Better woman, better life: the "workplace novel" in contemporary China

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Abstract

The aim of the research is to explore a category of Chinese contemporary popular novels, namely, the workplace novels. Through the textual analysis of nine narratives centered on the professional life of young white-collar women, this dissertation emphasizes the contradictions between an idealized professional world and the harsh realities faced by the heroines. It interrogates representations of female professionals, of the members of the new middle class, as well as the possible influences of the government on the novels. Indeed, their rhetoric seems highly congruent with official discourses on the "population's quality" and on the building of a "harmonious society".

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BETTER WOMAN, BETTER LIFE:
THE "WORKPLACE NOVEL" IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

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# TABLE OF CONTENT

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

## PART 1 - DEFINING AND DISCUSSING THE CATEGORY

**Chapter 1 - Popular Literature in China**

1.1 History and Development of Popular Literature in China  
1.1.1 Popular Literature before 1949  
1.1.2 The Socialist Literary System: From 1949 to the End of the 1980s  
1.1.3 Cultural Production in the Reform Era and Post-Reform Era  
1.1.4 Continuity through Ruptures  
1.2 Internet Literature  
1.2.1 History and Development of Web Fiction  
1.2.2 Categorized Novels  
1.2.3 Authors and Readers: Blurring the Boundaries

**Chapter 2 - What are Workplace Novels?**

2.1 Definition by Content  
2.1.1 The Category though Inventory Observation  
2.1.2 Major Works and Subcategories: *Du Lala Go!*, *Ups and Downs*, and *LoseeWin*  
2.1.2.1 Success, Popularity and Influence  
2.1.2.2 Variations in Narrative Structures  
2.2 Conclusion

**Chapter 3 - Origins and Genealogy**

3.1 Signification and Origin of the *Zhichang* Term  
3.2 Genealogy of the Category: Historical Models and Foreign Influences

**Chapter 4 - Current State of Research**

4.1 Western Studies  
4.2 Chinese Studies

**Chapter 5 - A Popular Category?**

5.1 What Does the Term "Popular" Imply?  
5.1.1 Relation to the "Canon"  
5.1.2 Belonging to a Genre  
5.1.3 Identity of the Readership  
5.1.4 Commercial Incentive, Format, and Trans-Media Presence  
5.2 Are Workplace Novels Popular?

## PART 2 - THE NOVELS

**Introduction: General Presentation of the Corpus and Method of Analysis**
Chapter 1: Yi ge waiqi nü mishu de riji 《一个外企女秘书的日记》, Tan Yiping 谭一平
1.1 General Information 125
1.2 Paratext 125
   1.2.1 Author's Presentation 125
   1.2.2 Preface and Postface 125
   1.2.3 Cover, Band and Layout 127
1.3 Characters 128
   1.3.1 The Heroine 128
   1.3.2 Positive Characters, or Helpers 130
   1.3.3 Negative Characters, or Villains 130
1.4 Narrative Structure 131

Chapter 2: Nü bailing zhichang riji 《女白领职场日记》, Tan Yiping 谭一平
2.1 General Information 134
2.2 Paratext 134
   2.2.1 Author's Presentation 134
   2.2.2 Preface and Postface 134
   2.2.3 Cover, Band and Layout 135
2.3 Characters 136
   2.3.1 The Heroine 136
   2.3.2 Positive Characters, or Helpers 138
   2.3.3 Negative Characters, or Villains 138
2.4 Narrative Structure 138

Chapter 3: Du Lala shengzhi ji 《杜拉拉升职记》, Li Ke 李可
3.1 General Information 143
3.2 Paratext 143
   3.2.1 Author's Presentation 143
   3.2.2 Preface and Postface 144
   3.2.3 Cover, Band and Layout 147
3.3 Characters 150
   3.3.1 The Heroine 150
   3.3.2 Positive Characters, or Helpers 157
   3.3.3 Negative Characters, or Villains 158
3.4 Narrative Structure 160

Chapter 4: Fuchen 《浮沉》, Cui Manli 崔曼莉
4.1 General Information 169
4.2 Paratext 169
   4.2.1 Author's Presentation 169
4.2.2 Preface and Postface 170
4.2.3 Cover, Band and Layout 171
4.3 Characters 174
  4.3.1 The Heroine 174
  4.3.2 Positive Characters, or Helpers 176
  4.3.3 Negative Characters, or Villains 178
4.4 Narrative Structure 179

Chapter 5: Miya, kuai pao 《米娅，快跑》, Qin Yuxi 秦与希 183
  5.1 General Information 183
  5.2 Paratext
    5.2.1 Author's Presentation 183
    5.2.2 Preface and Postface 183
    5.2.3 Cover, Band and Layout 184
  5.3 Characters 186
    5.3.1 The Heroine 186
    5.3.2 Positive Characters, or Helpers 189
    5.3.3 Negative Characters, or Villains 190
  5.4 Narrative Structure 191

Chapter 6: Zhengfeng 《争锋》, Ling Yuyan 凌语嫣 195
  6.1 General Information 195
  6.2 Paratext
    6.2.1 Author's Presentation 195
    6.2.2 Preface and Postface 196
    6.2.3 Cover, Band and Layout 197
  6.3 Characters 198
    6.3.1 The Heroine 198
    6.3.2 Positive Characters, or Helpers 199
    6.3.3 Negative Characters, or Villains 201
  6.4 Narrative Structure 202

Chapter 7: Kuai le XiaoV de shuijing touzi 《快乐小V的水晶骰子》, Xiao V 小V 206
  7.1 General Information 206
  7.2 Paratext
    7.2.1 Author's Presentation 206
    7.2.2 Preface and Postface 206
    7.2.3 Cover, Band and Layout 208
  7.3 Characters 209
    7.3.1 The Heroine 209
    7.3.2 Positive Characters, or Helpers 210
    7.3.3 Negative Characters, or Villains 211
PART 3 - DISCUSSING AND INTERPRETING THE CORPUS AND ITS CONTEXT OF PRODUCTION

Introduction 248

Chapter 1 - Idealization of Work Experience 252
GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The present dissertation was initiated as part of a collective research program which aimed to explore the realm of "popular literature" in contemporary China. An important part of the research was to discuss and define what constituted "popular literature" in China nowadays. Based on various studies focusing on the concept, and on observations of the Chinese cultural production of the last two decades, we came to consider that works which had sold well, seemed to have attracted numerous readers, had benefited from an important visibility in the cultural landscape (thanks to the existence of adaptations in other formats or to media coverage), or had been excluded from the realm of "serious literature" by Chinese scholars could be considered popular. Our object of study thus encompassed numerous narratives characterized by their classification in various genres, their strong connections to Internet literature, their apparent success in terms of readership or financial benefits, and the reservations of intellectual circles about their literary quality. The production seemed varied and dynamic. Indeed, Internet literature has allowed the appearance, visibility and, at times, success of numerous works of fiction, as well as a form of democratization of the access to literary expression, diffusion, and publication. It also represents a quantitatively immense production of texts, which are widely consumed. By encouraging interactions between writers and readers through various characteristics of their interfaces, online reading websites seem to have rendered these identities fluid and to have encouraged the formation of informal communities around different works and genres, showing that online writing activities participate in the transformation of the definitions of literature, novels, and authors.

Through the exploration of this vast body of texts, our attention was drawn to a category of novels centering on the concepts of work and career, and referred to by the appellation zhichang xiaoshuo职场小说, literally translated into "workplace novels" in English. This genre, which does not seem to have an equivalent in the Western literatures we are familiar with, was given its own tab on most reading websites and online bookstores. It also encompassed hundreds of works, some of which seemed to have become very successful. We were intrigued by the existence of a literary category entirely dedicated to the description of professional paths, and by the fact that many of them, though identified as fictions, were described as career guides written by experienced businesspeople for the use of college students and young white collars. Online bookstores generally include an important selection of self-help books and professional manuals but workplace novels, advertised in a similar way, were still classified in the realm of fiction.

1. Program titled Popular Literature in Contemporary China: Traditional Values, Confucianism, Politics, financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation and conducted between 2014 and 2017 at the University of Geneva.
2. This literal translation is also the most commonly used among Western scholars.
We started our exploration of the category with the identification of its most visible works - Li Ke's *Du Lala Go*¹, Fu Yao's *Lose&Win*², and Cui Manli's *Ups and Downs*³ - which was easy because of the important presence of these novels in the cultural landscape of the recent years. The three of them are multi-volume sagas, became bestsellers, are often referred to when the genre is discussed, and two of them were adapted for other media.⁴ Reading the first volume of each of these three works raised numerous questions on the genre. The narratives contained various and lengthy descriptions of professional situations, methods of communication and collaboration, or technical tools, while seldom providing information on the characters' psychology and personal life, thus seeming dull and, at times, difficult to read. Though this characteristic supported the assertion of the authors' knowledge of the workplace and of the novels' usefulness for readers at the beginning of their professional life, it seemed uncommon in the realm of fiction. Despite our personal reservations regarding the narrative interest of such texts, the quantitative importance of the category and the obvious success of some of the works it encompassed allowed us to think that they were meeting a demand in contemporary Chinese society. In a later stage of our work, when addressing the current state of research on workplace novels in China, we discovered that Chinese scholars often explained the success of these books, which they did not consider well-written, by asserting that they were answering the young white collars' need for identification, moral support, encouragement and guidance, in the context of an increasingly competitive job market.

Among the three novels mentioned above, two - the Du Lala saga and *Ups and Downs* - were written by female authors, starring female main characters, and apparently targeting a female readership. These two novels showed similarities in the way they described their heroines - ordinary young women trying to make it in a big city away from their hometowns - as well as the heroines' career paths - in both cases, the young women started at the bottom of the corporate hierarchy and eventually saw their efforts rewarded by professional advancement, while remaining far from the highest positions of the companies. The two narratives were also similar in their depictions of the heroines' processes of coming of age and pondering over life-work balance, relationships with men, and the meaning of success and happiness. In contrast, Fu Yao's novel, written by a male author, starring a male main character, and apparently targeting a male readership, described a main character already occupying a high position in his company at the beginning of the book, which focuses on a business competition opposing the hero and his team to another firm. In this novel, the

³ CUI Manli 崔曼莉 (2012). *Fuchen 《浮沉》* [Ups and downs], Xi'an: Shaanxi Normal University Publishing House. This novel does not have an official English title. In the present research, we chose to adopt the title *Ups and Downs*, proposed by Grace Hui-chuan Wu in her article "The Making of the New Global Middle Class: China's Workplace Novels". *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 2017, 43(1), pp.299-327.
⁴ None of these novels have been translated in English or in another Western language to this day.
hero is older and more experienced than the heroines of Li Ke and Cui Manli, and the narrative is centered on the strategies he elaborates with his team in order to defeat the rival company, rather than on learning and coming of age processes. The tone of the two first novels is generally light and uplifting, while Fu Yao's writing seems more solemn and pompous. Moreover, Li Ke's and Cui Manli's narratives seem to give more importance to the personality, interiority, and personal life of the heroines than Fu Yao's novel does, and they also describe - with various degrees of explicitness - issues related to women's condition in the workplace, and the hardships of contemporary urban life, questions that Fu Yao's saga does not address.

We have thus observed major differences between feminine and masculine workplace novels, in the case of the three most visible works of the category. Through the consultation of articles by Chinese scholars, we realized that this gender division seemed to apply to the genre as a whole. This hypothesis was later supported by the observations following the creation of an inventory of the works of the category. Moreover, we have observed that the characteristics of feminine novels - starring an ordinary main character, focusing on a learning and coming of age process, depicting reasonable and moral social climbing, providing professional advice to readers, and so on - came to be considered as the defining criteria of the zhichang category, and as the explanation of the novels' commercial success. As we will see when describing the variety of novels encompassed in the zhichang genre in chapter two, the characteristics described as most representative of the genre are usually encountered in feminine novels, despite the fact that male authors are in the majority in the category. In contrast, the depiction of high-ranked, not relatable heroes, business schemes, and ruthless power struggles, associated with masculine novels, seem to have become the defining characteristics of trade war novels (shangzhan xiaoshuo 商战小说), which are at times seen as a subcategory of workplace novels, and at times as a distinct genre. Among Chinese scholars, the specificities of masculine novels are usually evaluated with reservations, as they are seen as promoting an excessive aggressiveness and competitiveness in the workplace, while the feminine characteristics are valorized.

In the present research, we have chosen to focus on feminine novels, because they seem to give access to different themes of interest to us. These novels offer more information on the psychology and personal life of the characters than masculine novels, and they thus allow us to address questions of personal purposes and aspirations, as well as ambiguities and doubt about the definition of success and happiness in contemporary China. As they depict the professional struggles of supposedly ordinary white collars, they also give the possibility to apprehend contemporary social issues. Some of these issues are related to gender - glass-ceiling, gender biases, conservative views on women's sexuality, sexual harassment, etc. - and others seem to equally apply to both genders - difficulty to find a job after graduating, job market competitiveness, heavy workload and professional pressure, office politics, etc. Feminine workplace novels thus seem more
representative of the realities and concerns of the majority of the population in China nowadays. We consider that the gender division of the zhichang category reveals a process of feminization of ordinariness, subaltern status, apprenticeship, need for self-betterment, struggle, and doubt, while depictions of high-ranked managers and important business endeavors, which lead to the glorification of the main character, are limited to the masculine realm. This process seems worthy of scholarly attention and supports our decision of focusing on a quantitatively minority corpus. Moreover, we have observed similarities between the rhetoric adopted in feminine workplace novels and official discourses on the necessity of raising the population's "quality" (suzhi 素质) and building a "harmonious society" (hexie shehui 和谐社会), which was not the case in masculine novels.

The present research will focus on the feminine branch of the zhichang genre as a literary, but also socio-cultural, phenomenon. Our first aim is to valorize and give importance to the texts themselves. This aspect is generally neglected among scholars interested in the category, due to its supposed lack of literary value. We will also offer a contextual reading of the novels, and observe how they are integrated in the social, cultural and political landscape of the last decade or so. Our research will be divided into three parts. The first part will be dedicated to a definition of, and discussion on workplace novels as a category. We will first attempt to contextualize our research by going over the concept of "popular literature" in relation to the Chinese context. We will apprehend the history of entertainment literature in China, as well as its recent evolution and the way it is usually perceived among the academic and intellectual circles. We will also discuss the changes brought about by Internet literature in the cultural field, as workplace novels, and genre literature in general, are strongly linked to these evolutions. We will then define the genre through an exploration of its content, first by describing and analyzing an inventory of all of the works classified in the realm of zhichang fiction on the two online bookstores most commonly used in China. Following that, we will present and briefly analyze the only three bestsellers of the category. This will allow us to apprehend the category in its diversity, taking both its paramount examples and exceptional cases into consideration, and to distinguish the different tendencies observed in their narrative structures. In the next chapter, we will address the question of the origins and genealogy of the category. We will discuss the definition and implications of the term zhichang, the earliest works classified as workplace novels - a posteriori - and the possible inspirations leading to the emergence of the genre in Chinese and non-Chinese literary traditions. The fourth chapter will address the current state of research on workplace novels. As we will see, in the West, research papers on the category or mentioning it are rare, while Chinese scholars have dedicated numerous articles to the zhichang phenomenon. When discussing Chinese studies, we will attempt to emphasize the common axes of analysis adopted in most of the articles. Finally, we will discuss the legitimacy and implications of the inclusion of the zhichang category in the realm of popular

12
culture, which will lead us to general considerations on the use of this term in the contemporary context.

The second part of the research is dedicated to text analysis. After an introduction addressing the process of selection of the corpus and of the methods applied to understand the texts, we will present and discuss nine novels of the zhichang category. All of these narratives have been written by female authors and focus on the professional apprenticeship of female main characters. Each of the novels will be first apprehended through its paratext, which includes the authors' presentations proposed in most of the works of our corpus, the prefaces and postfaces, as well as the writing printed on the covers and bands of the books. We consider these different extra-textual elements to influence the reading experience and evaluation of the texts. The overall layout and design of the books will also be addressed. We will then present the novels' characters, dividing them into heroines, positive characters, and negative characters. Finally, we will describe the texts' narrative structure. This part will be concluded by a chapter dedicated to synthetical observations on the novels, which will comply to the same division as the preceding chapters. This central section of the research aims at emphasizing the similarities of the main narrative lines and of the characters of the novels. We will see that the heroines are often described in an archetypal way, and that their motivations and career paths are fairly similar from narrative to narrative. We will also emphasize the variations observed in the way the topics of work and career are treated in the category, despite its apparent homogeneity.

In the last part, we will distance ourselves from text analysis in order to interpret some characteristics of the novels of our corpus in relation to their context of production, diffusion and consumption. We will focus on the novels' descriptions and perceptions of career, of its importance in young women's life and coming of age process, and of the links established between professional apprenticeship and a notion of self-betterment necessary to reach success and happiness. First, we will observe that the narratives of our corpus generally propose an idealized picture of the workplace and of the prestige associated to the status of urban white collars in contemporary China. We will see that career is often presented as the preferred - or only - path to wealth accumulation and social climbing, but also to identity building, coming of age and individual self-cultivation. In the second chapter of this part, we will focus on the negative aspects of the professional life of white collars described in the narratives and illustrate how they seem to contradict the uplifting and encouraging tone of the paratext, which asserts that the novels are success stories, and of the main story lines, often characterized by a vertical movement. We will see that the young professionals' lifestyle is generally associated with prestige, consumption and hedonism, but that the corporate world is also represented as competitive, ruthless and as suffocating people's individuality. Many

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novels of our corpus address the question of how the heroines negotiate with these two contradictory aspects of the workplace. In the ultimate chapter of this part, we will focus on the similarities observed between the workplace novels' rhetoric on self-betterment through work experience, and official discourses on the raising of the population's quality and the building of a harmonious society. We will apprehend the different forms of influence the government can exert on the production, diffusion and reception of entertainment literature in contemporary China, in an attempt to explain this congruence. We will also discuss the implications of the idealization of an imperfect professional world in narratives described as realistic and didactic.

Our aim is for the present dissertation to enrich the Western current state of research on contemporary Chinese literature in different ways. First, we are proposing an in-depth analysis of a literary category which does not seem to have a Western equivalent and which has been seldom apprehended by researchers outside of China. The exploration of this category allows us to address the importance of genres in the production and consumption of entertainment literature in contemporary China, and thus to question the concept of "mass culture". Moreover, the social and educational status of the authors, characters, and intended readers of workplace novels allow us to discuss the legitimacy of the integration of the category in the realm of popular culture, as the term has long been understood in intellectual circles. Second, by emphasizing the similarities observed between the heroines' difficulties and struggles, as described in the novels, and the observations of Western sociologists on the contemporary Chinese workplace, we are given an opportunity to discuss some of these harsh realities, notably those concerning gender prejudices, as well as their representation in fiction, thus leading us to considerations on literary realism and on its characteristics in the Chinese context. Finally, by establishing a link between the novels' rhetoric and official discourses, we address the fundamental question of the influence of the government's leitmotif on the way people express their views, notably in entertainment culture.
PART 1 - DEFINING AND DISCUSSING THE CATEGORY

Chapter 1 - Popular Literature in China

As we have mentioned in the general introduction, the choice of the topic of the present dissertation has been influenced by its integration in a collective research program focusing on contemporary Chinese popular literature. In the framework of this program, the zhichang genre was discovered when browsing the different categories proposed on online reading websites. The tremendous commercial success of Du Lala Go!, and the existence of its numerous adaptations was discovered shortly after. In the present research, we consider workplace novels as belonging to the realm of popular culture because of their relation to Internet literature, associating them with concepts of entertainment, fast-evolving trends and consumption. Moreover, their number and their cross-media presence allow us to think that they are - or were - successful in terms of quantity of readers, and that some of them were financially profitable for their producers as well, which also links them to the field of what is usually perceived and described as popular culture.

In Chinese studies, workplace novels also seem to be perceived as popular, as illustrated by the fact that they are studied as a cultural rather than literary phenomenon, and by the widespread critiques on their lack of originality and artistic quality. They are often qualified as belonging to the realm of "fashionable literature" (liuxing wenxue 流行文学), or of "categorized novels" (leixing xiaoshuo 类型 小说), both implying an exclusion from the canon of "serious" or "elite" literature. The qualification of workplace novels as popular thus seemed natural in the context of the present research. However, seeing that this term usually holds a derogatory meaning - implying a lack of quality and originality, or a materialistic and economic purpose, rather than an artistic and literary one - we consider it necessary to question this seemingly obvious choice, in order to understand which characteristics of our novels made their categorization in the realm of entertainment or popular literature seem so natural.

In this chapter, we will thus offer an overview of the status and perception of popular literature in China. We will start with the history of popular novels in China, in an attempt to demonstrate how workplace fiction is inscribed in the cultural realm of the country. To do so, we will briefly refer to the history of popular novels and we will describe the evolution of the book market since the end of the Maoist period, as it seems to be at that time that the changes most relevant to understanding the current situation of the cultural field occurred. We will base our presentation on various studies on the evolution of the book market since the late 1970s, as they have proven to be very complete and relevant to the present research. We will also address the appearance and development of Internet
literature and the changes it gave rise to in the literary field.

1.1 History and Development of Popular Literature in China

1.1.1 Popular Literature before 1949

In their research on book culture from the 17th to 21st centuries, Daria Berg and Giorgio Strafella explain that the Chinese publishing industry started to really flourish in the late 16th and early 17th century, with the rise of prosperous market towns and cities increasing the demand for books. The two researchers date the birth of a mass communication society and of a mass print culture to that period.\(^8\) At that time, some publishing houses' owners apparently started to accumulate wealth and to become influential enough to challenge various members of the scholarly elite, illustrating the commercialization of books and "a shift from the traditional social hierarchy to a new order".\(^9\) Berg and Strafella emphasize the importance of the urban nature of the readership:

The mass market in the seventeenth century targeted as its audience the growing urban population and unprecedented numbers of examination candidates, lower degree holders, "failed" students, upwardly mobile merchants and literate women. Private and commercial publishers catered to the needs of the market, producing anything from handbooks on literati taste and leisure pursuits, textbooks for the civil service examinations, travel guides for merchants, historical works and fictional narratives to erotic literature and colour printing. Moral, educational and narrative works about and for merchants and women—the new readers—became popular.\(^10\)

In his research on "urbanites mass literature" (shimin dazhong wenxue 市民大众文学) - which encompasses various types of narratives such as romances, social novels, martial arts novels and detective fiction, all genres generally described as popular - Fan Boqun asserts that knowing these first "popular novels" is indispensable in order to understand contemporary literature:

[...] we can say that contemporary categorized Internet novels are the heirs of the tradition of Chinese urbanites novels. Indeed, they follow the traces of the novels from the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies novels from the Republican period, and from contemporary popular literature from Hong Kong and Taiwan, represented by Jin Yong and Qiong Yao. They also incorporate elements from Japanese manga, American and British fantastic films, European and Japanese detective fiction and from various other forms of

\(^8\) BERG Daria & STRAFELLA Giorgio, eds. (2016). *Transforming Book Culture in China, 1600-2016*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, p.4-5.

\(^9\) BERG & STRAFELLA 2016, 5.

\(^10\) BERG & STRAFELLA 2016, 5-6.
As we can see, according to Fan, popular literature in China has been intimately linked to the urban setting from the Ming dynasty to the contemporary era. Fan focuses specifically on the flourishing production of entertainment culture observed at the turn of the 20th century, which he explains in relation to Shanghai’s rise as the first Chinese metropolis, linked to the arrival of important groups of migrants and refugees fleeing wars and natural disasters, as well as of investors and businessmen. This flow of migrants created various problems of housing shortages, social unrest, unemployment, and so on, and Fan asserts that successful writers of the time were often journalists who knew which topics would attract the readers' attention and whose interest they captivated by their knowledge of the urbanites lifestyle and everyday struggles. Moreover, with the opening of the Shanghai harbor to trade, the city entered a fast path to modernization and industrialization, creating a new type of urban environment and a new population in need of a new literature. Fan Boqun challenges the criticism usually addressed to urbanites literature - poor quality, feudal values - by explaining that, at the time, it answered the entertainment needs of the population of Shanghai.

Some of these novels, especially social novels (shehui xiaoshuo 社会小说), were apparently offering "instruction through entertainment" (yujiaoyule 寓教于乐). Indeed, it seems to have been difficult for the refugees and migrants to integrate into Shanghai because of the unique structure of its government (with the coexistence of Qing government, international concession and French concession), and because of its diverse population and rapid evolution. Fan asserts that social novels were used by migrants to get accustomed to this new environment, calling for a literature able to reflect its specificities. Fan considers these texts, often criticized by May Fourth intellectuals for being reactionary, to be closely related to the living conditions of the readers and thus to have served as bridges to allow rural migrants to become urbanites. These texts, which reflected the concerns and struggles of migrants, are also described as a source of support and relief for this group - various novels were addressing the problems of migrants' status in the city, of unemployment, and of all the dangers and traps one might encounter in Shanghai. According to Fan, in the 1920s and 1930s, the readers of this popular fiction, the urban "middle class" of the time, was much more numerous than the readership of New Literature. Fan also asserts that it is through the reading of novels describing their own environment and concerns that the urban population formed

12. FAN 2014, 3.
its self-consciousness and its particular worldview.  

Fan Boqun's choice to qualify popular works as "urbanites literature" emphasizes the importance of the socio-cultural background of the authors and readers in his definition of these works. According to Fan, the "petty urbanites" represented about 40% of the population of Shanghai at the time. They were not reading New Literature works and were often described as having a feudal and backward mindset by "elite" writers who held them in contempt. This numerous and growing social group was apparently finding its source of entertainment and support in the "popular" works studied by Fan, because these novels had been written by authors well aware of the average population's everyday life and struggle, which was skillfully depicted in their writing. These texts were apparently very successful and widespread but are still neglected by scholars for their supposed lack of literary quality.

The two works presented above stress the importance of the relationship between the emergence of a commercial mass culture and the urban setting. It seems that the flourishing of popular literature in the beginning of the 20th century has accompanied the rise of Shanghai as a "modern" metropolis. Firstly, the city hosted a significant number of people who had the economic means, the leisure time and the education level necessary to consume and enjoy entertainment literature. This urban population was apparently keen to read novels from different genres, like romances, martial arts novels, detective fictions, or social novels describing their everyday life and concerns. Moreover, these works realistically depicting life in the fast-evolving city were also used by migrants to get accustomed with their new environment, its specificities, dangers and norms. It seems that, at the time, authors and editors were taking readers' tastes and preferences into consideration in order to produce works that would sell well and generate profit, thus encouraging the development of a literature market.

1.1.2 The Socialist Literary System: From 1949 to the End of the 1980s

In his research dedicated to the "socialist literary system" - namely, to the literary production of the 1950s to 1990s - Eugene Perry Link asserts that, during that period, literature was seen as relevant and essential to morality, social life, politics, etc. This characteristic was apparently the result of the encounter between Marxist literary theories - which considers literature as a weapon to be used to unite and educate the people - and Confucian tradition - which asserts that texts can guide readers toward good behavior and harmonious society:

17. FAN 2014, 11.
The assumption the generals were using - that people's behavior has much to do, for good or ill, with the fiction they read - has deep roots in Chinese culture and has been especially strong in the twentieth century.20

Thus, during the socialist period, writers, even those who were somewhat critical of the party, were led to think of their social role as one of educating and shaping the attitudes of readers. The government mobilized this wide-spread idea of writers holding a social mission by using them in different national plans. Link emphasizes the importance of literary control by the party by explaining that, in this system, the government was supposed to hold a parental role and to be concerned with the education of the population. In the 1980s, political slogans still asserted that literature should reflect on its effects on society.21

According to Link's research, until the 1990s, the great majority of books were published by three publishing houses only - the People's Literature Publishing House (*Renmin wenxue chubanshe* 人民文学出版社), the China Youth Publishing House (*Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe* 中国青年出版社), and the Writers Publishing House (*Zuojia chubanshe* 作家出版社) - which were editing classics of social realism and ancient classics in high demand.22 Moreover, nearly all book sales were handled by the New China Bookstores (*Xinhua shudian* 新华书店). In order to define the supplies, the bookstore system was charged to collect data about readers preferences and to transmit them to editors, however:

[...] the SPA had both political authority and control of the paper supply, and publishers knew that they could publish only to the extent that the SPA could be pleased. This condition produced a pressure on publishers, and therefore on the bookstore system, to report that readers everywhere wished to read what the leading authorities wanted them to wish to read.23

Thus, supply and demand were often unbalanced, and popular books were rapidly sold out while ideologically correct works could stay on the shelves indefinitely. Book prices were fixed by the government and non-negotiable, and bookstores were competing for a limited supply of books, especially out of the important urban centers. As it was still expensive for numerous people, especially in the countryside, to buy books, and because a significant part of the population did not have the literacy level to find the reading experience enjoyable, many people were consuming novels through their reading broadcasted on the radio, or through their adaptations into films, which, as authors rapidly understood, could potentially be very lucrative.

In parallel, numerous literary works were circulating only "internally", namely, among party

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20. LINK 2000, 8.
22. LINK 2000, 169.
members, officials, and their relatives:

The restriction of readership was implicitly based on the elitist principle that ordinary readers were insufficiently sophisticated to interpret "correctly" such things as Western politics, idealist philosophy, or sex.  

According to Link, ordinary readers were well aware of that system and, suffering from the entertainment shortage, nourished resentment towards people who had access to books containing "sensitive" topics which seemed very interesting. Link explains that the lack of correspondence between popular preferences and official supply in literature encouraged the development of various forms of unofficial and semi-official literary practices in socialist China, evoking, for example, the fact that "outsiders" regularly managed to obtain internal publications, and that a rich black market existed where one could obtain out of stock or second-hand books, which was officially forbidden.

We can observe that the system described by Link is characterized by the domination of politics over literary production. Under the socialist system, literature was perceived as a didactic tool to lead people in the right direction, and its enjoyable and leisurely dimension was apparently overlooked. As economic incentives were not taken into consideration, book supplies did not match the demand and the majority of the population seems to have suffered from an entertainment shortage. During that period, successful novels from earlier times - for example, the ones described by Fan Boqun in his research - were not allowed to circulate among "ordinary people". This situation encouraged the emergence of unofficial channels of circulation for entertainment literature.

1.1.3 Cultural Production in the Reform Era and Post-Reform Era

The rigid system described by Link started to wither away in the 1990s, with the appearance of private entrepreneurs who built a separate system of book distribution - the "second channel" (er qudao 二渠道) - in which financial profit was more important than ideological correctness.  

It is precisely this unofficial publication and distribution system which motivated the state editors and bookstores to take actual reader preferences into consideration. As the government's financial support to the book and culture industry was gradually disappearing, the official book market was forced to follow the path of the second channel and to adapt to the market. These changes importantly enriched the supply of books during the 1990s, and numerous classical novels, foreign works, and books from popular authors like Jin Yong or San Mao (re)appeared. In the 1980s and 1990s, the idea that literature should not only aim at political correctness but could also be

esthetically pleasing, expressing individual inner emotions, or entertaining, was rediscovered and re-valORIZED:

By the early 1990s, when the socialist literary system had all but disappeared, entertainment, now on television as much as in the printed media, filled the void left by "engineering" [of the souls, according to Marxist literary theories] and became the dominant function of published literature.27

Some authors started to see their writing as a potential way to reach fame, success and wealth, and some readers started to use literature as a basis to identify with a group - of fans of a same author, for example - to express themselves through identification with characters, etc.

Kong Shuyu has provided extensive research on the transformations of the book market from the beginning of the reform era to the beginning of the 2000s.28 Kong asserts that, during that period, new literary practices, motivated by the market rather than by ideology, emerged, and that they continue to develop to this day. Though cultural production companies were - and are - still state-owned and state-supervised, they also had to become financially independent, explaining how literature started to take financial profit and readers' tastes into careful consideration, which led to a diversification of contents and formats. Despite the lamentations of some intellectuals, who feared that commercialization would mark the end of "good literature", numerous authors realized that their writing could be very profitable if they managed to please readers. Kong mentions the appearance of the term "bestseller" (changxiaoshu畅销书), as an illustration of the deep changes occurring in the book market of the time:

After four decades during which literature was treated as noble spiritual food to nourish the young or as a rigid ideological tool to mobilize the people – something far removed from the dirty and avaricious capitalist world – the Chinese had suddenly discovered that books, even literary works, could be treated as commodities to be mass produced, advertised, and sold for profit. And for most players in the newly transformed world of literary publishing, the overarching goal was to release a best seller.29

This explains why, according to Kong, popular literature reappeared in mainland China in the 1980s, first through the re-introduction of traditional novels and the translation of foreign works, and, later, with novels from Chinese authors who started to write entertainment fiction. These novels were selling well, but authors were sometimes using pseudonyms to publish them, to avoid damaging their reputation as "serious" authors.30 In the same period, the readership of "serious" literature decreased, and it became more and more difficult for "traditional minded" authors to live

27. LINK 2000, 301.
off their writing. Kong mentions Wang Shuo 王朔 (1958) as having been one of the first Chinese
writers to understand and publicly assert that literature was a consumption good, a private business
and a potential source of high income, rather than a social mission; he also asserted that his main
goal was to please his readers.31 Apparently, Wang Shuo was one of the first writers to make use of
the mass media to promote his works and himself as, in 1991, he started to produce TV series,
notably through the adaptation of his own novels. As Kong explains:

A new image for artists leaving the womb of socialism for the marketplace had come into
being: the entrepreneur writer whose central aim is to produce and sell bestsellers and
thereby claim a place in the popular consciousness.32

Thus, many writers started to follow Wang Shuo's model, and, in the 1990s, the idea that writers
should produce works that would sell well became widely spread and accepted. It was also at that
time that novels, until then focused on rural life, started to give more importance to the depiction of
entrepreneurs, new riches of the coastal cities, white-collar women and their modern lifestyle, and
urban life in general. The 1990s saw the appearance and success of a new subcategory of popular
novels, urban fiction (dushi xiaoshuo 都市小说), which described the urban life and was also
targeting an urban readership in search of entertainment. Workplace novels seem to be inscribed in
this new genre.

Regarding the diffusion mechanisms of written culture, we have mentioned that, during the Maoist
period, the edition and distribution of books was monopolized by the state as part of the propaganda
dissemination apparatus. At the time, it was politically incorrect to sell cultural products for
entertainment or commercial profit, and market trends as well as readers' tastes were not taken into
consideration.33 Moreover, until the 1980s, only the state was economically profiting from book
sales. In the 1980s, the market gradually opened, for economic rather than political reasons, and
private and semi-private editors became the dominant actors in the field. According to Kong,
publishing houses, which were not financed by the state anymore and thus had to publish bestsellers
in order to survive, started to create alliances with unofficial and illegal vendors, more
knowledgeable of the market, in order to circulate high selling potential books, notably forbidden
ones. The state, understanding that these illegal practices were indispensable to address the
impossibility for publishing houses to meet readers' demand for entertainment literature, has proven
to be relatively lenient towards them. Publishing houses thus started to sell ISBNs to illegal
publishers in order to alleviate their work load and, by the 1990s, these practices had become so
common that it was difficult to distinguish which books were published by whom. By 2015, when
we conducted interviews with representatives from different publishing entities as part of a field

32. KONG 2005, 28.
research, the establishment of formal contracts between state-owned publishers and private companies - where the former sell ISBNs to the later, thus outsourcing the tasks of discovering high selling potential works and to publish and advertise them in order to increase profit - had become very common and legal.34

Starting in the 1980s, with the economic reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, financial independence and profitability, rather than strict ideological conformance, came to be expected from the book industry. The need for literature to sell well pushed authors and publishers to pay attention to readers' preferences and to market trends. This allowed a diversification of content, format and practices, and a dynamic and varied entertainment culture was reborn. Adaptations of successful novels for other media also started to develop and spread. The changes brought about by the economic reforms and a relative political relaxation are tremendous, but we consider that they could not have occurred without the precedents of literature production and consumption observed before 1949. The next section of this chapter will thus be dedicated to the continuities discernible in literary practices despite the important socio-political ruptures of the 20th century.

1.1.4 Continuity through Ruptures

Fan Boqun's research emphasizes the continuity between modern and contemporary popular culture. For example, he asserts that web fiction shares numerous similarities with the urban novels of the beginning of the 20th century, like the attention authors give to readers' taste, the socio-cultural proximity between authors and readers, and the dual function of novels as a source of entertainment and a way to apprehend a new and foreign urban culture. Fan mentions that, in 2011, the urban population exceeded the rural population for the first time in China, stressing the necessity to observe how fiction could be used by new urbanites to get accustomed to the city. This is reminiscent of the situation of Shanghai at the beginning of the 20th century.35 Similarly, we will see that workplace novels are built on the idea that their characters have to adapt to a new environment at work but also in their personal life. Indeed, the heroes and heroines of the genre are often said to have recently left their hometowns to work in major cities - Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and the like - and to have to struggle with a hostile urban space where they do not have any social connections to help them.

Fan also mentions the appearance of a greater variety of book formats at the beginning of the 20th century, with the proliferation of small and light editions suitable for the needs of urbanites, as well

34. In May 2015, we had the chance to visit various publishing houses and online reading websites, as well as to meet with some contemporary authors in mainland China. This field research was part of the Swiss National Science Foundation research program to which the present study also belongs. For more details on this field research, refer to appendix A.
35. FAN 2014, 169.
as serialized novels to be read in literary magazines and newspapers, and links this evolution to the actual trend of reading on mobile phones while spending time on public transportation.\textsuperscript{36} We can thus observe that the adaptability of popular fiction, in terms of format as well as content, characterizes both the "petty urbanites fiction" described by Fan Boqun and the contemporary entertainment literature production, intimately related to the evolution of new technologies.

Eugene Perry Link also emphasizes that popular literature was produced in somewhat similar contexts in the 1910s and the 1970s: in both cases, there was a great demand for entertainment fiction and a relative shortage of books, especially in the 1970s; in both periods, the majority of the readership was urban, and entertainment fiction was thus mirroring the specific lifestyle and concerns of the city dwellers; finally, in the 1910s as in the 1970s, Link observes the succession of waves of popularity of different genres, as the rise to success of a particular story was apparently motivating the creation of many other narratives built in a similar mold. Link stresses the continuity of popular themes in entertainment fiction, explaining that the urban narratives from the Ming, Qing and Republican periods, forbidden during the Cultural Revolution, suddenly reappeared on the market in the 1970s, along with translations of foreign novels:

There had been great changes in popular fiction over sixty years, in form and style, in size and mode of circulation, and in subservience to political authority. The life which stories reflected had changed in significant ways as well. But the basic staples of popular fiction's appeal - romantic love, the thrills of a detective story, the reunion of relatives by coincidence, the unmasking of corruption - had stayed in many ways the same.\textsuperscript{37}

Link thus points out the continuity - of format, patterns of diffusion, and themes - between turn of the century and contemporary popular literature, despite what is often described as the "rupture" of the Maoist period. While the production of entertainment culture apparently stopped in 1949, it maintained some level of circulation until 1966, as well as through the Cultural Revolution, in an illegal and clandestine manner, explaining its reappearance at the end of the 1970s.\textsuperscript{38} Lena Henningsen has dedicated a study to these unofficial literary practices of the Maoist period. She explains that the underground hand copied fiction (\textit{shouchaoben} 手抄本) of the Cultural Revolution served as a link between former and later literary practices, most importantly because these stories borrowed the themes of earlier genres - espionage, crime, love, and so on - which would rise back to popularity starting in the late 1970s.\textsuperscript{39} Moreover, by pointing out the collective nature of the

\textsuperscript{36} FAN 2014, 85-86.
\textsuperscript{38} LINK 1981, 236.
literary practices of the Cultural Revolution - with readers copying texts they liked by hand to circulate them among their friends and, in the process, completing or modifying the story - Henningsen also shows how clandestine literary life of the Maoist time is linked to the contemporary practices of online writing and reading, which allows readers to be involved in the story-making process.40

Through this overview of the history of popular literature in modern and contemporary China, we aimed at showing how workplace novels are inscribed in a cultural landscape that exceeds the time and place of their production. These narratives seem to be integrated in continuous practices of writing genre fiction for specific social groups by appealing to their tastes and interests, by mirroring their everyday life and concerns, and by offering them help in their processes of adaptation to a new and, at times, hostile environment. Among the cultural elites, these characteristics were interpreted as signs of low literary quality and of commercial incentives. In the present research, we consider this continuity and these similarities to justify the integration of workplace novels in the realm of popular culture. However, we use the term "popular" to describe works widely spread and successful in the population, without associating criteria of content quality to it. In the following section, we will focus on Internet Literature and on the zhichang category's integration in its sphere of influence, which also associates the genre to the realm of the "popular".

1.2 Internet Literature

1.2.1 History and Development of Web Fiction

We have observed that numerous workplace novels, including the three major works described in chapter two, originally appeared online. Many works also conserve, in their printed form, some characteristics of online writing, for example the division of the narrative into numerous short chapters, the inclusion of English words - brand names, professional terms, and sometimes full dialogues - in the Chinese text, or direct addresses to readers. Moreover, entertainment literature categories often appear online, in an unofficial and spontaneous manner, before being adopted by bookstores, the media, or researchers. We consider these elements to illustrate how Internet writing has fundamentally changed the Chinese cultural landscape since the early 2000s, exercising influence on how people write and read, on the vision of entertainment fiction as divided into genres, but also on the core definition of literature, rendering it necessary for our research to address the question of online literary practices.

Michel Hockx's research *Internet Literature in China* provides a valuable overview of the changes

40. HENNINGSEN 2016, 105.
pushed on the book industry by the arrival of the Internet and of online literary activities.\(^{41}\) According to the statistics of the China Internet Network Information Center, in 2012, 40% of Internet users were consuming online literature, which represents a vast and important group.\(^{42}\) For Hockx, the specificity of online literature stands on the fact that it is written especially for publication on an interactive website and that it is intended to be read on screen. This implies that texts can be constantly modified by the author, following his or her inspiration as well as readers' comments. Apparently, the majority of texts posted online will never be printed, do not pass into posterity and can disappear overnight. Moreover, the particular status of online fiction seems to endure even after a work is published on paper, as attested by the fact that online novels are often separated from other works in bookstores, that they sometimes contain a mention of their online origins, or that they show the logo of the website where they were originally posted on the cover.\(^{43}\)

Hockx asserts that the first works of Internet literature written in Chinese were published in an online magazine named China News Digest (Huaxia wenzhai 华夏文摘), created by Chinese U.S. residents in 1991. In 1994, the first webzine solely dedicated to literature was created under the name New Spinners of Words (Xin yusi 新语丝), and was rapidly imitated by other publications. In 1995, the servers of some universities, starting with Tsinghua University, initiated the creation of bulletin boards where popular Taiwanese novels were copied and published, along with some original texts. The first Internet novel to ever be published in print was The First Intimate Contact (Divici de qinmi jiechu 《第一次的亲密接触》), posted online in 1998 by Taiwanese author Cai Zhiheng 蔡智恒 (1969), under the pseudonym Pizi Cai 痞子蔡, and printed in 1999. According to Hockx, it is this novel which familiarized Chinese readers with Internet literature. In an article dedicated to the same novel - though the title is translated differently: The First Intimate Touch - Lena Henningsen explains that the text, even in its print version, conserved some characteristics of online writing, for example the use of short chapters, English quotes and names, and the listing of various brands and consumption products, which we have mentioned above.\(^{44}\) This novel thus initiated the trend of having the original, online format influence the layout of the printed book.\(^{45}\)

Another characteristic making Cai Zhiheng's text representative of Internet fiction is the haziness of the author's and main character's identity, who are referred to by the same name. The author seems to be consciously casting doubt on the degree of fictionality of the story, probably to raise the

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42. HOCKX 2015, 5.
43. It is the case of the 2012 reedition of Ups and Downs, for example.
45. HENNINGSEN 2011.
readers' interest. We have observed that numerous workplace novels' authors use this kind of narrative device to strengthen the appearance of authenticity, and thus of usefulness, of their writing. According to Henningsen, this novel also served as a guide to identify and interpret new trends in the actual life of readers. Indeed, in the 1980s and 1990s, China witnessed a massive arrival of new brands and consumer products, as well as the commercialization of society, making material desires and reflections on what and how to desire very important. As wealth was becoming an accepted source of status, people started to differentiate themselves according to their occupation, income, lifestyle and consumption patterns, which came to be reflected in online literature. The First Intimate Contact initiated the trend of using lifestyle as a major stylistic tool, with characters defining themselves through their ways of consuming. Thus, the narrative created and legitimized new desires and illustrated how consumption could be used as a lifestyle identifier and as a social class distinguisher. For readers, imitating the characters' consumption patterns became a way to feel like they belonged to a certain social group. We consider that workplace novels, which give great importance to the lifestyle of their characters, participate in the elaboration of representations of white collars and of how they should live, work and consume. These observations also show similarities with Fan Boqun's considerations on early 20th century fiction.

Attempting to explain how, from these early examples, Internet literature started to grow and spread, Hockx mentions the website Under the Banyan Tree (Rongshu xiá 榕树下), founded by an American Born Chinese in 1999, as one of the earliest and trendsetting examples of online reading websites. Under the Banyan Tree apparently initiated the trend of offering different forums for specific genres or themes, and of distinguishing registered members - who can upload their works wherever they want - from nonmembers - who can read and comment but encounter some limitations in the posting of texts, even if registering on the website seems to be an easy and anonymous process, allowing everyone to post his or her writing online. Usually, websites encourage users to post often on the forums by allowing them to gain "popularity points" if they do so, the purpose of the platform being to promote interactions between users:

Comments on a particular work are automatically appended to the work itself, creating so-called threads of discussion, which often also involves the author of the original work. This aspect of direct interaction between author and reader constitutes the main distinction between web literature and printed literature in China.46

And:

In 2002, Banyan Tree struck me as being involved in community-building practices not dissimilar to those practiced by the literary magazine communities that were active in China roughly a century earlier. The company running the website organized meetings and

46. HOCKX 2015, 32.
workshops for readers and prospective contributors, usually in Hangzhou, traditionally the scene of literary gatherings. [...] However, what made (and makes) Internet communities like this qualitatively different from print-culture communities was the possibility of almost direct interaction through the various discussion forums. The actual communities were formed on those forums, as authors submitted and published their works and readers (or other authors) commented on them through the website, developing their own critical discourse and values in the process.47

Some workplace novels' paratext, as well as some academic articles, also mention the contribution of these works in the formation of communities of readers who share similar experiences and struggles as the characters.

According to Hockx, the popularity of Under the Banyan Tree at the beginning of the 2000s is partly explained by the fact that it hosted a regular column from the author Chen Cun 陈村 (1954), as well as the diary of a patient dying of cancer which attracted wide media coverage. This, once again, illustrates the trendsetting role of the website, because, while blogs were rare in the beginning of the 2000s, it gave the opportunity to some popular authors to have their own mini-sites on the platform, which can be interpreted as a precursor of the blogging activities which became popular a few years later. For online writers, having one’s texts set apart from discussion forums and placed on individual mini-sites was a sign of status change:

This status came with the privilege to publish outside the normal discussion forums, that is, to have one’s texts separated from discussion of those texts. As we have seen, in the online context the removal of commentary and interactive functionalities often represents a form of canonization and a first step toward print publication.48

Hockx asserts that Under the Banyan Tree was characterized by its attempts to preserve the literary quality and seriousness of the writing it posted, while also being open to new practices. As the platform was linked to radio stations and literary magazines broadcasting and publishing some of their most popular works of the site, and as it was organizing literary awards, it seems to have initiated the trend of reading websites as multimedia businesses, while maintaining relationships with the structure of the "traditional" literary realm.

The discussions on the literary website were not completely left to run free, but were controlled by moderators expected to prevent the publication of illicit content, and, at times, to stimulate discussions. Moderators were also charged to select the best texts in the forums and to publish them in online magazines. Apparently, in the case of Under the Banyan Tree, moderators attempted to exercise a sort of quality control on the published texts. Hockx explains that users could post their

47. HOCKX 2015, 40.
writing in two different sections of the website: "Society" (Shequ 社区), which was open to anyone, and "Literature" (Wenxue 文学), where only members were allowed to post and where the texts had to be approved by the moderators before being made available for reading. According to Hockx, these practices illustrate the intention of the website to produce original and quality pieces and to not be completely assimilated into popular culture. In 2011, Under the Banyan Tree was not classified among the major literature websites anymore, which Hockx perceives as a consequence of its literary rather than commercial orientation.

Hockx chooses the example of the website Qidian 起点 - literally translated into Starting Point - to describe the emergence of a new type of commercially oriented online reading platforms. Qidian was created in 2001 by fans of the genre "fantasy" (xuanhuan 幻), but, already in 2002, it was open to other genres as well. In 2003, Qidian initiated the practice, now widely spread on literary websites, to give only the first chapters of popular novels to read for free, with the necessity to subscribe to the site and to pay a fee to read the text in its entirety. In 2004, the platform was classified among the hundred most popular websites in the world and bought by the Shanda Group (Shengda jituan 盛大集团), one of the leading Internet companies in China, according to the group's website.49 Hockx summarizes the functioning of Qidian as follow:

The Starting Point business model is simple but effective. On the one hand the site operates as a standard portal for online forums, offering users the opportunity to publish their writing online and receive comments from readers. At the same time, however, they also contract a number of more experienced "VIP authors," whose works appear in serialization, chapter by chapter, initially for free, but usually about halfway through the novel they are moved behind a pay wall.50

The subscription fees are divided between the author, who receives 70%, and the site, which receives the remaining 30%. An average author earns about two cents per thousand characters per reader. According to Hockx, the website is attractive for readers because it provides them with regular posting of their favorite genres for an affordable price; for the authors, it is attractive because it seems to give everyone the opportunity to launch a writing career "from submitting work to the normal forums, to establishing a readership, to being discovered by the site's editors, to becoming a contracted author, to making money," especially since the website can also play the role of mediator between writers and publishers.

Hockx asserts that websites like Qidian have played a major role in redefining the way people think of literature:

50. HOCKX 2015, 110.
51. HOCKX 2016, 211.
Online fiction websites have been instrumental in bringing about a radical redefinition of literary genres, with the word previously used to indicate "literature" in general (wenxue) now increasingly used as a genre label for more aesthetically oriented writing. Starting Point, for instance, uses the term wenxue xiaoshuo (literary fiction), indicating that xiaoshuo is the overarching category and "literature" a subcategory. This is highly reminiscent of practices from the pre–May Fourth period of magazine literature, when journals featuring the word xiaoshuo in their titles contained all kinds of creative writing in a dazzling variety of subgenres.52

Hockx explains that, among the thirteen categories available on the website, the most popular are fantasy, romance, and urban. However, most works could apparently fit in more than one category, as these are not hermetic nor exclusive.

Despite the government's attempts to reduce the differences of control, and thus of content, between "traditional" publishing and online literature, Hockx asserts that:

Massively popular genre fiction websites such as Starting Point are doing their share in bringing about literary innovation, specifically in the context of the mainland Chinese literary system. The works they publish are full-length novels without book numbers, read by millions of people. They take shape outside the state-owned publishing system and are not subjected to the same levels of control by editors acting as censors, compared with what would be the case if they were appearing in print. Moreover, these works are so long, are serialized over such long periods, and appear on so many different websites, that it is physically impossible for state control mechanisms to subject them to careful scrutiny.53

The researcher emphasizes the great variety of innovative practices displayed by Internet literature and questions the conclusions of the government on online writing activities as expressed in the 2012 annual report of the China Internet Network Information Center, which deplored the low quality and lack of innovation and originality of Internet fiction. In this report, the authorities apparently criticized Internet writers for adapting to readers' tastes, which is said to lead to the lowering of the quality of their works, and to the loss of interest of the readers:

Giving the people what they want, apparently, can only lead to low quality, making literature seem less like literature, and eventually causing the same people whose tastes are provided for to turn away and go in search of some other form of entertainment. [...] The passage is a perfect example of how, in the wonderful world of Chinese postsocialism, a distinction can be forged between what the market seems to want and what "the masses" really want, and articulated through a concept of style more commonly encountered in the writing of literary

52. HOCKX 2015, 111-112.
53. HOCKX 2015, 113.
Hockx asserts that online literature, as a social and interactive activity, displays great creativity and innovation. Moreover, online writing practices have contributed to the evolution of literature as a whole by allowing the appearance of new writers, new genres and, at times, by pushing the boundaries of what is politically acceptable to say and write. Hockx compares the Internet literature phenomenon to the blooming of literary magazines in the beginning of the 20th century because, in both cases, the evolutions of the literary field were shaped by a combination of social changes and technological innovations. Hockx also emphasizes that what is often perceived as the lack of quality of Internet literature is similar to what the critics addressed at the beginning of the 20th century entertainment fiction:

In some ways, Chinese Internet literature is reminiscent of the often hastily produced work that featured in the countless literary supplements of newspapers during the Republican period, which one scholar has aptly described as "literature in its primary state" (yuanshengtai wenxue).

Emphasizing the quantitative importance and success of Internet literature in mainland China, Jin Feng explains that, since 2000, its volume overcame the one of printed literature. According to Feng, this success is partly attributable to reading websites' tendency to encourage the establishment of communities of users, who are linked by their love for a certain type of stories. Using the example of the website Jinjiang Literary City (Jinjiang wenxue cheng), Feng also explains that contemporary Internet literature is characterized by rapid changing of trends:

Furthermore, because the Internet enables fast dissemination and ready imitation of any high-ranked Web fiction, Jinjiang readers and authors also exhibit the typical Web user's "fickleness" in tastes.

According to Feng, Internet fiction illustrates the author's - and probably the readers' - wish to escape from reality, described as dull and unsatisfactory, or to transgress it in some way. However, Feng does not identify online writing and reading as a locus of political dissent but, rather, as a place to find expression of authentic emotions, entertainment, and satisfaction of creative impulses. In that sense, in their literary life, users see "Internet as a tool to attend to their immediate needs and aspirations". Feng mentions the anonymity provided by the website as an explanation for the sense of freedom allowing the expression of some feelings and opinions, for readers and authors.

54. HOCKX 2015, 187.
55. HOCKX 2015, 29.
57. FENG 2012, 51.
58. FENG 2012, 55.
1.2.2 Categorized Novels

We have mentioned that Internet literature in contemporary China is characterized by its division into multiple genres. The practice of categorizing novels according to theme and style already existed before online writing. Fan Boqun describes the "categorization of novels" (xiaoshuo de leixinghua 小说的类型化) as a consequence of popular authors' understanding of readers' tastes.\footnote{59} However, if some genres preexisted the arrival of Internet in China, many others seem to have appeared online, or in parallel with the development of online writing and reading practices. The fact that online reading websites rapidly had to deal with important amounts of text, which they had to classify in a precise manner in order to give a pleasant and convenient experience to the user, and thus insure his or her loyalty to the platform, might account for this phenomenon. We have also mentioned that the interactivity of literary websites has encouraged the formation of virtual communities around specific works and genres. The different studies mentioned above seem to consider that the fragmentation of mass culture into different niches, allowing consumers to distinguish themselves on the basis of their literary preferences, is correlated with the development of various literary categories and reading communities in online literary practices.

Internet literature specialist Ouyang Youquan asserts that Internet literature is the natural result of the marketization of society and of technological progress, and that categorized novels are the consequence of the commodification of culture on this new medium.\footnote{60} According to Ouyang, the categories are used to attract users' attention and are thus displayed on the home pages of online reading websites, illustrating their interest and appeal to potential readers. Ouyang states that categories of novels originally appeared to satisfy the ever-more differentiated tastes of consumers, as well as to allow writers to express themselves in a more individualized manner. Thus, we can observe that categorized novels are here described as part of a wider phenomenon of individualization of Chinese society, especially among the youth, where originality and unicity of personality and character are increasingly valorized and expressed through consumption:

The individualization of reading practices of the numerous Internet literature consumers is the social basis of the flourishing of categorized novels. The famous online writers' personal forums, communities, blogs and micro-blogs fostered big groups of supporters and fans, encouraging authors to write and boosting their self-confidence.\footnote{61}

Applying this analysis to workplace novels, and using the example of Du Lala Go!, Chinese

\footnotesize{\textbf{59.} FAN 2014, 13.}  
\footnotesize{\textbf{60.} OUYANG Youquan 欧阳友权. "Wangluo leixing xiaoshuo: jiyuan he kunju" “网络类型小说：机缘和困局” [Internet categorized novels: good luck and difficulties], \textit{Study and Exploration}, 2013, 2013/02, p.123.}  
\footnotesize{\textbf{61.} OUYANG 2013, 124.}
researcher Zhao Kun explains how the categorization of literature is linked to its commercialization:

The new workplace novels, represented by *Du Lala Go!*, are a successful example of this "era of mass reading fragmentation". By being capable to master its own position and its target audience, it combines the spiritual value of cultural products and the practical value of commodities in the traditional sense. Thus, the act of reading literature, becoming a consumption behavior, not only gives its consumers - mainly white collars and university students - a new and unique form of esthetic enjoyment, but also allows them to obtain a practical and effective workplace experience.  

According to Zhao Kun, processes of division represent the natural evolution of mass consumption, because, society being heterogeneous, commodities need to be specifically targeted in order to be economically efficient. The researcher mentions the theories of American futurist and businessman Alvin Toffler, developed in the 1970s, which already predicted that the fragmentation of masses was indispensable to economic success, to support his assertions.

1.2.3 Authors and Readers: Blurring the Boundaries

Scholars have observed that online literary practices have considerably altered the definition of "authors", by allowing everyone to post texts on reading platforms, by making the writing process an interactive collaboration between like-minded users, and by emphasizing the "democratic" nature of this new way to start a career in literature. However, we can also observe that distinctions remain between Internet writers and "traditional" authors, as illustrated by the fact that the former are generally called *xieshou* 写手, "writing hand", or *zuozhe* 作者, writer, and the later *zuojia* 作家, which is the only one of those three terms to hold the sense of legitimacy and prestige the English term "author" also does. Despite this persistent hierarchy among literature makers, the flourishing of entertainment fiction that emerged in the 1990s has undoubtedly allowed a greater variety of backgrounds and careers among writers. The double identity of workplace fiction writers as businesspeople and authors is an example of that trend. We will now address the question of writers' and authors' identity and status in modern and contemporary China, in order to better apprehend the implications of the Internet literature phenomenon in this realm.

Apparently, in ancient China, the language used for the redaction of texts - either classical (*wenyan* 文言) or vernacular (*baihua* 白话) - was an important way to differentiate and evaluate written expression. While vernacular literature was often disparaged for its "popular", vulgar, and even dangerous qualities, the classical texts like poetry, historiography, Confucian scholarship and so on were valorized as "conveyers of truth and morality" (*wen yi zai dao* 文以载道), which implied a

responsibility of the writer to his or her readers.\textsuperscript{63} Literary talent was also strongly linked to social advancement, because the examination system, through which the administrators of the Empire were selected, was based on written compositions, and because traditional Chinese scholars were generally serving the government. Yuri Pines describes these literati as "a well-defined group" with a "distinct self-awareness and strong group identity."\textsuperscript{64} Thus, the Chinese intellectual elites were apparently conscious of their status and saw themselves as moral guides for society. Their perceived mission was to serve the ruler and the people, an ideal that shaped their career's aspirations and their processes of self-cultivation:

This combination of prestige, pride, and commitment to public service became the hallmark of shi [士, scholar] identity throughout the imperial period.\textsuperscript{65}

We can thus see that the characteristics of the traditional Chinese scholar encompassed public spirit, political involvement, and a sense of belonging to an elite group.

Link asserts that the vision of written texts as holding real moral and political power, and the vision of intellectuals who mastered the literary canon as holding the responsibility of disseminating its moral virtues persisted throughout China's history. Though disagreeing on which texts should compose the canon and thus be studied, intellectuals and writers of the beginning of the 19th century apparently continued to see themselves as the holders of a social mission: to save China from its internal crisis and from foreign aggressions. Link asserts that, in order to pursue this common goal, May Fourth intellectuals were willing to give up some of their individuality in writing:

The sense of crisis had grown into a sense of impending doom (wangguo yishi) that was strong enough that intellectuals willingly subordinated individual judgment to a collective voice. Writers who in the late 1910s or early 1920s had joined May Fourth groups based on natural affinities in viewpoint began in the 1930s to join groups from a sense of patriotic duty.\textsuperscript{66}

Mao's "Talks on Literature and Art", pronounced in Yan'an in 1942, also emphasized authors' role in propagating socialist and revolutionary ideals.

The Yan'an speech also asserted the government's monopolistic power to decide on literary correctness. In 1949, the All-China Writers' Association (\textit{Zhongguo zuojia xiehui 中国作家协会}) was established and came to represent the only ladder to recognition and success for writers. The Association was granting writers different privileges according to their status in its internal

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{63} KONG 2010, 126.
\item \textsuperscript{64} PINES Yuri, 2012. \textit{The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Imperial China and its Imperial Legacy}, Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press, p.76.
\item \textsuperscript{65} PINES 2012, 77.
\item \textsuperscript{66} LINK 2000, 107.
\end{itemize}
hierarchy. Apparently, only a tiny minority of writers were paid as full-time authors by the Association, while the majority was making a living through other professions. The possibility for popular authors to live off their writing thus vanished in the socialist system, and paid writing activities as well as the professional writer status even disappeared completely between 1966 and 1978. Until the 1990s and the marketization of entertainment fiction, it was impossible to make a living out of writing. According to Link, this proves that money was not a major incentive to become a writer at the time. Those who chose this path were rather motivated by a sense of moral duty - by their perceived responsibility to be the intermediaries between the rulers and the masses, a vision deeply rooted in both Confucian and communist visions of literature:

Few writers in socialist China viewed themselves as their readers' peers. Whether because they felt they understood more deeply or had a generally higher level of moral and political awareness, their implicit attitude toward readers was nearer to that of teacher than of conversation partner. Such an attitude was prescribed in the literary theory of state socialism, captured perhaps most notably in Stalin's phrase about "engineers of the soul." But it had deeper roots in Chinese cultural tradition, where the associations between written language and moral instruction were pervasive, ancient, and strong. Chinese modernizers early in the twentieth century, before the arrival of communist influences, were convinced that the writing of a good, new kind of fiction could help to build a strong and modern China.

According to Link's research, popular writers of the beginning of the 20th century differentiated themselves from the traditional literati, May Fourth intellectuals and authors under socialism both in the way they perceived and enacted their status and in how they made a living:

Before the twentieth century, creative writing in China was not used to support a living. It was a side activity for people who made a living from official service, landowning, or other business of the literate elite. [...] The first examples of professional creative writers appeared between about 1895 and 1920, when modern printing methods and changing education patterns created the conditions for mass-produced fiction in Shanghai, followed by Tianjin, Beijing, and Guangzhou. The harbingers were mainly journalists who began writing fiction on the side and later discovered they could make a living from it. They would sell their work to newspapers or magazines by the piece, and later (beginning in the 1910s) by a fixed rate of 1 to 3 yuan for a thousand characters. The more successful ones were able to sign on as salaried professional writers, earning in the range of 30 to 300 yuan per month.

Fan Boqun calls these authors who were living from their writing "professional freelance intellectuals" (ziyou zhiye zhishi fenzi 自由职业知识分子). Apparently, they managed to live from their novels and press articles because the press was already developed in Shanghai at the time, and

67. LINK 2000, 121-122.
68. LINK 2000, 143.
69. LINK 2000, 129.
because they were successful among a wide readership, even if they were often criticized by the "traditional" intelligentsia holding government offices. 70

Of course, only the most popular writers were able to live from their writing, while the others still had to turn to other jobs to make ends meet. However, the fact that being a full-time writer and to live off of it had become a possibility participated in changing the way literary activities were perceived. According to Link, some writers got a deeper understanding of contemporary society through their other professions, which contributed to their success, rise to popularity, and eventually to the possibility of living off their writing. They were also giving great importance to building their author's persona, and to emphasizing the originality and eccentricity of their personal lives and works. Apparently, successful writers started to develop relationships with their readers:

Readers were asked to join essay contests, to help judge them, or to send in letters with suggestions, appraisals, or questions about particular works. Authors and editors prided themselves on the strength of their hold on readers, and in their fashioning of public images liked to claim a personal magnetism strong enough to prevent any reader, once he had joined their following, from ever leaving it. 71

Apparently, readers appreciated this opportunity to participate in literary life.

Popular writers were often criticized for being more interested in making money than in the quality of their texts. 72 Link admits that many authors were writing in a serialized format which was not always compatible with the creation of a unified and coherent narrative. Moreover, the vision of fiction as a consumption good submitted to the rules of supply and demand could push authors to write fast and to give greater importance to readers' opinions than to the criteria traditionally used to appraise literature:

In the 1920s, as commercial influences grew stronger and the distinction between popular and elite (May Fourth) writers became clearer, popular fiction in China grew increasingly to resemble popular fiction in the West. This development makes it more possible to search for standards which characterize modern popular fiction generally, across cultures. Some may wish to speak of mere "characteristics" instead of standards, but in any case there are certain things that make some works more popular than others. 73

Among the characteristics that pleased readers, Link mentions an easily understandable style and form, the predominance of action over description, and the insertion, in the narrative, of strange and unexpected events, as well as plot twists. All of these characteristics attributed to beginning of the 20th century popular authors seem to apply to contemporary entertainment fiction as well.

70. FAN 2014, 100.
73. LINK 1981, 185.
especially those written online.

With the disappearance of the strict necessity for literature to teach revolution to readers in the Deng Xiaoping era, since the 1980s, writers have rediscovered the possibility to gain fame and money through their texts:

The material and careerist concerns of individual writers often pulled in considerably different directions from what was prescribed by the exalted image of the writer as moral guardian of the public interest. 74

In the early 1980s, it became acceptable for literature to embrace other goals than serving politics, like being entertaining for readers, for example. Kong Shuyu describes how, in the beginning of the 1990s, the government withdrew its financial support from most writers, and how it (re)became customary for them to sign contracts with editors and to be paid for their manuscripts. As they also started to receive royalties according to the book sales, it became potentially profitable to please readers. 75

Taking the examples of literary magazines of the 1990s, sociologist James Farrer describes how the changes in the structure of the book industry influenced the relationship between authors and readers. 76 Apparently, in the 1980s, magazines were playing the role of moral guidance for readers, which was not the case anymore in the 1990s, when they shifted to entertainment in order to survive. Farrer explains that magazines lost their educative authority because readers wanted to be treated as equal and to be entertained. 77 This necessity for readers to feel equal to writers is epitomized by Internet literature. Indeed, as described by Jin Feng, the interactive interface of online reading websites has rendered the author and reader categories fluid and mutually constitutive, where authors read and follow readers' advice and suggestions in order to please them and obtain higher popularity, and where readers gain agency by seeing that the opinions they express online matter and influence the creation of the texts they like. 78 The comment spaces available on the websites are described as allowing discussions on the development of the novel but also as a locus of opinion sharing on literature and life in general, thus creating a sense of community between users, no matter if they are readers, writers, or both:

Perhaps because it is more important than acquiring new knowledge and ideas, readers and authors navigate to this space for the social energy and emotional support it offers. They often exchange greetings and tell one another about changes and problems in their lives. In

74. LINK 2000, 153.
75. KONG 2005, 32-33.
77. FARRER 2002, 146-147.
78. FENG 2012, 49.
Feng emphasizes the importance, in the success of online reading platforms, of the sense of belonging to an imagined community for all users, who share an identical and egalitarian social status, no matter if they write or read, as these activities have become open to everyone. The majority of online readers and writers, like most Internet users in China, are usually young, urban, well-educated and enjoy higher than average income and social status. Within this group, identities and roles are blurred, because authors are generally reading novels from other writers, and because readers can easily become authors. Indeed, the websites allow readers to write comments, feedback, and even side-stories, as well as to make these contributions public. In that sense, readers participate actively in the life and evolution of the text. Feng asserts that, in order to please readers, authors often modify their stories according to the comments left after each chapter. Readers' comments are also used to establish rankings of the most popular works, which are then promoted and gain even greater visibility and popularity. This strategy can be profitable for authors as popular online novels are regularly selected by editors to be printed and published. This explains why the writing style of online literature is interactive and reader-oriented.  

Shih-chen Chao offers a detailed analysis of how these Internet literature practices have reconfigured the wider literary landscape of contemporary China:

The re-configuration lies in the fact that digital media poses a challenge to books as the dominant medium for authors and readers to produce and consume literary works.  

Chao asserts that online reading websites have blurred, and even erased, the distinction between production and consumption, as well as between authors and readers, by facilitating the possibility, for users, to assume these different roles alternately. Thus, readers cease to consume literature passively and participate in its elaboration. According to Chao, this progressive disappearance of the boundaries separating the traditional roles of literary production and consumption has been promoted by the participatory culture of Internet 2.0:

This digital and networked participatory culture empowers the notion of "digital prosumption" whereby, in a nutshell, netizens see the tendency of the roles of "producer and consumer, writer and reader, speaker and audience" merge into one within a digital and networked participatory environment.  

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79. FENG 2012, 60.
80. FENG 2012, 63.
82. CHAO 2016, 228.
Chao emphasizes the pioneer role of Qidian in the creation of this new type of literary arena where writers and readers belong to the same communities and often are the same people. As we have seen, Qidian designed its interface in order to outsource a great part of the editorial and marketing work to the users, by allowing them to comment chapters, to attract attention to mistakes, and to rank their favorite works:

Readers not only consume literary works but also contribute directly, and in different ways, to the making of a literary product, thus becoming prosumers.83

Qidian has even established a system of rewards for the best written book commentaries. Moreover, we mentioned that the process allowing an user to publish his or her writing online is very easy: it is enough to subscribe as a writer, and then to submit a sample of 3000 characters to the editors who will appraise the user's skills; if the text does not contain any illicit elements - political critiques, erotic scenes, and so on - it is published on the website and the author's career can begin. Qidian provides detailed guidelines to help the new authors to write popular works, and to take advantage of their interactions with readers. It also allows writers and readers to contribute to the elaboration of popular works' rankings, thus encouraging authors to refer to these rankings in order to produce what readers prefer, and encouraging readers to express directly their preferences:

This reflects a new, more direct relationship between authors and readers to the point where the vertical relationship between authors and readers of the past has become a more horizontal relationship in which authors and readers are on a par, and the traditional intermediary agents appear to have lost their significance. In this horizontal relationship, authors and readers can switch roles easily due to the multi-interactive functions facilitated by the digital platform, thus contributing to digital prosumption.84

As far as the author-reader relationship is concerned, the case of workplace novels proves to be particular. The novels are generally advertised in a way that emphasizes the proximity of the readers to the characters and the authors, who are all supposed to be educated white collars, thus supporting the idea that the novels are authentic and useful. However, for the novel to be a valuable guidebook, the author should also hold some form of authority, and thus superiority, compared to the readers, allowing him or her to give advice and spread knowledge. As we will see in the part of this research dedicated to text analysis, in their prefaces, workplace fiction authors often mention the fact that, as their readers, they are ordinary people, and evoke the existence of interactive communities around their works. On the other hand, they also emphasize their wish to help young people on the path of professional success, which they often perceive as a mission they have to accomplish for society. Workplace fiction authors thus seem to embrace both the egalitarian and interactive ideal of Internet

83. CHAO 2016, 236-237.
84. CHAO 2016, 246.
writing, and the traditional identity of the literati enlightening and serving the people.

The fact that novels of the *zhichang* category are often advertised as career manuals is probably linked to a commercial necessity of differentiation in a context where novels' production is numerically important and is influenced by the success of self-help books and professional manuals. However, the acceptance, by Chinese researchers, of the usefulness of workplace novels as truth, and their use of this characteristic to valorize works otherwise criticized for their lack of originality and literary quality allows us to think that the perception of literature as didactic is persistent in China, at least among intellectuals, despite the "democratizing" effect of online writing on the wider literary realm.
Chapter 2 - What are Workplace Novels?

We have mentioned that the purpose of this research is to explore the specific genre of contemporary Chinese novels labeled as workplace fiction. In mainland China, this category can now be found in all major book stores, physical and online, as well as on most reading websites. This allows us to think that this label has come to be acknowledged as a meaningful reference by the audience, to the same extent as other qualifiers like fantasy, romance or thriller, which are more familiar for Western readers and researchers. The presence of the category on online reading websites seems to indicate that workplace novels belong to the realm of entertainment literature. Indeed, as we have seen in the preceding chapter, the vast majority of online writing is generally considered as being created and consumed for entertainment purposes only.

As we will be discussing workplace novels as a category, we would like to bring to the reader's attention that the boundaries of the genre are blurred. This can probably be explained, to some extent at least, by the "unofficial" nature of popular culture categories in contemporary China. Indeed, with the exception of "historical" genres - martial arts novels, or ghost stories, for example - many literary genres seem to be appearing online. They often illustrate the emergence and development of new tendencies in pre-existing categories. In the specific case of workplace fiction, Chinese literature specialists Zhang Yonglu and Xu Daojun assert that some websites commonly used for online reading - for example Tianya Club (Tianya shequ 天涯社区), or Douban Reading (Douban yuedu 豆瓣阅读) - started to propose special tabs for this category after the tremendous success of the 2006 novel Quanzi quantao 《圈子圈套》, Circle and Trap, which was first published and read on the Internet.

The spontaneity of literary categories' appearance does not seem to be specific to the Chinese context, as it has also been observed by Tzvetan Todorov when he discussed the subdivisions of detective fiction. After pointing out the blurriness of the boundaries between two acknowledged detective fiction subcategories - the whodunit and the thriller - Todorov explains that this subdivision, though useful, does not necessarily describe inherent differences in the novels themselves - as they often contain the same narrative elements - but in the different degrees of importance given to each of these elements:

I have presented the opposition between the whodunit and the thriller as an opposition between two stories and a single one; but this is a logical, not a historical classification. The

85. WANG Qiang 王强 (2006). Circle and Trap, Beijing: Tsinghua University Press. We chose to adopt the English title proposed by Grace Hui-chuan Wu in her above mentioned article.
thriller did not need to perform this specific transformation in order to appear on the scene. Unfortunately for logic, genres are not constituted in conformity with structural descriptions; a new genre is created around an element which was not obligatory in the old one: the two encode different elements.  

This observation applies to contemporary Chinese workplace novels as well because, according to Zhang and Xu's article, the zhichang category has formed around a nucleus of works which started to be considered as divergent from preexisting genres, and as representative of an emerging new genre.

Before beginning with our presentation of the zhichang category, through the presentation of an inventory of the works classified in it and of the most famous novels it encompasses, it seems necessary to emphasize some problematic questions related to the study of literary genres, especially when their existence and evolution is contemporary to the research. Here, the observations of Philippe Lejeune on autobiography seem relevant:

> Prendre pour objet d'étude un genre vivant et contemporain, c'est se placer dans une situation ambiguë, qui est à la fois une ressource et une limite. Le choix de l'objet n'est pas innocent: dans la mesure où les genres sont des institutions sociales, isoler un genre pour le constituer en objet de savoir, cela peut être une manière de collaborer à l'institution autant que de faire oeuvre scientifique.

And further:

> L'étude universitaire des genres, si scientifique qu'elle se veuille, participe elle aussi, à sa manière, à l'institution: elle contribue souvent à construire ou à consolider ce qu'elle prétend analyser ou décrire. Elle rationalise et systématisé, pour fonder en droit et en dignité le genre étudié.

In accordance to Lejeune's distinction between description - an attempt to explain how the object of study is - and definition - which states how it should be, and which is thus normative - we will try to describe the workplace novels category without restricting the genre by attempting to strictly define it. As we will see, and as has been observed by Lejeune, theorizing a literary genre is not easily compatible with empiric observations, which often reveal the variety and heterogeneity of the works encompassed in a same category. Despite this obstacle, we will attempt to determine which are the invariable elements of workplace fiction, and to use them as a basis for our analysis.

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90. LEJEUNE 1996, 311.
91. LEJEUNE 1996, 322.
2.1 Definition by Content

2.1.1 The Category through Inventory Observation

At the beginning of this research, after having encountered the zhichang label on many occasions, the first question that had to be addressed was the evaluation of the genre's importance, in terms of quantity of works produced, and of visibility in the cultural field and in society as a whole. We consider that, if the works encompassed in the category are numerous, if some of them have enjoyed a significant commercial success - measured by the number of sales and by the existence of adaptations for other media - and if the zhichang label can be found in most places dedicated to literary consumption, it can be assumed that the category exerts an effect on collective representations of literature, and on the topics it treats. One of the first endeavors of the present research was thus to attempt to establish an inventory of the production of workplace novels, in order to apprehend its quantitative importance. As an inventory of works published on online reading websites would represent thousands of texts, we have decided to limit our research range to novels which have been printed and materially published.

As workplace novels have been - and still are - published by a wide variety of publishing houses, and as we did not find any trace of attempt to establish a comprehensive record of the production of the category, we decided to use and compare the lists proposed by the two online bookstores most commonly used in China, Dang Dang (Dangdang wang 当当网), and Amazon China. The fact that both websites include a zhichang tab among the limited number of categories that they propose for fiction - fifteen for Dang Dang, eleven for Amazon - is noteworthy in itself, as an indicator of the category's recognition as a relevant classifier for contemporary novels. The number of works classified under the zhichang label is important on both websites, with 1307 entries listed on Dang Dang, and 604 on Amazon. However, it should be noted that many works seemed to have been misplaced in the workplace fiction category - some did not deal with the professional world and some were not fictions - and that the lists contained various editions of the same novels. Moreover, each volume of a saga was considered as one entry. In the present research, we have decided to consider the different editions of the same novel as one, but we have recorded the existence of re-editions when the information was available. We have also decided to treat the different volumes of a saga as one novel, while mentioning the number of volumes encompassed in one narrative.

Through this process, we have identified 523 novels and six collections of short stories on the Dang Dang website, and 283 novels and fourteen collections of short stories on Amazon. The novels

93. The inventory has been completed in June 2017 and the results thus reflect the state of the websites at that moment.
94. The websites have been last checked on September 12th, 2017.
95. The most important numbers mentioned in this part are summarized in different tabs in appendix B.
found on the two websites differ greatly: only 122 works appeared on both platforms. This particularity allows us to think that online bookstores do not aim at exhaustivity when establishing literary categories. On these websites, the existence of the category seems to be motivated by a necessity to guide users towards narratives most likely to fit their tastes, and to do so as efficiently as possible considering the volume of novels available for purchase. Online bookstores do not seem to contribute to the elaboration of literary categories as coherent and circumscribed ensembles. We did not find any trace of attempts to establish an exhaustive list of workplace fictions on other platforms either. This absence could be interpreted as a consequence of their quantitative importance, but also as a symptom of the intellectual circles' attitude towards these novels. Indeed, we can imagine that, if they were seen as holding an inherent quality, they would be considered as worth recording and preserving.

The inventory listed a total of 849 authors for 826 works, which can be explained by the fact that some works are attributed to more than one author. The descriptions of the books to be read online do not always provide information about the authors, and, when available, this information is often laconic. We have observed that, in most cases, information about the authors' identities was provided when it was related to their proficiency and experience of the workplace. The most detailed accounts concerned the author's achievements in the professional realm, conveying the idea that the books, written by experienced businesspeople, were realistic and potentially useful for the readers. Information about the professional background of the author was available in 745 cases. In 590 cases, the author was described as having some recognized experience or knowledge in the field he or she was describing in the book, or in a closely related fields. The 155 authors who were not said to be experienced in the workplace they were describing were usually government officials, teachers or people working in media.

In some cases, the descriptions of the writers' backgrounds also focused on literary achievements, mentioning, for example, the literary awards they received, or praising the quality and success of their earlier works. However, this type of description was not as frequent as the one emphasizing the authors' professional experiences. Apparently, workplace fictions are generally not the work of full-time writers, but of businesspeople who write in their spare time. These professionals have rarely published books on other topics and are seldom praised for the literary quality of their works. Among the 849 authors listed in our database, only seventy-five appear more than once, and only twenty more than twice, indicating that most writers did not produce more than one novel or saga. We cannot rule out that some of them might have written novels which do not belong to the zhichang category, even if this seems rare. It has apparently been the case for three authors, who appear only once in our inventory but who are said to have obtained literary awards for other works. The information available online allows us to think that the majority of workplace novels' writers produced only one novel or saga.

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Regarding the authors' age, information was only available in 321 cases. The following observations might thus not be representative of the genre as a whole. Our inventory lists authors born between the late fourth century (Vegetius) and the 1990s. The most represented age cohort seems to be the post-1970 generation, with ninety-eight writers, followed by the post-1980 generation, with eighty-two authors. Most of the inventory's writers were thus in their forties and thirties around 2010, when the majority of workplace novels was published, which seems to coincide with the age when people are most involved in their careers. The post-1960 cohort and the post-1950 cohort are also importantly represented, with sixty-one and forty-six authors respectively.

As for the authors' gender, information was available in 810 cases, which were divided into 528 male authors and 282 female authors. In most cases, it seems that male authors choose male main characters, the opposite being true for female authors as well, illustrating the importance of the gender line in the definition of the themes and target readers of different works. Information about characters' gender was available in 730 cases. In the remaining cases, either the gender of the character was impossible to identify, which was rare, or the summaries described the heroes and heroines of the novels as an undefined group, which made the gender of the different main characters seem irrelevant, the important aspect being the age cohort or the social background of the protagonists. In 428 cases the main characters of the novels were male, in 252 cases the main characters were female, and in twenty-three cases the novel was centered on both a male and a female main character. We can thus notice that, both in terms of authors and characters, men are in the majority in the workplace fiction category.

Our inventory also indicates that the production of the genre can be clearly delimited in time. Workplace novels seem to have been rare until the end of 2007, as less than ten novels were published every year until 2004, then eleven in 2005, fourteen in 2006, and sixteen in 2007.96 Apparently, the category began to grow significantly in 2008, with forty-eight volumes published, reached a peak between 2009 and 2010, with 137 and 140 novels published respectively, and started to decrease in 2011 (119 novels, 89 in 2012, 75 in 2013, 60 in 2014, 53 in 2015, and 50 in 2016). This observation allows us to think that workplace fiction was most fashionable around 2010, and that the craze has already passed. It should be noted that the dates listed in our database might not always represent the first appearance of a specific narrative, but the date of publication of the editions available on the two websites used to collect the data. However, as we will see when discussing the current state of research on workplace novels, the peak situated between 2009 and 2010 seems coherent with the interest raised by the category in the press and in academic articles.

We can see that the volume of the production of workplace novels changed drastically with time.

96. Here we describe the production as represented by our inventory. We do not pretend our observations to be perfectly representative of the totality of the category, but we consider that this method of production analysis is sufficient to obtain the general idea relevant to this research.
The category also seems to have undergone important changes in terms of content. First of all, we have observed that the earliest narratives were describing only a limited set of professional sectors - mainly government and finance. They also conformed to restricted patterns of narratives - the exposure of the dark secrets of the emergent capitalist society, or the revelation of the career tricks of self-made men. Female authors, and thus female characters, appear later in the genesis of the category. As time went by, the workplaces represented grew more diverse, which seems to be correlated with the increasing involvement of women in the category. The focus of most narratives also seems to have shifted to younger characters, as they came to mostly describe the young white collars' transition between university and the professional world. The increasing attention given to younger characters, and thus to younger readers, is probably linked to the fact that teenagers and young adults have come to represent the main consumers of entertainment literature.\footnote{During our 2015 field research, we had the opportunity to interview editors from the Changjiang Wenyi Press (Changjiang wenyi chubanshe 长江文艺出版社), who asserted that mastering the young readership was equivalent to mastering the market as a whole.}

The evolution of the category also seems to reflect deep changes occurring in the structure of the Chinese job market, for example its increasing competitiveness, or the growing difficulty for college graduates to find suitable employments, which can explain the shift of focus to young readers, in need of support and guidance in the professional realm.

Let us now turn to the publishing houses involved in the production of workplace novels. In our inventory, information about the publishing houses issuing the books was available in 820 out of 826 cases. These 820 volumes have been edited by 206 different publishing entities. We have observed that 748 novels have been published by publishing houses (chubanshe 出版社, shushe 书社 or shuju 书局), meaning by state-owned structures which are solely allowed to issue ISBNs. The majority of the remaining works have been published by "companies" or "corporations" (gongsi 公司 or jituan 集团), which are privately or semi-privately owned and funded. These structures usually need to be linked to publishing houses by contracts to be allowed to distribute the books they print. They are often more commercially oriented than publishing houses, and they generally enjoy a better knowledge of the market and of the works' selling potential, making them profitable partners for the more "traditional" publishing houses. We have also listed seventy novels published by editors attached to universities (daxue 大学), and other types of research centers, as indicated by their names, containing terms like yanjiu 研究, research, xueyuan 学院, institute, or kexue 科学, science. The entities which seem to be most involved in workplace fiction publishing in our inventory were the Jiangsu Literature and Art Publishing House (Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe 江苏文艺出版社), with thirty-four novels released, the Chongqing Publishing House (Chongqing chubanshe 重庆出版社), which published twenty-five novels, as well as the Writers Publishing House, and the New World Publishing House (Xin shijie chubanshe 新世界出版社), which released
twenty-three novels each.

Among the 826 works listed in our inventory, fifty-seven were attributed to non-Chinese authors. These works can be used as a sample to apprehend the heteroclitic nature of the category, as they include, for example, Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, and Vegetius' *The Military Institutions of the Romans* (*De re militari*). On this basis, we can observe that the workplace fiction label can apparently encompass any novel dealing with the professional world, strategic thinking, or social climbing. Despite the fact that the name of the category allows potential readers to expect a focus on work-related issues, the summaries available online seem to indicate that the importance given to the professional realm or to the characters' careers differs greatly from narrative to narrative. While some of them describe in detail the specificities of a profession, or the development of the protagonist's career, for others, the workplace seems to be only used as the background of a love story, or of the depiction of social issues - for example the way women juggle work and motherhood, the question of divorce, the problem of re-employment of older laid-off employees and former military men, etc.

Through the constitution of the inventory, we have also observed that it is sometimes difficult to draw a line between the realms of fiction and nonfiction, and thus between what should be regarded as a workplace novel and what seems to rather belong to the categories of self-help books or professional manuals. In the summaries available online, most workplace novels are described as realistic and useful, and the fact that the authors benefit from first-hand knowledge and experience of the workplace that they depict is often emphasized. In the present research, we have aimed at being as inclusive as possible in the creation of the inventory, excluding only the works clearly identified as nonfictional in their summaries. In these cases, we have interpreted the classification of the texts among workplace novels as a mistake. However, the proximity of the genre to nonfictional and didactic categories should be kept in mind, as that can probably inform us on the readers' expectations towards these works, which influence the way they are perceived and consumed.

The fact that workplace novels are often described as realistic and authentic accounts by experienced professionals justifies their use not only as entertainment literature, but also as career guides. For example, the back cover of *Du Lala Go!*, the most famous novel of the category, which will be analyzed later, states:

You can read this purely fictional story as entertainment, but you can also use it as a

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98. We have listed twenty-three American authors, sixteen Japanese, twelve British, two Israeli, two Italians, one Canadian, and one French.

They are thus situated on the border between fictional narratives and nonfictional self-help books or professional manuals, at least in the way they are advertised. In her study on contemporary literature, Lena Henningsen has observed a similar phenomenon:

 [...] I noticed that the differences between factual and fictional writing are increasingly blurred. What appears to be a factual account of events may turn out to contain fictional elements. Similarly, texts that appear to be purely fictional at first glance may contain clues that offer a strong autobiographic reading. Thereby, the fictional quality of the text is reduced and its factual elements appear. I argue here that these factual elements in fictional texts serve as a means to underline the authenticity of such texts and to bestow authenticity on the arguments the authors want to convey through their texts.101

For the novels in our inventory, the authors' experiences are indeed mobilized to assert the authenticity, realism, and usefulness of their writing. Moreover, this emphasis on the authors' professional backgrounds might lead the readers to infer that there is a strong connection between the authors and the main characters, whose careers are the focus of the novels. However, most of the novels are written using the third person - only twelve out of the 826 novels of our inventory use the first person. Many works of the category thus bring to mind Lejeune's definition of "autobiographical novels":

This is how I will refer to all fictional texts in which the reader has reasons to suspect, from the resemblance that he thinks he sees, that there is identity of author and protagonist, whereas the author has chosen to deny this identity, or at least not to affirm it.102

This characteristic participates in casting doubt on what in the novels should be considered as fiction, and what should be considered as factual information or description.

We have mentioned that the success of the category can be clearly delimited in time. We can assume that the production peak situated around 2009-2010 follows the access of the three bestsellers of the category - Du Lala Go!, Lose&Win, and Ups and Downs - to a certain level of fame and success. Indeed, the three zhichang novels which became bestsellers were all published between 2006 - for the first volume of Lose&Win - and 2011 - for the fourth volume of the Du Lala saga. 2010 was also the year when Du Lala Go! was first adapted into a movie and a TV series, marking the arrival of workplace narratives to other media. Moreover, in 2008, China celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the economic reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, which initiated China's economic

100. LI 2013.
growth and development, an event which seems to have enjoyed important media coverage.\textsuperscript{103} This period has proven to be of great importance for the positioning of China as a strong economic nation in the world. Not only did China host the Olympic Games in 2008 and the World Exhibition in 2010, but the country also took the opportunity of the financial crisis of 2008, and the way it affected the Western world, to consolidate its role as a major economic agent and as an interlocutor who could not be ignored in the future world order.\textsuperscript{104} These events probably encouraged a stronger interest in all signs of national modernization and enrichment, including, for example, narratives describing careers in foreign-owned companies - seen as symbols of China's integration and success in the global economy - and white collars' processes of wealth accumulation and social climbing.

We can also observe that the appearance and rise to success of workplace novels followed the continuous growth of government investments in education between 1980 and 2009, and especially between 1999 and 2003, as described by sociologist Jean-Louis Rocca, who asserts that the government's goal was to "[...] respond to the needs of economic development by improving labor force skills to satisfy the need for engineers, accountants, lawyers, researchers, managers and so on."\textsuperscript{105} Simultaneously, the number of enrollments in higher education grew by 20% every year between 1999 and 2003, because:

By applying this policy, the government aimed to meet the scheduled needs of the labor market for highly qualified manpower and to open up opportunities for upward social mobility for urban dwellers.\textsuperscript{106}

This means that, until a certain point, holding a higher education degree was a guarantee to find a high-paid job and to have access to consumption. However, as the number of college graduates grew, their value on the job market started to decrease, making it more and more competitive, even for the well-educated youth.\textsuperscript{107} It seems that the shift of workplace novels' focus to a younger audience has accompanied the increasing difficulty for them to find satisfactory jobs after their

\begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{103} The question of the anniversary has been addressed on major Chinese news broadcasting websites and has given rise to various types of articles. The Chinese Knowledge Integrated platform, an important database for academic articles and important press releases, lists more than 4000 articles addressing the topic of "thirtieth anniversary of the economic reforms" (\textit{gaige kaifang sanshi zhounian} 改革开放30周年). See the website www.cnki.net (last consulted on July 19th, 2018).
    \item \textsuperscript{104} See, for example, CALLAHAN William A. (2013). \textit{China Dreams: 20 Visions of the Future}, New York: Oxford University Press.
    \item \textsuperscript{106} ROCCA 2017, 31.
\end{itemize}
graduation, as well as their growing interest for employment issues, explaining why novels are advertised as handbooks to find a suitable employment and have a successful career. In their article, Zhang Yonglu and Xu Daojun assert the existence of a causal relationship between the rise of admissions to universities beginning in 1999 and the increasing number of potential readers for workplace novels.\(^{108}\) In her 2012 article, Zhang Yulian also described the appearance and success of workplace novels as a consequence of the increasing difficulties for university graduates to find a job.\(^{109}\)

We consider that the type of publishing entities involved in the production of workplace novels can provide us with useful information on the status of these works in the literary field. In recent years, along with the commercialization of literature, publishing entities have grown more numerous and more varied in their structures, orientations, funding, governmental ties, and prestige in literary circles.\(^{110}\) It seems that, nowadays, these different structures adopt various attitudes and strategies towards literature and the potential benefits it can provide. Our 2015 field research allowed us to observe that some publishing houses, for example the Writers Publishing House, attached to the China Writers Association, choose the texts they publish according to what they perceive as the works' "literary value", and neglect works considered "popular" or "commercial", despite their high selling potential. At the other end of the spectrum, we find publishing entities like the Changjiang Wenyi Press, which mainly publishes young and fashionable authors guaranteed to sell well.

We have seen that the four publishing houses most involved in workplace novels' production were the Jiangsu Art and Literature Publishing House, the Chongqing Publishing House, the Writers Publishing House, and the New World Publishing House. According to its webpage, as well as its name, the Jiangsu Art and Literature Publishing House focuses on publishing modern and contemporary literature, art and literary critics, biographies and documentaries. The home page of the website states:

The Jiangsu Art and Literature Publishing House brings together elites from all directions, promotes the outstanding works of recognized authors, gives great importance to cultural content, and is committed to elegant taste.\(^{111}\)

Thus, we can infer that this publishing house adopts a rather "traditional" approach to book editing, based on appreciation of literary value.

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108. ZHANG & XU 2011, 46.
110. Regarding the development of the publishing market between the 1990s and early 2000s see, for example, KONG 2005. For an overview of the book industry from the 17th century to this day, see BERG Daria & Strafella Giorgio, eds. (2016). *Transforming Book Culture in China, 1600-2016*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.
The Chongqing Publishing House is part of a bigger structure, the Chongqing Publishing Group (Chongqing chuban jitian 重庆出版集团), which, according to its website, involves printing and publishing, but also paper trade, advertising, tourism and real estate. The presentation of the group, available in English, states:

The newly-founded Chongqing Publishing Group will further speed up the shareholding reform to establish a modern enterprise system which manifests the principles of "clearly established ownership, well-defined power and responsibility, separation of enterprise from administration, and scientific management"; It will also push forward the cross-region and cross-industry merging and association to create scale advantages, and will make full use of current resources to forge a new multi-media industrial structure, and to tap new sources of economic growth, including online digital publishing, cartoon-animation bases and so on.\textsuperscript{112}

This allows us to think that this publishing entity is less concerned with literary value, and mainly prides itself on its contribution to the country's economic development.

As we have seen, the Writers Publishing House follows an editorial line based on "literary value" and is also close to the government. Finally, the New World Publishing House "implements conscientiously a scientific approach to development, [and] follows the publishing principle of 'concern for the progress of society, dedication to publication for the masses, offering a new world to readers' [...]\textsuperscript{113} Apparently, this publishing house specializes in editing management and self-help books (jingying lizhi tushu 经营励志图书), explaining its interest in workplace fiction. We have also seen that numerous publishing entities involved in the production of zhichang literature were affiliated with academic and educational structures. Out of these observations, we can infer that, while the category seems to belong to the realm of popular, fashionable, or commercial reading, thus attracting the attention of profit-oriented editors, they are also sometimes considered as holding an intellectual and didactic value, which is attested to by the involvement, in the publication of these novels, of publishing houses following a "stricter" editorial line, or of entities attached to universities and research centers. This observation is supported by the fact that the vast majority of the works listed in our inventory were edited by publishing houses rather than by private companies and is also congruent with the books' advertisement describing them as useful manuals for young college graduates and white collars.

\textsuperscript{112} http://www.cqph.com/Group/Index (last consulted on October 17th, 2017).

\textsuperscript{113} http://xsjcbs.show.imosi.com/1/company_desc.aspx (last consulted on October 17th, 2017).
2.1.2 Major Works and Subcategories: *Du Lala Go!, Ups and Downs, and Lose&Win*

### 2.1.2.1 Success, Popularity and Influence

The inventory established for the purpose of the present research contains an important number of texts of varied forms and concerned with varied topics. This list allowed us to apprehend the quantitative importance of the *zhichang* category. However, approaching the genre through its most "popular", and thus influential representatives also seemed necessary to understand its qualitative relevance in the contemporary cultural field. Here, we follow the proposition of Margaret Wan, who chooses to evaluate the "popular nature" of novels according to their availability in society, rather than according to criteria of authorship or esthetic.\(^{114}\) Margaret Wan states:

> By using the term "popular" here to refer to the traditional Chinese novel, I want to highlight two ideas. The first is the relative ubiquity and availability of many of these works in the print culture of their day. Thus I define popularity in terms of wide accessibility, measured by the number of times a novel was reprinted.\(^{115}\)

It is in accordance with this definition of popular culture that we attempted to identify the workplace novels which had sold the most copies, had been edited multiple times, and adapted for other media, assuming that they would be the ones with the greatest influence on the category, the literary field, and on society, whatever this influence may be.

In order to determine if some of the works of the category enjoyed a significant commercial success, and if so, which ones, we used the media studies platform OpenBook (*Kaijuan 开卷*).\(^{116}\)

The purpose of this organization is to identify best-selling books - separated between the realms of fiction and nonfiction - and to publish their daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly rankings. According to the website, the lists published online are based on data collected from more than three thousand major bookstores all around the country. Undoubtedly, it would have been beneficial for this research to compare the results of different media studies companies. However, the organizations analyzing book sales in China are rare and usually do not publish their results online, compelling us to limit ourselves to the use of this single source of information, which holds the advantage of making the results of its investigations available on its website.

According to the rankings provided by OpenBook before 2016 - when the website's interface and the volume of available data changed drastically - we identified three novels which ranked among the thirty best-selling fictional works between 2005 and 2015. These were Li Ke's *Du Lala Go!*, a

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115. WAN 2017, 7.
four-volume saga published between 2007 and 2011, Cui Manli's *Ups and Downs*, an intended trilogy with only two volumes published for the time being in 2008 and 2009, and Fu Yao's *Lose & Win*, an announced three-volume saga with only two volumes published to this day, between 2006 and 2014. As bestselling works, these three novels can be seen as the most famous examples of the category, and thus as its representatives, from the point of view of norms and standards. After evoking the genesis of these works, we will follow the methodology adopted by Margaret Wan in her evaluation of literary works' popularity, and consider the existence of multiple editions and of adaptations of the novels - in film, TV series and others - as important signs of their success, popularity, and thus influence on later works of the category, and on the readership:

By the late Qing, stories like the court-case legend of Judge Shi and his martial helpers were neatly ubiquitous, as printed novels, drama, storytelling, ballad texts, and popular print. Thus such stories were part of the fabric of the culture.\(^{117}\)

The novels' trans-media presence will be interpreted as a sign of their participation in the "fabric of the culture", and thus in the elaboration of a shared, imaginary version of the environments and events they describe. The three most popular sagas of the *zhichang* genre, identified here by their status as bestsellers, will be considered as influential in the definition of the category and of its standards, as well as in the elaboration and dissemination of particular views on the workplace and the life of white collars. Then, in the next section of this chapter, the plots of these three major works of the *zhichang* genre will be presented in order to illustrate the narrative variations existing in the genre, which, as we have mentioned in the general introduction, is divided according to the gender of the authors, main characters, and target readers of the novels.

The reading and analysis of these bestsellers seem indispensable to apprehend the category as a whole. As they have obtained a significant commercial success, they have probably influenced the production of later works, and participated in setting the standards of the category. For example, *Du Lala Go!* is often described, in the press as well as in academic articles, as having initiated a "production chain" (*chanye lian* 产业链) of novels,\(^{118}\) or as having marked a turning point in the development of the category, as illustrated by the use of the term "post-Du Lala era" in some articles.\(^{119}\) The description of the heroine as a "typical representative of the middle class" (*dianxing de zhongchan jieji daibiao* 典型的中产阶级代表)\(^{120}\) supports the idea of this book holding a

\(^{117}\) WAN 2017, 15.

\(^{118}\) See, for example, FENG Yuqian 冯雨乔 & CUI Lingrui 崔凌睿. "Shilun changxiaoshu qi ji chanye lian de xingcheng - yi 'Du Lala shengzhi ji' wei li" “试论畅销书及其产业链的形成——以《杜拉拉升职记》为例” [Best-sellers and the Formation of Production Chains - The Example of "Du Lala's Promotion Diary"], *News World*, 2011, 2011/06, pp. 227-228.

\(^{119}\) See, for example, GAO Quanjun 高全军. "Hou Du Lala shidai de zhichang xushi" “后杜拉拉时代的职场叙事” [Workplace Narration in the Post-Du Lala Era], *Yuwen jianshe*, 2010, 2010/05, pp. 65-66.

\(^{120}\) See, for example, the back cover of the 2013 edition of the first volume.
normative function in the category. Moreover, in the summaries of other workplace novels available online, *Du Lala Go!* is often used as a reference, the narratives being described through their similarities and differences with Li Ke's bestseller, while the plots of many of them also strongly evoke the story of Du Lala.

We have observed that the characteristics of the Du Lala saga - summarized by literature specialists Pan Yuanwen and Peng Wenzhong using the three concepts of "workplace" (zhichang 职场), "great professional Classic" (zhīyě shèngjīng 职业胜经), and "ordinary hero" (píngmín yíngxióng 平民英雄) - have come to be perceived as the characteristics of the genre as a whole, despite the fact that they almost exclusively concern feminine workplace novels, which are not in the majority in the category. In general, the Chinese researchers interested in the category tend to describe its internal homogeneity positively, as a testimony of its existence as a genre, despite their wish for future workplace novels to break away from the models and to display more originality. Congruently, according to Tzvetan Todorov, conformity to certain narrative norms is a necessary characteristic of genre literature. When discussing the typology of detective fiction, he states:

Yet there is a happy realm where this dialectical contradiction between the work and its genre does not exist: that of popular literature. As a rule, the literary masterpiece does not enter any genre save perhaps its own; but the masterpiece of popular literature is precisely the book which best fits its genre.

Following that statement, we can speculate that readers of genre literature seek familiarity - in narrative structures, characters, etc. - in the novels they choose, and that they evaluate their reading experience, to some extent at least, according to the narratives' conformity to the genre's rules and norms, which have been established by the works perceived as the most representative of the category.

Let us start with the presentation of *Du Lala Go!*, written by female author and businesswoman Li Ke. The Du Lala saga contains four volumes, published between 2007 and 2011 by the Shaanxi Normal University Publishing House (*Shanxi shifan daxue chubanshe* 陕西师范大学出版社). In

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121. See, for example, CHEN Tianli 陈田立 (2012). *Ren zai qi tu* 《人在企途》 [On the Companie's Way], Chengdu: Sichuan Literature & Art Publishing House, described as a "male version of 'Du Lala's Promotion Diary'", *nan ban "Du Lala shengzhi ji"* 男版《杜拉拉升职记》.


123. PAN Yuanwen 潘沅汶 & PENG Wenzhong 彭文忠. "Zhichang xiaoshuo de san ge guanjianci" "职场小说的三个关键词" [The Three Key Words of Workplace Novels], *Hunan shangxue xueyuan bao*, 2013, 20 (1), pp.94-97.

124. See, for example, FENG Xue 冯雪. "Cong 'Canglang zhi shui' dao 'Baigujing liancheng ji' - qian tan zhichang xiaoshuo" "从《沧浪之水》到《白骨精练成记》——浅谈职场小说" [From "Canglang zhi shui" to "Baigujing liancheng ji": a brief discussion on workplace novels], 2011, *Jintian*, 2011/11, p.49, or ZHANG & XU 2011.

2013 and 2015, the saga was reedited by the Nanhai Publishing Company (Nanhai chuban gongsi 南海出版公司). Here we would like to attract the reader's attention to the difference between these two publishing entities: the first edition was published by a state-owned publishing house affiliated with a university specialized in the formation of educators; the second and third ones were released by a private company, which usually implies financial independence from the state and a profit-oriented editing strategy. The second and third editions of the saga, as well as their appropriation by a private company, can probably be explained by the success encountered by the book which, by 2013, had sold more than five million copies, according to the advertisement printed on the cover of the 2013 edition.\(^{126}\) The origins of the novels are described in an article by Liang Chunfang.\(^ {127}\)

Apparently, an editor from the Shaanxi Normal University Publishing House, in search of new narratives to be targeted at the growing group of urban white collars, found a long series of blog posts telling the story of a young woman, Du Chaoyang, who was describing her professional difficulties and relationship concerns. The editor, impressed by the quality of the writing and considering that the story could potentially sell well, then contacted the author, Li Ke. As she was apparently already considering the option of writing a novel, a contract was signed rapidly.

Following the success of the novel, Du Lala Go! was adapted for various media, which will be briefly described here. It should be noted, however, that a precise textual comparison between the different adaptations of the novel exceeds the scope of this research, and that the basic information provided on the subject mainly aims at illustrating the omnipresence of the narrative in the realm of popular culture and mass consumption in contemporary China. The first adaptation of the novel was a thirty-two episode TV series by director Chen Mingzhang 陈铭章, aired between 2009 and 2010. This first TV show, sharing the first volume's title, respects the novel's focus on Du Lala's professional experiences and achievements, while also adding a humorous touch to the narrative, absent from the book, by making Lala an extremely clumsy girl with a special ability for putting herself in awkward and complicated situations. This show is completely set in Shanghai, while, in the novel, Lala is based in Guangzhou and occasionally travels to Shanghai, Beijing and other locations.

In 2012, a fifty episode web series, directed by Zhang Feng 张峰, was released. The title of this second show was also Du Lala Go!, but it starred different actors and the format of the episodes changed as well: fifteen minutes each, instead of forty-five for the first series. The setting of the plot also changed, as this second version was staged in Beijing. While narrating approximately the same events as the first series - meaning, following roughly the plot of the first volume of the saga which

\(^{126}\) LI 2013.

depicts Lala's arrival at the American IT company DB - the second version seems to give more importance to the personality of the characters, as well as to the heroine's relationships with her friends, her new coworkers - who play cruel pranks on her when she first joins the company - her lover Wang Wei, and her love rival Daisy, which slightly furthers the focus of the show from Lala's professional achievements, even if the question of her career remains important. In this version, Du Lala is less serious and more lively than the heroine of the novel, giving the show an entertaining note, but the character does not display the awkwardness and susceptibility for practical jokes visible in the first series.

In 2013, a thirty-six episode TV series was produced by Taiwanese director Lin Helong 林合隆. It was titled Du Lala 2: Those Shinning Years (Du Lala 2: Hua nian si shui 《杜拉拉2华年似水》), which is also the title of the second novel. Starring yet another set of actors, and setting the story in Shanghai, the episodes constituting this series are approximately forty-five minutes long. This show starts with Lala having already been named chief inspector of human resources at her company and focuses on her relationship with Wang Wei, who she hopes to marry. At the beginning of the series, Wang Wei, who left DB to avoid damaging Lala's career with the scandal of their love affair, encounters professional difficulties pushing him to delay his marriage proposal to Lala, instilling tension in their relationship. At some point, he disappears without giving her any notice and reappears only at the end of the series, successful and ready to get married - the wedding ceremony marking the end of the show. Thus, as we will see, this second series covers the events of volumes two to four of the novels, with slight divergences from the books’ plot.

In 2016, Taiwanese director Liu Junjie 刘俊杰 produced a fourth TV series, titled I am Du Lala (Wo shi Du Lala 《我是杜拉拉》). This series was composed of forty-two episodes, each forty-five minutes long, and starred a fourth set of actors. This show narrates the life of Du Lala after she marries Wang Wei and focuses both on her work and on her couple life. Interestingly, this fourth show is the only one not starting with a view of the city skyline - and thus not identifying straight away the location of the narrative - but with a browse of a spacious and comfortable apartment, symbolizing the shift of the series towards domestic life. Later in the first episode, it is not the traditional view of the Pudong buildings or of the Bund which allows the viewer to understand that the story takes place in Shanghai, but a close shot on a car's license plate.

Moving on to the adaptations into film, the first Du Lala movie was produced by female director Xu Jinglei 徐静蕾 in 2010, with the English title Go Lala Go!. The movie, set in Beijing, starts with the beginning of the first book, meaning with the hiring of Du Lala by DB, and narrates the same assignment occupying Lala for most of the first volume, the renovation of the company's main Chinese offices. However, the movie gives more importance than the books and the TV series to Du Lala's physical transformation after she joins DB: she becomes more and more beautiful, fashionable and sophisticated, and consumes more and more luxurious brands. Moreover, each new
part of the movie starts with the mention of Lala's position and salary, which is increasing continuously. In the movie, Lala is shown in different cosmopolitan and elegant settings like a ball or on holidays in Thailand. The movie also gives more importance than the first book to Lala's relationship with Wang Wei, drifting away from the professional focus of the novel. On April 20th, 2010, the newspaper 21st Century Business Herald (21shiji jingji baodao 21世纪经济报道) published an article by journalist Zhang Ye 张烨, titled "'Du Lala': From 'Completely Professional' to 'Very Fashionable'" which describes this change of focus from the novel to the movie. This article inventoried thirty-three famous brands clearly identifiable in the movie. It also states, with reasons, that the movie completely obliterated the hardworking and serious spirit of the novel's heroine and shifted away from dealing with the "typical story of middle-class struggle". According to the journalist, it is because the movie director was not familiar with the workplace described in the novel that she chose to focus her story line on fashion and romance.

Zhang Ye points out that the success of both the novel and the movie does not originate in the fact that the story is fascinating or in the fact that Du Lala's character is particularly interesting, but in the fact that she is said to be very ordinary. Viewers and readers therefore identify with her and can hope to encounter the same success as the heroine. The article also emphasizes that, in the movie, Du Lala's promotions only serve the purpose of showing the changes in the heroine's patterns of consumption, as she is able to afford more and more expensive products. The journalist describes this consumerist and materialist lifestyle as the "middle class' illusion of the good life", and he regrets the restricted vision of success and happiness promoted by the movie. In a part of the article titled "from 'how to get in the middle class' to 'why to get in the middle class'"', the author identifies the book as a "professional guide for 'those who are about to join the middle class'" and explains that, if the novel depicts the hardship of the social climbing process, the movie rather focuses on showing why people should attempt to join the middle class despite the difficulties, by flaunting its attractive lifestyle. Moreover, instead of explaining how to gain professional success, the movie tells the viewers how to consume - which brands to buy, when to buy them - once one has obtained success and wealth. This dimension is also important in the second, and especially in the third volume of the book. Finally, the article points out that Du Lala perfectly exemplifies how contemporary white collars are expected to master both Western patterns of consumption and professional techniques, as well as Oriental philosophy and etiquette in order to succeed in the workplace.

In 2015, a second movie by director An Zhujian 安竹间 was released, under the Chinese title

Account of Du Lala’s Quest for Marriage (Du Lala zhuì hùn jì 《杜拉拉追婚记》), and the English title Go Lala Go 2. Starring a different set of actors than the first movie, this second opus describes the difficulties encountered by Du Lala in her relationship with Wang Wei, as she wishes to get married, as well as the continuation of her career under the leadership of a new boss.

As for the miscellaneous other adaptations, in 2009, the novel was adapted into a theater play by female comedian Yao Chen 姚晨, and into a music-hall by director Huang Kai 黄凯.129 The article by Pan Yuanwen and Peng Wenzhong also mentions the existence of a reality show inspired by the Du Lala saga, named Looking for Du Lala (Xunzhao Du Lala 《寻找杜拉拉》), and created by female journalist Yan Lan 杨澜 and by stand-up comedian Zhou Libo 周立波.130 This show apparently aired in 2010 and aimed at telling the story of "real life Du Lala". Finally, in 2009, the editor in charge of the promotion of Li Ke's saga, Cai Mingfei 菜明菲, released a book titled We All Could Be Lala: Another Bill Gates? No! As a manager of fortune 500 company, she’ll tell you about survival and success, which was published by the Shaanxi Normal University Publishing House, as the first edition of the saga was.131 This book contains basic information on the genesis of the novel, interviews with Li Ke, as well as her address to Beijing University students, various testimonies about the book (notably by Yao Chen and Xu Jinglei), a list of Du Lala's qualities that the readers should try to imitate, and information about the adaptations of the novel into movies, TV series and a theater play. The variety of derived products inspired by Li Ke's novel provides us with an idea of the omnipresence of this narrative in the media, roughly between 2007 and 2015. Lastly, let us mention that the "Du Lala phenomenon" did not escape the eye of the academic world, as the CNKI platform lists 252 entries with titles containing the name "Du Lala", published between 2008 and 2017. This aspect will be treated in more detail in the fourth chapter of this part, dedicated to the current state of research on workplace novels.

Now turning to Ups and Downs, the first volume of the novel was originally published in episodes on the forum Tianya Club, between September 21st, 2007 and April 25th, 2008, under the title "Ups and Downs" Unwritten Rules to Survive in a Foreign-Owned Company in China ("Fuchen" Zhongguo waiqi shengcun qianguzi 《浮沉》中国外企生存潜规则).132 This online version, though quite extensive, does not seem complete when compared with the printed book. In 2008, the first volume was published by the Shaanxi Normal University Publishing House, which, as we have seen, also published the first edition of Du Lala Go!. In an interview conducted in 2009, the editor

129. We did not find precise information about the release date of the music-hall, but the production started in 2009, according to the Baidu page of the show: https://baike.baidu.com/item%E9%9F%B3%E4%B9%90%E5%89%A7%E6%9D%9C%E6%8B%89%E6%8B%89%E5%8D%87%E8%81%8C%E8%AE%B0/2193345?fr=aladdin (consulted on September 21st, 2017).
130. PAN & PENG 2013, 95.
131. CAI Mingfei 菜明菲 (2009). We All Could Be Lala, Xi’an: Shaanxi Normal University Press.
of the novel, Zhang Yingna, explains that she discovered the novel on Tianya Club by chance, in October 2007, a time when other novels centered on the workplace - she mentions Lose & Win and Du Lala Go!, among others - were selling very well.\(^{133}\) Her interest was attracted to the novel because it started by mentioning an event which had occurred only two days before its publication online, on September 19th, 2007, namely, the announcement of the resignation of the director-general of Microsoft China. The fact that the author of the novel, who at the time used the pseudonym Jingcheng luoshen 京城洛神 to post her writing online, explicitly linked her narration to this event, raised a lot of questions about her identity and involvement in the affair. Indeed, she seemed to have been aware of it before it was announced in the media, otherwise it would have been difficult for her to publish the first chapter so soon.

Between December 8th and 16th, 2008, the first chapter of the second volume of the novel was released by the author on Tianya Club. The whole novel was then published by the Shaanxi Normal University Publishing House in 2009. Both volumes were reedited in 2012, by the same publishing house, the covers of the new edition mentioning that the saga had sold more than one million copies. The second volume is concluded by an open ending, allowing us to think that a third opus was intended to close the saga. However, to this day, the final volume has not been published, which could be a sign of the declining success of the genre, or at least of this particular work. The fact that the novel did not seem to maintain the readers' interest might be linked to its narrative characteristics. Indeed, it stars a female main character, but contains numerous elements usually found in trade war novels, a genre where, as we have mentioned in the general introduction, male protagonists are in the majority and which is, more often than not, directed at a male readership. Even if the novel focuses on a single hero - in this case a heroine - which most trade war novels do not, and contains slightly more information about her personal life, it does not give the same importance to the protagonist's lifestyle and relationships as Du Lala Go! does, for example. The cross-boundary nature of the novel, and its subsequent failure to target a specific readership, might explain why it did not meet the tremendous success of the Du Lala saga. In his research on contemporary Chinese popular culture, Kevin Latham has observed a general shift away from the idea of mass culture and towards an emphasis on individual tastes, expressed through personalized consumption patterns.\(^{134}\) According to Latham, in contemporary China, to be successful, a cultural product should thus target specific niches of consumers, which, apparently, Ups and Downs failed to achieve, as it seems to adopt characteristics of two literary categories - zhichang and shangzhan - which usually target different genders.

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As for the adaptation of the novel for other media, a TV series directed by Teng Huatao and composed of thirty episodes of forty-five minutes each was released in 2012. The TV show, staged in Shanghai, contrarily to the novel which is set in Beijing, maintains the professional focus of the original work and roughly follows the plot of the two published books of the saga. In the TV series, the main assignment that the heroine, Qiao Li, is in charge of succeeds, and she becomes a sales director, while, in the novel, this second event does not occur, even at the end of the second volume. Though the heroine preserves the serious and diligent attitude described in the novel, this version of the narrative gives more importance to her personal and romantic life than the book, where these elements are virtually nonexistent. The end of the show notably implies that Qiao Li and Lu Fan, her superior, will get married, which is not the case in the novel.

Finally, the last of the three bestselling workplace novels, and the only one belonging to the masculine branch of the category, Lose&Win, was first posted by Fu Yao, using his actual name, on Tianya Club, between June 16th and August 8th, 2006. During this period, eight chapters - out of the thirteen contained in the first book - were posted by the author. After that, other chapters were posted by different users - or by a single user under different names - apparently without any interference of the author, or of the person who started the forum thread. This process continues all through chapter thirteen, with a last post made available online on September 18th, 2006. The ending of that last post does not seem to match the ending of the published novel. Seeing that online novels are generally modified before being printed by an editor, this is not a sufficient argument to assume that the later parts of the narrative were not written by the author. However, for him to stop using his own name after having posted eight chapters seems difficult to explain and interpret. Moreover, as we have seen in chapter one, the participation of enthusiastic readers in the creation process of online novels - by posting alternative endings, developments, or side stories - has become common in the realm of Internet literature.

The first volume of the novel was first published in 2006 by the Beijing University Publishing House (Beijing daxue chubanshe 北京大学出版社). In 2008, the same editor released a book by Fu Yao titled Lose&Win's Six Ways to Destroy the Dragon: Six Crucial Steps to Expand Your Clients List (Shuying zhì cùi long liú shì: tuozhàn kehu de liú ge guanjiàn buzhou 《输赢之摧龙六式：拓展客户的六个关键步骤》). This work is described as a practical manual for people working in sales, even though it is written as a story, and it is said to develop, in a more explicit way, the didactic aspect of Lose&Win. Apparently, this book also introduces some elements of the second volume of the saga. From January 2nd to February 9th, 2010, a Tianya Club user named Kaihuo 开火 posts what he describes as a prequel to Lose&Win. As this user eluded the commenters' questions

about his identity, it is difficult to determine if he is the original author of the saga.\textsuperscript{136} From March 2nd to 14th, 2012, what appears to be a part of the second volume is also posted on Tianya Club by a user named I am Kaïhuo (Wo shì Kaïhuo 我是开火), blurring further the determination of the author's and users' identity.\textsuperscript{137} It is also in 2012 that the first volume of the novel was reedited by the China Commerce Publishing House (Zhongguo shangye chubanshe 中国商业出版社), along with the second volume of the saga, simply titled Lose&Win2. In 2014, the Beijing United Publishing Company (Beijing lianhe chuban gongsi 北京联合出版公司), released Lose&Win's Beautiful Business Opportunities: A Sales Revolution From Clues to Order (Shuying zhi jinghong shangji: cong xiansuo dao dingdan de xiaoshou geming 《输赢之惊鸿商机: 从线索到订单的销售革命》), described as a prelude to Lose&Win3, which has not been published to this day.

As for the book's adaptations, according to the Chinese Internet, a thirty-two episode TV series should have been released in 2017, but we did not find any concrete information on that topic.\textsuperscript{138} To our knowledge, there are no other adaptations of Fu Yao's novel to this day.

2.1.2.2 Variations in Narrative Structures

The volume and diversity of our inventory's content raises the question of its division into more limited and coherent subcategories. The first criteria coming to mind to do so is probably to separate the novels according to the type of professional environment they depict. However, seeing that numerous works are set in companies (gōngsī 公司), which are sometimes left undefined, such a categorization would be of little help to differentiate them. Another possibility would be to distinguish the works according to the age cohort of their authors. This method would have allowed us to determine if fundamental differences in the topics addressed by different generations exist, as well as to examine the evolution of the category. Such an evaluation would, of course, be of great interest and relevance to the understanding of the category as a whole. However, in the present research, we consider the variations in narrative structures - or in narrative "functions", to borrow the term used by Vladimir Propp in his study of Russian folktales\textsuperscript{139} - to be the most fundamental way workplace novels differ from each other. Moreover, as we have mentioned in the general introduction, with rare exceptions, these differences in narrative structure divide the category in the same way as the gender of the authors and of the main characters does.

In their 2011 article, Zhang Yonglu and Xu Daojun propose a division of the category according to the theories of Vladimir Propp and define three subcategories of workplace novels: the "coming of age workplace novels" (zhīcháng chéngzhǎng xiàoshuō 职场成长小说), in which is included the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{136}  http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-no20-233537-1.shtml (last consulted on September 26th, 2017).
\item \textsuperscript{137}  http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-culture-436787-1.shtml (last consulted on September 26th, 2017).
\item \textsuperscript{138}  http://www.yue365.com/tv/2545/jishu.shtml (last consulted on September 26th, 2017).
\item \textsuperscript{139}  PROPP Vladimir (1968). \textit{Morphology of the Folktale}, Austin: University of Texas Press.
\end{itemize}
Du Lala saga; the "survival workplace novels" \( (zhichang\ shengcun\ xiaoshuo\ 职场生存小说) \), where the researchers classify \( Ups\ and\ Downs\); and the "warfare workplace novels" \( (zhichang\ zhengzhan\ xiaoshuo\ 职场征战小说) \), which adopts the same characteristics as the narratives sometimes qualified as trade war novels. Zhang and Xu do not explicitly mention \( Lose\&Win\) in their article, but the summary of its plot clearly identifies it as belonging to the third subcategory.\(^\text{140}\) The two researchers analyze workplace novels and delineate the three subcategories of the \( zhichang\) genre on the basis of a typological description of the texts, inspired by the methods of Vladimir Propp. This method is supposed to allow a definition and depiction of the novels using objective criteria, namely, the fundamental narrative elements of the text. Here is how Zhang and Xu describe the plot that they perceive as common to most workplace novels:

\[...\] we can borrow Propp's morphological method of narrative analysis to summarize the typical workplace novel in a simple subject-verb-object sentence pattern: under the guidance of kind-hearted superiors, young and inexperienced people longing for success obtain professional achievements and abilities and become "White Bone Demons" (white collar, backbone, elite)\(^\text{141}\) or acquire managing positions in their fields, after passing through "the three lessons of life".\(^\text{142}\)

According to Zhang and Xu, the protagonists of workplace novels will go through a transformation that will alter their identity \( (shenfen\ 身份)\), attributes \( (shuxing\ 属性)\), and condition \( (zhuangtai\ 状态)\). This transformation is put in motion by the characters' pursuit of their goals - to attain a certain position in the company, or to improve their social status and material comfort, for example.\(^\text{143}\)

Zhang and Xu explain that workplace novels' plots are centered on a target, which they name "prize" \( (jinhao\ 锦标)\), on the character who pursues it, the "seeker" \( (zhuiqiuze\ 追求者)\), and on the "helper" \( (zhushou\ 助手)\), who assists the "pursuer" in his or her quest. Moreover, the pursuer's quest is hindered by a "competitor" \( (jingzhengzhe\ 竞争者)\), who is, in turn, helped, but also controlled by a "dominator" \( (kongzhizhe\ 控制者)\). The two researchers base the subdivision of the category on the characters' functions of seeker, helper, and competitor. They consider that a novel giving more importance to the seeker-helper relationship than to the difficulties posed by the competitors is a coming of age workplace novel, that the isolation of the seeker against numerous competitors is the sign of a text belonging to the survival subcategory, and, finally, that if the seeker and the competitor do not belong to the same company, the work should be classified as a warfare

\(^{140}\) ZHANG & XU 2011.

\(^{141}\) The White Bone Demon \( (baigujing\ 白骨精)\), is a character from the novel \( Journey\ to\ the\ West\). Here, it is used as the contraction of three words, white collar \( (bailing\ 白领)\), backbone \( (gugan\ 骨干)\), and elite \( (jingying\ 精英)\), describing highly experienced and proficient professionals. For the definition, see CAI Shenshen \( (2016)\). \textit{Television Drama in Contemporary China: Political, Social, and Cultural Phenomena,} London & New York: Routledge, p.66.

\(^{142}\) ZHANG & XU 2011, 47.

\(^{143}\) ZHANG & XU 2011, 47.
In the present research, we consider the overall structure of the narratives to be more important than characters' relationships to distinguish different works. Indeed, an examination of the summaries of the works listed in our inventory allow us to easily distinguish two main types of narration. On the one hand, some novels focus on the professional development and personal growth of a main character who is usually young and inexperienced at the beginning of the story. These would correspond to Zhang and Xu's coming of age workplace novels, a term that will be adopted in this research. On the other hand, some narratives do not focus on a single main character but, rather, on a team of employees, or on a whole company, and describe a business competition between the firm and one or many opponents. These would be Zhang and Xu's warfare workplace novels. As we have mentioned, the coming of age workplace novels are generally written by women and star heroines, while the warfare workplace novels belong to the masculine realm. The characteristics of the first subcategory have come to be perceived as defining the zhichang genre as a whole, while the particularities of the second subcategory are often associated with trade war novels, no matter if this group of works is considered as a subcategory of workplace novels or as an independent genre. Seeing that, among the three bestselling sagas, only Du Lala Go! is complete, and as there is no guarantee that the other two will ever be - the second volume of Ups and Downs was first published in 2009 and there is no announcement of the publication of the third volume to this day - for the time being, we have chosen to limit our presentation to the first volume of each series. In this way, we will establish a frame of reference allowing fair comparison. Moreover, we consider these first volumes to be sufficient to apprehend the story lines and the characteristics of the novels, and thus to discuss their categorization.

In his 1968 work Morphology of the Folktale, Vladimir Propp defines the term "morphology" as "a description of the tale according to its component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole".145 In this research, Propp asserts:

> Since the tale is exceptionally diverse, and evidently cannot be studied at once in its full extent, the material must be divided into sections, i.e., it must be classified. Correct classification is one of the first steps in a scientific description. The accuracy of all further study depends upon the accuracy of classification.146

Considering the necessity of classifying the works encompassed in the folktale category as a given, Propp then asks which criteria should become the basis of such classification. According to Propp, it is impossible to classify tales according to their theme, which is what we have observed in the

144. ZHANG & XU 2011, 47.
145. PROPP 1968, 19.
146. PROPP 1968, 5.
case of workplace novels as well, as it seemed difficult to categorize them according to the type of workplace they depict, for example. Here is how Propp justifies the use of formal elements to categorize texts:

Tales possess one special characteristic: components of one tale can, without any alteration whatsoever, be transferred to another.147

It is thus on the basis of these fixed elements that Propp will classify tales. During the elaboration of our inventory, we have found this remark to be applicable to workplace novels as well, as the zhichang genre seems to be divided into two archetypal types of plot, corresponding to the gender division observed in the category.

Propp then attempts to identify the most basic, indecomposable units constituting a narrative, as he considers them to be the most reliable criteria for description and classification. Using various examples to illustrate his hypothesis, Propp asserts that tales often attribute identical actions to different characters, which he defines as the "function" of the character, and that it is precisely these functions that are invariable in all folktales. He states:

1. Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale. 2.

The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited.148

Going further, Propp explains that the functions always appear in the same order in a tale: the story begins with an initial situation giving information about the main character, his or her status, who are the members of his or her family, etc. This initial situation is followed by a sequence of thirty-one functions, leading to the happy ending of the tale. We will not get into the details of the structure of Russian folktales, as they are of little relevance for the purpose of our research, but we will try to identify which of the functions described by Propp apply to workplace novels.

In workplace novels, the initial situation is generally short and does not provide a lot of details on the main character, his or her family, or his or her situation. Characters are often described as types, and thus do not require lengthy descriptions. The initial situation is usually followed by Propp's function 8a, the lack. In folktales, it is a member of the hero's family who feels this lack or desire to acquire something. In workplace novels, either it is the heroine who feels a lack - or, rather, a dissatisfaction with her low socio-economic status - or the lack is represented by the will of the company, or of the superior of the main character, to sign a very lucrative contract.149 As we can see, the category is already divided into two types of scenarios. In the first scenario, Propp's function 9,

147. PROPP 1968, 7.
149. When describing the two typical narrative structures of workplace novels, we use the pronouns associated with the gender most commonly represented in the corresponding type of plot, in order to illustrate the gender division of the genre.
the mediation or connective incident, is omitted because, as it is the protagonist who feels the lack, she does not need to be informed of it, and the story passes directly to function 10, beginning counteraction, when the character decides to better her life, which usually implies finding a high-paying job in a good company or obtaining a higher position in one's company. The character thus becomes a seeker. In the second scenario, function 9 is the moment when the protagonist is informed of the lack or desire of the company or his superior, and he is charged with the mission of obtaining a contract before a rival company does. Function 10 is then marked by the character's acceptance of the mission, even if, usually, he does not really have a choice but to accept his assignment - refusing would put him at risk to be laid-off, as would failing to obtain the contract. In that case, the hero also becomes a seeker.

Both scenarios then stage function 16, the struggle, which designates the difficult path of the protagonist to achieve his or her goal. In the first scenario, the main character is usually assigned a difficult task serving as a test to determine if she is worthy of pursuing the career she chose. In the process, the heroine will be confronted by one or more competitors - named villains by Propp - who generally work at the same company. The competitors are often jealous colleagues or superiors who try to directly hinder the protagonist's assignment or refuse to provide help. Simultaneously, at the beginning of the assignment, the main character encounters one or more kind-hearted superiors who, impressed by her various qualities, will become her helpers - or donors in Propp's research - for the rest of the narrative. In the second scenario, the struggle is usually a direct confrontation with one or more other companies to obtain a contract, the companies playing the role of competitors. In this case, the protagonist, who generally occupies a position of authority in the company, chooses his own helpers, as he has to form a team in order to achieve the mission.

Eventually, thanks to the main character's efforts and intelligence, as well as to the support of the helpers, both scenarios end up in function 18, victory, when the assignment is completed. This is not the case, however, when the same assignment continues in the following volume of the saga, as we can observe in Ups and Downs, for example. In the first scenario, the victory provides the protagonist with pride, recognition of the helper, and with the confirmation that she belongs in the company. However, the initial goal - bettering one's life - is not always achieved, as the heroine might still not be satisfied with her socio-economic status or her profession. Function 19, the initial misfortune or lack is liquidated, is thus not necessarily depicted. In such cases, either the main character embraces a new life goal, usually linked to the pursuit of happiness and well-being rather than to seeking material gains, or the end is left open, and to potentially be continued in a following volume. On the contrary, in the second scenario, the signature of the contract marks the success of the protagonist and the liquidation of the initial misfortune or lack and thus constitutes a clearer victory.

The tales described by Propp are concluded by the succession of functions 29 to 31, namely
transfiguration - the hero is given a new appearance -, punishment - of the villain -, and wedding - generally marking the ascension of the hero to the throne. In workplace novels, however, the conclusion is not as definite. First of all, in none of the scenarios does the hero or heroine go through a real transfiguration. In the first scenario, the heroine gains experience, maturity and proficiency throughout the narrative, which is implicitly associated with a process of self-betterment and coming of age, but it is also important that she does not endure any fundamental transformation in terms of ethics and values, as the protagonist should remain hard-working, humble, and eager to progress, despite success and wealth. Sometimes, the main character questions the importance she has given to her career, and wonders what one really needs to be happy, but it is not necessarily the case. In the second scenario, the hero is generally an experienced professional already and there is thus little to no learning process involved. The conservation of values and righteousness despite encounters with corrupted individuals is also important is this type of narrative but does not seem to necessitate as much effort as in coming of age novels. In both scenarios, the villain might be punished, in one way or another. If he or she was working in the same company as the main character, he or she will probably be laid off, but always in respect of labor law. If he or she was working in a different company, he or she might end up in jail, if the novel described an important case of corruption, or he or she will suffer the economic consequences of having lost an important contract. In the first scenario, the villains are sometimes not punished, which is notably the case when the author describes the seeker's disillusionment regarding the morality of the workplace. As for the wedding, it does not constitute the typical ending of workplace novels, as they usually give little importance to the characters' personal lives. It should be noted, however, that analyzing the first volumes of sagas which, in some cases, are unfinished to this day, necessitates keeping an open perspective on the conclusions we have reached as, for example, Du Lala gets married in the fourth volume of the saga.

Let us now observe how the succession of the functions is exemplified in the three bestsellers of the category. As text analysis will be the focus of the second part of this research, the considerations proposed here will be succinct and general. The initial situation of Du Lala Go! is presented in an introduction titled "A Three Months Career in a Private Company" (San ge yue de minqi shengya 三个月的民企生涯). Du Lala is described as an ordinary girl coming from an ordinary background. She is said to value financial independence, which is linked to the modest situation of her family, and to show great filial devotion (xiaoxin 孝心). At the first and second jobs she finds after graduating, Lala feels a lack of opportunities to grow and to acquire wealth. After a particularly difficult day at work, she decides to quit, which can be seen as her first beginning counteraction. The heroine then states her goal to work in a better environment and to earn more money:

Xia Hong [a friend of the heroine], deeply concerned, asked Lala which type of work she wanted to find next. At that point Lala had understood why Zhang Dongyu [Du Lala's first
boyfriend] advised her to enter in a big foreign-owned company. She had no choice but to admit that he was wiser than her and that he knew better what was best for her. "I want to enter in a real foreign-owned company, in a Fortune 500 transnational company dealing with high technologies. There, I will have a decent salary, I will not need to learn poems anymore, and I will not be sexually harassed anymore either. Also, my boss will be very busy for sure, he will not have time to make me listen to his bragging for two hours, and even if he bragged, he would surely do it in a very glamorous way." said Lala, looking forward to it.\textsuperscript{150}

This goal is soon achieved when Lala is hired by the American IT company DB. However, even though entering DB is described as her dream, the lack that she feels is rapidly reiterated when she realizes that she stands at the very bottom of the company's hierarchy, which she understands through the explanations of Helen, the company' receptionist who becomes her friend:

The people ranked below the managers are called "petits bourgeois", which just means "poor people". In general, they use public transportation to get to work, otherwise they could not pay their home loans. The managers belong to the "middle class", their characteristic is that they were able to buy their first apartment without a loan. Typical first rank managers drive Volkswagen Bora, the transportation subsid provided by the company allows them to pay a part of their car fees; second rank managers drive Volkswagen Passat, the subsid provided by the company covers all their daily car fees. The departments directors are the "upper class", not only do they own their apartments, but they are always high quality flats located in good neighborhoods or villas. They can choose between using the car made available for them by the company, or to use the same amount of money to buy their own car, and all the expenses related to the car are payed by the company. The vice-presidents and president are the "rich people", they have butlers and doormen, the company hires a personal driver for them, and when they go on business trips they always travel first class. Lala thought sincerely that she absolutely could not be a sales assistant forever, because this would mean that she would never be more than a "petit bourgeois".\textsuperscript{151}

This repetition of the lack felt by the heroine will motivate her to work hard and obtain promotions in the company, thus marking the beginning of the struggle.

Lala's victory occurs when the main assignment she is in charge of in the first volume - the renovation of the Shanghai office of the company - turns out to be a success. However, the story does not end there, as the initial lack or misfortune - Lala’s wish for a better life - is not liquidated, which leads to an open conclusion to the first volume:

It is not that easy to find happiness, which is why it is such a fascinating thing.\textsuperscript{152}

\textsuperscript{150} LI 2013, 9.
\textsuperscript{151} LI 2013, 16.
\textsuperscript{152} LI 2013, 308.
It should be noted, however, that, according to Marco Fumian's 2016 article, the first edition of the novel proposed a different ending. According to Fumian's account, the story was originally concluded with a happy ending, with a stronger emphasis on Lala's achievements than in the 2013 reedition, and with Lala and Wang Wei living happily ever after. Both versions of the story allow us to classify the novel in the coming of age subcategory, with the difference that, in the first edition, Lala ends up satisfied with her life and embraces a new goal - to live a "free and easy life" – while, in the second one, the prolongation of her dissatisfaction opens the narrative to a further pursuit and, thus, to the following parts of the story.

As for the plot of the first volume of *Ups and Downs*, the initial situation provides very scarce information about the main character: her name is Qiao Li and she looks like a "typical white-collar girl from the information technologies field" *(dianxing de IT jie bailing nüxing 典型的IT界白领女性)*. Then, a flashback from three months earlier presents the lack felt by the heroine, describing how she decided to quit the American company where she was working for a year, Saisi 賽思, because she did not want to be a receptionist anymore, and how she was then summoned by the company's director-general, who asked the reasons for her resignation. This scene seems to constitute the heroine's beginning counteraction, and it is also the point of the story when the reader learns about her goals:

"I want to be the salesperson obtaining the best results in the best foreign-owned company of the field."*

During this conversation, the director-general of the company offers Qiao Li the position of his secretary until an opportunity to promote her in the sales department presents itself, which is the case three months later. Qiao Li is then charged to obtain the contract of the technological reform of Jingtong Electronics (*Jingtong Dianzi* 晶通电子), very important to the company, which marks the beginning of her struggle, as two other companies are attempting to obtain the same contract. Qiao Li does not succeed in the assignment at the end of the first volume, but at the end of the second. However, as will be described in the second part of this research, the end of the second volume does not depict a real victory or the liquidation of the initial lack or misfortune.

Finally, in *Lose&Win*, the initial situation shows Zhou Rui - director of the sales department of the East China sector of the company Jieke 捷科 - congratulating his team after they achieved the trimester's sales target. Even though Zhou Rui seems to be the hero and seeker of the narrative, the reader is offered minimal information about him. The reader is then informed that the other sectors

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154. FUMIAN 2016, 96.
155. CUI 2012, 2.
156. CUI 2012, 3.
of the company did not meet their objectives, which represents the lack. The CEO of Jieke China, Chen Mingjie, then transfers Zhou Rui to the North China sector, for him to motivate the local team, which seems to be inefficient, in order to allow the North China sector to achieve its target by the end of the next trimester. Each chapter of the book describes the events of one of the weeks of this trimester. This event represents the mediation, as it is the moment when Zhou Rui is informed of his mission. His acceptance of the transfer, even though he probably does not have much of a choice, and his first attempts to improve the efficiency of his new team constitute the beginning counteraction. In this narrative, the seeker, Zhou Rui, does not receive help but, instead, requires it from the subordinates he chooses as the members of his team, and thus as his helpers.

Zhou Rui soon realizes that the only way for his team to achieve its target, and thus for him to keep his position, is to steal the most important client from Jieke's rival company, Huikang 惠康, the Jingxin Bank (Jingxin yinhang 经信银行). This event marks the beginning of the struggle, describing the rivalry between Jieke and Huikang, but also Zhou Rui's attempts to counter the schemes elaborated against him by Chen Mingjie, who actually wants him to fail to be entitled to lay him off. After a corruption scandal, partly uncovered by Zhou Rui's team, the hero is then chosen to replace Chen Mingjie, who has been laid off, which represents his victory. The initial lack - the poor sales results of the North China sector - is also liquidated at the end, though not by obtaining the contract originally targeted. One year later, Zhou Rui, still traumatized by the death of Luo Jia, her first love and rival in the pursuit of the contract with the Jingxin Bank, decides to quit Jieke and to finally start to enjoy life, leaving the end of the novel open, despite the liquidation of the original lack.

We can observe that Lose&Win constitutes a good example of a warfare workplace novel and of the masculine branch of the zhichang category. Indeed, it focuses on the rivalry between two companies to obtain a specific contract and stars experienced professionals, thus lacking the emphasis on the learning process characterizing the coming of age workplace novels. Moreover, the main character's goal is not to address a dissatisfaction with his current socio-economic situation, but, rather, to complete a particular task for the benefit of the company. As we have seen, most workplace novels give little importance to the characters' interiority. However, this is especially true for warfare novels, which contain almost no information about the protagonist's background, psychology or aspirations.

Basing our analysis on Propp's theories of morphological text analysis allows us to distinguish two types of scenarios among workplace novels, which can be interpreted as forming two subcategories of the genre: the coming of age subcategory, representing the feminine branch, and the warfare subcategory, representing the masculine branch. We have observed that some functions take fundamentally different forms in the two scenarios: in the first scenario, the initial lack is felt by the main character while, in the second scenario, it is expressed by a superior. In the first scenario, the
goal of the main character is generally her own social climbing, while, in the second scenario, as the main character is already experienced and high-ranked, the good and profit of the company is more important. In the first scenario, the role of the helper is endorsed by one or more kind-hearted superiors who will advise and support the main character, in the second scenario, however, it is the seeker who chooses his helpers. In the first scenario, the competitor generally belongs to the same company as the seeker, while, in the second scenario he or she belongs to a rival firm or is the rival firm itself. Finally, as the initial misfortune or lack in the first scenario is an abstract wish for a better life, it is not necessarily liquidated when the narrative comes to an end, even if the concrete assignment bestowed on the main character is achieved, while in the second scenario, as the reader is not provided with information about the personal aspirations of the main character, the resolution of the assignment means that the initial misfortune or lack is, indeed, liquidated. We can thus see that, in general, interiority, doubt about the meaning of happiness and success, as well as processes of learning and self-betterment are limited to the feminine realm, while professional mastery, clear and concrete goals, grand success, and glorification of the main character are encountered in masculine novels.

As we have mentioned, Zhang and Xu assert that the survival workplace novels constitute a third subcategory, in which they include *Ups and Downs*. We consider this choice to be problematic and subject to discussion. Indeed, if it is true that *Ups and Downs* contains elements generally found in warfare workplace novels - for example the importance given to the rivalry between the heroine's company and two other firms - the narrative functions seem closer to the first scenario described above. The initial lack motivating the heroine's action is her dissatisfaction with her current professional situation as a receptionist, and not the Jingtong assignment - which would be the case if it was a warfare novel - even though this second element becomes the focus of the novel. Moreover, as the heroine starts as an inexperienced workplace novice, the novel gives great importance to her learning process, especially in office politics, which is usually not the case in warfare novels, where the heroes are already experienced professionals at the beginning of the narratives. Of course, the unachieved condition of the novel renders the structural analysis of the text problematic, and our conclusions are thus open for discussion.

We can also see that the two novels with a narrative structure affiliating them to the coming of age subcategory have been written by women and star female main characters, while the novel following the typical scenario of a warfare workplace novel has been written by a man and stars a male main character. This shows that the narrative differences apparently separating genders in the works classified in our inventory also apply to the genre's most famous and most representative examples. In the case of the category's three bestsellers, other differences linked to gender but not concerning the narrative structure are observable. For example, as the heroines are young and inexperienced at the beginning of the stories, they need the help of older and wiser male characters,
and the narratives focus on their learning and self-cultivating processes. In contrast, the heroes are already mature, proficient, and experienced, and thus need the help of younger or lower-ranked employees who will become their assistants. They do not seem to go through processes of learning or self-betterment. Moreover, coming of age workplace novels' heroines never seem to reach the positions of power and authority occupied by the heroes of warfare workplace novels. Novels targeting a female readership also give more importance to the main characters' interiority and to their romantic lives than masculine novels do, even if these elements do not constitute the main storyline of any novel of the zhichang category. More often than not, heroines' ambitions are linked to the acquisition of a higher socio-economic status, while heroes aim at obtaining benefits and prestige for themselves but, more importantly, for their team and their company. Finally, while the implication of women in the corporate world and their acquisition of the related knowledge and practices seem to often be perceived as a threat to their femininity and morality, positive male characters are always able to maintain their honor and ethic intact through hardships and encounters with corrupt individuals.

We can observe that the basic sequence of functions is relatively simple in workplace novels, regardless of the subcategory to which they belong. This is also what Propp has observed about folktales, explaining why he considered that their interest and value lay in the variable elements of the stories, for example the characters' motivations, rather than in their narrative structure:

By motivations are meant both the reasons and the aims of personages which cause them to commit various acts. Motivations often add to a tale a completely distinctive, vivid coloring, but nevertheless motivations belong to the most inconstant and unstable elements of the tale. In addition, they represent an element less precise and definite than functions or connectives.157

If, in folktales, the characters' motivations are said to give each narrative its specificity and its color, we will see that the lack of details and definition regarding the motivations of workplace novels' characters' contributes to the impression of repetition and lack of originality of the genre. Workplace novels provide very few details about the personality, thought process or aspirations of the characters, making their goals - which are sometimes implied, rather than explicitly stated - difficult to apprehend.

Propp also mentions the variety of characters and their detailed descriptions as the most memorable elements of the tales and as what differentiates them from each other:

The nomenclature and attributes of characters are variable quantities of the tale. By attributes we mean the totality of all the external qualities of the characters: their age, sex, status, external appearance, peculiarities of this appearance, and so forth. These attributes provide

157. PROPP 1968, 75.
On the contrary, workplace novels generally give very little importance to the characters' psychology and personal life, and its heroes and heroines are usually defined by archetypal traits. Propp's observations thus shed light on what workplace novels lack, which is, precisely, individualized characters transcending their narrative functions and their use as role models for the readers. As we will see in the second part of this research, workplace novels' characters are often described only as representatives of the middle class or the white-collar group, allowing us to think that these narratives do not aim at creating heroes and heroines memorable for their individuality, but, rather, only for their professional positions and achievements. The characters of the zhichang category seem to be defined by their employment, and by the lifestyle and consumption patterns associated with their professions in social representations. Moreover, they often lack a defined purpose to explain and justify their continuous efforts to succeed, giving the impression that the direction of the narrative is solely dictated by the idea that there is no other way to live than trying to climb the social ladder, as a survival necessity more than as an individual choice.

2.2 Conclusion

The second chapter of this research constituted a first attempt to define the zhichang category by observing which novels are classified as such in online bookstores, and through the apprehension of the most popular - and thus, we can assume, most representative - works of the genre. We have observed that, as the name of the category indicates, the numerous works it encompasses should be characterized by the centering of their plots on the professional life of the characters, despite the apparent lack of precision of this criterion. This seems to be the case in the three major works described above, as well as in many other texts apprehended through the summaries available online. However, in the books listed in our inventory, the importance given to the professional environment and to the characters' endeavors in this realm seems to greatly vary. Some of them apparently contain numerous and detailed descriptions of professional procedures and interactions, leaving little to no space to the depiction of the protagonist's life outside of work, and rendering the texts similar to non-fictional professional guidebooks. Other novels, on the other hand, seem to be mainly concerned with romance or lifestyle, in which case the workplace is merely used as a background, and the occupation becomes one of the many characteristics of the hero or heroine.

Phenomena of this nature have been described by Eleanor H. Rosch, when she argues that no

158. PROPP 1968, 87.
category can ever be delineated in a definite manner:

[...] categories are composed of a "core meaning" which consists of the "clearest cases" (best examples) of the category, "surrounded" by other members of decreasing similarity to that core meaning.\textsuperscript{159}

In the case of our inventory, we could consider that the major works mentioned above constitute the "core meaning" of the \textit{zhichang} category and have exerted a form of attraction on later works, probably as a result of their commercial success. We can assume that the most famous and most successful works of the category have probably been used as models by later novels and can thus be viewed as representative of the \textit{zhichang} genre. However, the question of representativity is not as straightforward as it might seem. In his description of the emergence of the social category of "the cadres" in France after World War II, Luc Boltanski opposes "statistic representativity" - designating the most common and most numerous examples of a category - and " politic representativity" - meaning the examples of the category which come to be considered as the most perfect and the most typical, and which thus exert a normative and standardizing effect on the category as a whole.\textsuperscript{160} In the context of our research, the three major works of the \textit{zhichang} genre, as well as a few other successful novels, can be seen as holding the "politic representativity" of the category. This is especially the case of the Du Lala saga - probably because of its tremendous success and important visibility on different media - explaining why its narrative characteristics have come to be considered as the genre's standards, even though they are mainly encountered in the minority of feminine novels. The rest of the novels of the inventory, which are varied, differ from the models and, often, lack success and recognition, constitute an overview of what could be considered as the "statistic representativity" of the genre. When apprehending the classifications found on online bookstores, we cannot rule out the possibility that some novels have ended up in the wrong category, and that some narratives are found simultaneously in two categories - workplace novel and romance, or urban novel, for example - blurring further the limits and definition of the genre.

We have also seen that, from the narrative structure point of view, workplace novels can roughly be divided into two subcategories. On the one hand, some works focus on the development of the main character's career, describing the arrival of a recent college graduate to a new work environment, her learning process, the different positions she occupies, as well as the assignments and specificities of each of the these positions. In this case, the novel is centered on a single individual and on her career path, and also gives great importance to the question of social upward mobility.


These novels are, in their great majority, written by female authors, star female main characters, and target a female readership. On the other hand, some narratives focus on a whole company or on one of its departments, thus centering on a team of employees rather than on a single individual. In that case, the plot will typically describe a competition between two companies which aim at obtaining the same contract and depict the efforts of the team to overcome technical obstacles, or to counter the pitfalls set up by the rival firm. Such novels seem to contain less information on the identity and lifestyle of the characters, and seem to be more suspenseful, through the use of dramatic plot twists, notably involving corruption scandals. These narratives seem to mostly belong to the masculine realm. We have hypothesized that this apparent lack of variety could be explained by the normative effect exerted by the most successful works on the rest of the category. Moreover, conformance to a set of narrative patterns and characteristics seems to be inherent to the nature of literary genres.

These considerations do not imply, however, that genre literature necessarily lacks originality. As explained by Lena Henningsen:

[...] in my analyses of literary products I argue that - contrary to common perceptions - imitations serves to further creativity. What appears at first sight to be bold theft of intellectual property often contains new, creative elements.\(^1\)\(^6\)\(^1\)

According to Henningsen, resemblance to a widely appreciated work, far from disparaging the imitation, gives it a certain value and aura, as it allows readers to re-experience, in a slightly different way, what they had loved in the original. Moreover, these imitation processes are described as beneficial for the imitations as well as the original works:

A similar mechanism is at work, for example, in the Harry Potter fakes: While these are clearly recognizable as plagiarized, the label Harry Potter nonetheless makes them attractive to the readers. Similarly, the imitations of Wolf's Totem (狼图腾) discussed in the third chapter aim at distinguishing themselves from the original - while at the same time participating in the allurement of the original.\(^1\)\(^6\)\(^2\)

Henningsen also mentions the acceptance, in Chinese literary history, of imitation for the purpose of inscribing one's work in a specific textual tradition.\(^1\)\(^6\)\(^3\) By mentioning this particularity, we do not imply that workplace fiction should necessarily be considered as an artistic movement to which authors wish to belong. However, considering the strong link existing between this genre and the realm of Internet literature - we have seen that the major works of the category have made their first appearances online - the imitation of successful workplace novels could be interpreted as an attempt to join a literary, but also social, group. Indeed, the authors, characters, and intended readers of

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161. HENNINGSEN 2010, 10.
162. HENNINGSEN 2010, 33.
163. HENNINGSEN 2010, 30.
workplace novels, who are all supposed to belong to a cosmopolitan and educated middle class, are surrounded by a highly attractive aura, which could explain other authors' attempts to join their sphere of influence. The second part of the present research, dedicated to the analysis of different narratives, will allow us to apprehend how the texts display originality in the frame of the category.
Chapter 3 - Origins and Genealogy

3.1 Signification and Origin of the Zhichang Term

Our inventory revealed that workplace novels greatly differ in the work environments they set their plots in. While the specific professional settings of some novels are not identifiable in the summaries available online, the inventory still allowed us to distinguish more than sixty different workplaces, which can be roughly divided between general sectors, for example health (hospitals, practices, pharmaceutical companies), hospitality (hotels, restaurants), media (television, press, publishing), services (interior design, consulting, head-hunting, publicity, travel and leisure, public relation), law (legal departments, law firms), bank, finance and accounting, insurances, products' elaboration, transportation and sale (food and drinks, clothes, ceramics, antiques, carpets, gems), etc. While some novels depict original and unique professional settings, like online gaming creation, agriculture, the railway sector, the police or the army, most of them focus on different types of urban companies where the characters typically work in sales, human resources, marketing, public relation or management. The job hunting and establishment of new companies' processes are also popular topics.

However, even if workplace novels' settings are numerous and diversified, there seem to be some restrictions regarding the type of professions depicted in these narratives. Even though the Chinese term zhichang - where zhi means duty, profession, office, and the like, and chang means place, or location - could theoretically be applied to all occupations, in practice, it is rarely used to describe factories, workshops or other places where employment is based on physical rather than intellectual labor. In fact, the term zhi also holds the meaning of "manage" or "direct", as it is the case when it is combined with the character zhang 掌, literally meaning palm, the word zhizhang 职掌 signifying "to be in charge of". Thus, despite the variety of the category in terms of workplaces - at least as it is presented on reading websites and online bookstores - we can observe that some narratives, though centered on work and the dream of social climbing, are left out of the zhichang genre. Here, we are referring to the novels described by Wanning Sun as "workers literature" (dagong wenxue 打工文学).164 When considered from a narrative point of view, these novels, which "[...] often unfold against the background of the rural migrant's place of work, daily life, and social interactions in this city,"165 and usually depict young country girls' dreams for a better life and their migration to the industrial cities of Southern China where they look for jobs, show striking similarities to workplace

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165. SUN 2014, 222.
novels and their ambitious heroines who, to say it simply, want to make money, get married and enjoy life. Moreover, similarly to many workplace novels, dagon novels have often appeared online, which can be explained by the fact that their authors are generally migrant workers themselves, making it difficult for them to access regular publishing channels.

According to Sun, in the press and among Chinese scholars, dagon literature, also referred to as "low-stratum literature" or "subaltern literature" (diceng wenxue 底层文学), is described as "[...] a historically specific form of expression, created to give literary shape to the experience of a group of people at a particular moment of social transition and transformation."166 In this respect, the novels, often written and advertised as testimonies or biographies, are considered to be a valuable source of information on, and of experience sharing for the "members of the lower classes", whoever they may be. We have observed that the same rhetoric applies to the description and advertisement of workplace novels, which are supposed to document the life of urban white collars, and to provide them with possibilities of identification and comfort, strongly needed in an increasingly competitive job market. The fundamental difference between these two types of narratives, and the probable reason of dagon literature's exclusion from the realm of zhichang literature, lies in the characters' social background and in the employment opportunities that are available for them: workers literature's heroines are uneducated women from the countryside whose only choices to make a living are factory work or prostitution, while workplace novels' heroines are usually urban college graduates who obtain office clerk positions in companies where they can advance and prosper. This allows us to think that the term zhichang holds a certain social standing linked to education and qualification.

Zhang Yonglu and Xu Daojun assert that the word zhichang started to be widely used only in the 2000s, with the apparition of new university majors like human resources or public relations, as a consequence of the emerging discussions and debates about the pioneers of these new professions, who were seeking recognition and sympathy.167 To apprehend the appearance of the term and the evolution of its usage, we have explored its occurrences in the People's Daily (Remin ribao 人民日报), which holds the advantage of making all the issues printed since the foundation of the paper, in 1946, available online, with the possibility to browse through the articles using keywords.168 Searching for the term zhichang in all issues from May 15th, 1946, to May 15th, 2017, we were able to make the following observations. First of all, out of 598 entries, only nineteen occurred before 2001.169 Moreover, it seems that, before 2001, the term was used in a neutral and general sense to refer to any place of work. At the time, zhichang seemed to also apply to places of physical

166. SUN 2014, 221.
167. ZHANG & XU 2011, 46.
work, as we can see in the following examples:

[...] in order to provide a concrete assistance to the shipyard, the labor union has already signed "production contracts" with sixteen workplaces [...]170

And:

Friendly competitions were launched between the different workplaces and departments of the paint factory.171

After 2001, the use of the term increases significantly. Moreover, the concepts associated to it seem to narrow down to specific fields and occupations. The new terms associations include, for example, "information technology workplace" (IT zhichang IT职场), "workplace competitiveness" (zhichang jingzheng 职场 竞争), or "The temporary hirement of talented people is a recruitment practice becoming more and more popular in the workplace." A few years later, we also observe the appearance of concepts such as "workplace elites" (zhichang jingying 职场 精英) (2006), or "workplace people" (zhichang ren 职场人) (2009).

The evolution of the use of the zhichang term seems to belong to a wider phenomenon of linguistic changes accompanying the social transformations that followed and evolved with the economic reforms. In 2004, the English version of the People's Daily online released a list of fifty-five new economic terms which had appeared since the founding of the PRC. This list encompasses heteroclite items like Olympics, insurance, Internet, petty bourgeoisie and so on. A few of these terms have attracted our attention, as they seem useful to illustrate the changes - in vocabulary as well as in lifestyle and worldview - that we are attempting to describe here. For example, the definition of "white collar" (bailing 白领), - which is frequently encountered in workplace novels and their paratext - states:

White collar is a term designating a person who works in a luxurious office building for a firm with foreign investment and earns a higher salary than ordinary people. There are now also derivatives such as "gold collar" and "pink collar". More often than not people love to call girls "white collar ladies" who are dressed in neat business wears but are much busier than other people. The white collar is a special stratum in the city. They represent a kind of life mode and attitude, which have nothing to do with the amount of salary.173

170. From a February 12th, 1950, article titled "The Dalian factory of boat reparation and construction signed different contracts of production, collaboration, and evaluation - the records show that the movement is carried out in a deep-going way".
171. From an August 8th, 1950, article titled "The factories of the port of Dalian continue to launch competitions, they guarantee to fulfill their yearly assignments before the predicted date, this welcomes the first anniversary of the birth of the new China".
172. From a May 13th, 2003, article titled "The temporary hirement of talented people troubles the calm waters of the workplace".
We can observe that the concept of white collar - generally used in a derogative way in the People's Daily's articles before 1978, when the rise of this social group started to be associated with necessary and positive technologic development - designates a new type of professionals but, more importantly, a new social stratum and the lifestyle associated to it. We consider the appearance of these terms, or their entrustment with new meanings, to be symptoms of deep changes in people's ways of thinking about work, status and success. Even though the word zhichang does not figure in this list, we believe that it participates in the same circle of influence, in which one's employment is no longer seen only as a survival means, or as a duty to the state and society, but, rather, as a way to enhance one's social status and to increase one's wealth and comfort. Simultaneously, the pursuit of individual wealth and success has become an acceptable, and even encouraged, life goal. We could probably go as far as asserting that these new attitudes towards work, henceforth seen as a career and as a development process, rather than as a fixed position, became the norm to which people should conform to obtain recognition and consideration.

Another illustration of this phenomenon is discernible in the general introduction for the word zhichang on the Chinese collaborative, web-based encyclopedia Baidu Baike 百度百科174:

In society, politics and economics are inextricable. In the same way, workplace politics and individual capabilities are impossible to separate. All professional elites have their own talents and understand politics. Individual capabilities are demonstrated in one's ability to manage time, in one's level of knowledge, or in one's capacity to solve problems. Proficiency in workplace politics is demonstrated in the ability to determine one's own position in one's environment.175

The page continues with a section on the concept of "position" (dingwei 定位), establishing a strong link between occupation, identity, and social status. Next, a long section on development or growth (fazhan 发展), explaining that once one has defined one's dingwei - in other words, once one knows who one is and has chosen a suitable occupation - one should then direct all one's energy and efforts towards development and growth. The following sections deal with various aspects apparently associated with the workplace, explaining how to design a business card, describing the basic skills of a zhichang person, discussing ball etiquette or the laws and regulations applicable to the professional setting, enumerating TV programs and magazines dedicated to workplace matters, either in an entertaining or serious way. Finally, the page mentions a book titled Zhichang, published in 2010, which apparently promotes a blend of modern and cosmopolitan work practices,

174. By using this website, we do not mean that it is a verified and reliable source of scientific knowledge. However, as it is widely used in mainland China, it is an useful tool to apprehend the common understanding of some concepts in society, and it is as such that the information available on this plateform is used here.

175. https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%81%8C%E5%9C%BA/172681?fr=aladdin (last consulted on October 11th, 2017). Translation by the author of the present research.
with the traditional respect of the elders characterizing the Chinese professional culture, as the "recipe" for success in the workplace.\textsuperscript{176}

We can thus see that the term \textit{zhichang} is intimately linked to the concept of professional development, or career, and it seems that it is a specific view of, and attitude towards work that ultimately sets those who are included in the semantic field of \textit{zhichang} apart. To be considered as belonging to the \textit{zhichang} realm, one should apparently give thought and care to one's employment, social status, and prospective growth opportunities, but also to one's personal improvement, on which professional development seems to depend, to a large extent. While this kind of work ethic could theoretically be applied to all fields, including the ones based on physical work, more often than not, it seems to be perceived as a specificity of high-ranked office jobs - those implying managing tasks - or of liberal professions - doctors, lawyers, and the like. These are precisely the types of "new occupations" which, according to Jean-Louis Rocca, have (re)appeared in mainland China after the abolition of the planned economy system in the 1980s, and the abandonment of the work unit system in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{177} Rocca explains that, at that time, the private and foreign companies, as well as the new public sector, started to feel the need for new types of employees, and turned away from cheap, unqualified workers, to the profit of those holding the education and qualifications necessary to fuel the scientific and technologic development of industry, and thus to foster economic growth. This process gave rise to the apparition and proliferation of various skilled jobs, but also to a new hierarchy of employment, where the peasants and factory workers were henceforth at the bottom, and the members of the professions requiring higher education at the top.\textsuperscript{178}

This change in the perceptions of work was part of an all-encompassing process of social transformation initiated in the 1990s, with the decision to deepen the economic reforms after the Tiananmen protests. From then on, the quality of life started to improve for parts of the population, especially for educated people, as a strong link between scholarly achievements and social and economic status was progressively forming. As Rocca states:

In the wake of these reforms, social representations changed. Alongside political and social capital, money, occupation and level of education became determinant elements of social stratification. By contrast with the socialist period, to have money, to find a non-physical, intellectual (naoli laodong) and skilled job, and to get a university degree became the objectives of most people.\textsuperscript{179}

It seems that the individuals encompassed in the \textit{zhichang} realm - the characters and readers of

\textsuperscript{176} JIN Bei 金碚 (2010). \textit{Zhichang} 《职场》 [Workplace], Shanghai: Zhongguo jingying shebao.

\textsuperscript{177} ROCCA 2017.

\textsuperscript{178} ROCCA 2017, 24.

\textsuperscript{179} ROCCA 2017, 21.
workplace novels, for example - are precisely those who took, and keep taking advantage of the paradigmatic shift described above to increase their wealth and enhance their social status through scholarly and, later, professional achievements. However, as we will observe, these individuals, in Rocca's words, are "[...] less a group of people than a way of thinking and foreseeing the structures of Chinese society, a part of the new social imaginary China is elaborating." Moreover, their path towards success, wealth and happiness is usually not as straightforward as advertised.

As we have mentioned, in their great majority, workplace novels depict middle to high-ranked office employees, or people involved in liberal professions. They also give great importance to their enviable lifestyle. Thus, these narratives show a concordance with what we could call the "elitist inclination" of the word zhichang. Moreover, as will be demonstrated in the part of this research dedicated to text analysis, they usually describe professional development and social climbing as obvious life purposes rather than as individual choices, which supports our hypothesis that the perception of work as an ever-lasting attempt to climb the social ladder has become a norm in contemporary Chinese society.

3.2 Genealogy of the Category: Historical Models and Foreign Influences

When describing a literary genre, it seems necessary to attempt to determine when it appeared, which were the pioneer works, by which former genres it was influenced, and how it is positioned in literary and social history. Thus, we will now examine the question of the origins of the zhichang category. The establishment of a complete genealogy of workplace fiction exceeds by far the scope of the present research, as it would necessitate the use of a wider corpus, in terms of content and time of appearance. Thus, we will rather attempt to describe how the question of the genre's origins is apprehended in the academic articles dedicated to the category - mostly the works of Chinese scholars, as studies in Western academic circles are scarce - to observe which are the works mentioned as pioneers of the category, or as having influenced seminal workplace novels. Through these observations, we will try to understand what these different genealogies can teach us about the perception of the genre, but also about the perception of literary genres in general, especially in the field of popular culture.

Starting from the definition of workplace novels as texts centered on the professional life, business endeavors, and social climbing of the characters, we observed that Fan Boqun dedicated a chapter of his research on urban mass culture to 20th century novels describing the evolution of Shanghai's commercial and financial life, the new businessmen, and what he calls the "trade war" (shangzhan

180. ROCCA 2017, 11.
Among these novels, Fan mentions Chen Diexian's *Chenfushen* (1879-1940) *Unofficial Biography of Hu Xueyan (Hu Xueyan waizhuan 《胡雪岩外传》)*, published in 1903 and describing the extravagant lifestyle of a businessman, Wu Yueren's *Wangjiaren* (1866-1910) *The Secret to Make a Fortune (Facai mijue 《发财秘诀》)*, published in 1906 or 1907 and focusing on the practice of usury, Chen Lengxue's *Chenfubin* (1878-1965) *Memoirs of a Business Demon (Shangjie guiyu ji 《商界鬼蜮记》)*, published in 1907 and proposing a repertoire of the different types of financial fraud, Ji Wen's *The City's Voice (Shi sheng 《市声》)*, describing the migrants' role in the economic development of the city, and Jiang Hongjiao's *Jiang Hongji* (1898-1972) *Notes on the Real Nature of Stock Exchange (Jiaoyisuo xianxing ji 《交易所现形记》)*, published in 1922 or 1923 and depicting the financial crisis of 1921.

We can observe that the majority of these titles evoke an idea of authenticity - using terms like biography (*zhuan* 传), and memoirs or account (*ji* 记) - or an idea of usefulness, as illustrated by the title *The Secret to Make a Fortune*. While Chinese scholars interested in workplace novels do not mention these early financial novels as a possible influence on the category, the way contemporary novels are often advertised shows striking similarities with what has been pointed out here. Indeed, numerous workplace novels are described as revealing the secrets of the business world, or as transmitting a realistic and authentic account of the practices that rule this universe. For example, as we have seen, *Ups and Downs* was first released on Tianya Club under the title "*Ups and Downs* Unwritten Rules to Survive in a Foreign-Owned Company in China", and the same idea is implied in the title of another novel which will be analyzed in the second part of this research, *The Art of Winning: Those Unknown Stories Inside the World's Top Company (Zhengfeng: shijie dingji waiqi chenfu lu 《争锋：世界顶级外企沉浮录》)*. Moreover, many workplace novels' titles contain the character *ji* 记 - which can be translated to notes, accounts, memoirs or diary - like in the Chinese title of *Du Lala Go!*, which can be literally translated into *Du Lala's Promotion Diary*, but also *Account of a Workplace Little Shrimp's Transformation (Zhichang xiaoxia bianshen ji 《职场小虾变身记》)*, or *Professional Diary of a White-Collar Woman (Nü bailing zhichang riji 《女白领职场日记》)*, among others.

Fan Boqun does not explicitly link works mentioned above to contemporary workplace novels but he still emphasizes the existence of an uninterrupted evolution in Chinese literary history. The

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181. FAN 2014, 504.
182. The titles have been translated for the purpose of this research, as no translation of these texts seem to exist in English.
guiding thread of Fan's research is the asserted existence of continuity between vernacular authors from the Ming dynasty, for example Feng Menglong 冯梦龙 (1574-1646), the "Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies literature" (yuanyuang hudie wenxue 鸳鸯蝴蝶文学) of the early 20th century, and what he calls contemporary "categorized web novels" (wangluo letixing xiaoshuo 网络类型小说). 186 According to Fan, the authors of all these novels have in common that they are socially and economically close to their intended readers, understand their realities, and are thus able to write stories the readers can identify with. This specificity is presented as an explanation for the narratives' success. Moreover, it also asserts their value because these works, which have often been disparaged for their supposed lack of literary qualities, are actually valuable as faithful depictions of the everyday life and concerns of their contemporary readers. In that sense, they are described as an unique source of information for researchers, but also as guidebooks for their consumers, because they supposedly were - and are - used by readers to obtain information about a new environment - the modernizing and ever-changing city - and to be able to survive and integrate into this environment. 187 This description is reminiscent of the advertisement of workplace novels, asserting that they can be used by readers as manuals to get accustomed to the unknown environment of the workplace, and thus to become more competitive.

We do not pretend that the early 20th century novels mentioned by Fan Boqn exerted a real influence on contemporary workplace novels. As the authors of the texts apprehended here do not explicitly mention these works as having inspired them, to our knowledge at least, and as it is virtually impossible to determine if they have read them or know of their existence, it would be problematic to establish a literary continuity between these different types of narratives. However, we consider that the novels listed by Fan Boqn and contemporary workplace novels participate in a shared "horizon d'attentes", to borrow the term used by Philippe Lejeune and which is described as follows:

Tout public a tendance à classer ce qu'il reçoit, et à le recevoir à travers le classement de tout ce qu'il a reçu avant. Ce travail de classement, de normalisation se fait d'abord de manière empirique: Hans Robert Jauss a proposé pour le désigner l'expression d'"horizon d'attente", horizon sur le fond duquel toute nouvelle production apparaît, soit pour répondre fidèlement à l'attente, soit pour la décevoir ou lui imposer de se transformer. L'expression d'"horizon" est excellente: son brumeux lointain représente la manière dont toutes les expériences antérieures de lecture tendent à se fondre en une sorte de paysage-type; et le propre de l'horizon, on le sait, est d'être un phénomène relatif de perspective qui change lorsque l'observateur se déplace (ici, dans le temps). 188

186. FAN 2014, 2.
187. FAN 2014, 10. See also LINK 1981, 21.
188. LEJEUNE 1996, 320.
All of these novels, modern and contemporary, are said to have been written and perceived as faithful testimonies of social phenomena, either the changes of the Chinese commercial and financial realms brought about by increasing contacts with the rest of the world starting in the 19th century, or the new career paths made available to the Chinese youth by the economic reforms and globalization in the 2000s. They can thus be considered as belonging to the same "horizon d'attentes".

Let us now turn to recent Chinese articles dedicated to workplace novels and examine which are the works proposed as having influenced the zhichang genre, and those mentioned as pioneers of the category. As we will see when addressing the current state of research in the next chapter, the corpus of articles by Chinese scholars dedicated to workplace novels is quite extensive. Thus, a systematic and exhaustive analysis of that corpus would require its own dissertation. Here, we will only discuss the articles consulted for the purpose of this research, which were selected according to their relevance for the topics we intended to address - the didactic function of the novels, their link to the creation of the middle class, and their relations with different concepts developed in public discourses in the recent years.

As mentioned above, Chinese scholars studying workplace novels do not establish a literary continuity between contemporary narratives and the 20th century novels centered on business and finance described by Fan Boqun. However, they mention the possible influences of other categories of works. Firstly, a few articles evoke the proximity of workplace novels with American self-help literature. The works listed in this context are, for example, Spencer Johnson's *Who Moved my Cheese?*, Jack Welch's *Winning*, Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Og Mandino's *The Greatest Salesman in the World*, or Elbert Green Hubbard's *A Message to Garcia*. Interestingly, the fact that these books are not identified as novels - even if some of them use allegories to make the lessons they intend to teach more lively and understandable - is not addressed in the articles mentioning them. Secondly, in two articles, the novel *Hotel* from British-Canadian author Arthur Hailey is evoked as having exerted a strong influence on the zhichang category.

According to Zhang, Xu and Xu's article, this novel, which was adapted into a TV series popular in China in the 1980s, was highly appreciated for its author's deep knowledge of the professional

189. FAN 2014, 506 and PAN & PENG 2013, 94.

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environment he was describing.\textsuperscript{192} Finally, three articles mention Hong Kong author Liang Fengyi's financial novels as early examples and possible influence for workplace novels.\textsuperscript{193} This would corroborate the idea that popular fiction was reintroduced in mainland China after the Maoist period through successful novels from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and the West.\textsuperscript{194}

The mention of the work of Liang Fengyi - described as a major figure of 1990s Hong Kong literature - deserves attention, as this author has the particularity to have written a whole collection of books centered on the world of economy and finance, published in the 1990s, and to have been a successful businesswoman as well, a characteristic she shares with numerous workplace novels authors.\textsuperscript{195} Liang Fengyi's financial novels are usually described in a way that emphasizes their proximity with reality, especially with the changes and ever growing difficulties encountered in the business world, as workplace novels often are. For example, the inside cover of Liang Fengyi's \textit{Financial Tempest (Jinrong da fengbao 《金融大风暴》)} states:

The big financial unrest surging in Asia in 1997 was a bloodless World War Three governed by the rules of finance and obeying the law. It inflicted serious damages to Asia and affected the whole world. Society was troubled, the economy recessed, people suffered, it was a time of grief and helplessness.\textsuperscript{196}

The comment then asserts that the novel describes how some people managed to survive through these hardships. Inside of the back cover, the reader can also find a description of Liang Fengyi's achievements in the literary field and in business, supporting the authenticity and usefulness of the knowledge she can transmit about finance and management. As we can see, the way this novel is advertised is very similar to what we have observed for workplace novels, with an emphasis on realism, authenticity and usefulness. In his 2010 article, Zhao Kun also emphasized the parallelism between the appearance and success of Liang Fengyi's novels in Hong Kong and the ones of workplace novels in mainland China, explaining the time difference between the two phenomena by

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{192} ZHANG, XU & XU, 2010, 22-23.
\item \textsuperscript{195} SHENG Kai Li 盛开莉. "Liang Fengyi xiaoshuo xin jie - caijing waiyi xia de nüxing chengzhang xiaoshuo" “梁凤仪小说新解——财经外衣下的女性成长小说” [New Interpretation of Liang Fengyi’s Female Bildungsroman Novels in the Perspective of Finance and Economics], \textit{Journal of Shihezi University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)}, 2016, 30(1), pp.116-119.
\end{itemize}
the different stages of economic development of Hongkongese and Chinese societies.\textsuperscript{197}

In a 2000 article, researcher Daria Berg describes a series of novels by female author Zhang Xin 张欣 (1953), published at the end of the 1990s, depicting how educated women decided to leave the state sector, where they were working, in order to get involved in private business.\textsuperscript{198} Apparently, these novels were classified as "new urbanites novels" (xin shimin xiaoshuo 新市民小说), and were also describing business women's glamorous lifestyle and patterns of consumption. Dara Berg explains that, in these narratives, women get involved in business in order to connect with the modern world and to obtain higher living standards, explaining why these works contain numerous descriptions of cosmopolitan and luxurious settings, like restaurants and bars. In that sense, Zhang Xin's novels seem to hold important similarities to workplace novels, which also give strong importance to the lifestyle that professional achievements allow people to reach. However, Zhang Xin's narratives apparently illustrate how neither education nor talent seems to be of any help to succeed in the business world, which is not the case in workplace novels, where education and individual qualities are necessary attributes for social climbing. Moreover, Zhang Xin's narratives ultimately seem critical toward women's will to join modernity and consumerism, depicting the subsequent failure of their marriages, for example, and proposing a turn back to Chinese traditional values as a remedy to contemporary problems. This is not the case in workplace novels, where the quest for wealth and social status through professional achievements seems to be accepted and even encouraged, despite the fact that women's access to financial and professional power seems to still be problematic in some cases. This difference might be explained by the fact that, in the 1990s, intellectuals were reluctant to throw themselves into business, which was not yet perceived as a proper way of gaining wealth and social status, leading to a situation where many newly rich people were actually self-made men and women with poor educational background.\textsuperscript{199}

It is surprising to us that Zhang Xin's novels are never mentioned as possible predecessors of workplace novels. Indeed, as described by Daria Berg, these works illustrate the emergence of an interest for the business world in literature and urban culture, a phenomenon holding strong similarities to the one explaining the appearance, proliferation and success of workplace novels in the 2000s. Moreover, in their 1996 article, Chinese scholars Dong Limin and Wang Yinong mentioned the existence of numerous other authors of the 1990s whose novels focused on characters - generally females - who decided to abandon their "intellectual" status and to go to

\textsuperscript{197} ZHAO 2010, 177.
\textsuperscript{199} BERG 2010.
Southern China to work in business. This article mentions the novels of Zhang Xin, but also He Dun 何顿 (1958), Shu Ping 述平 (1962), Zhu Wen 朱文 (1967), Lin Bai 林白 (1958) or Xu Xiaobin 徐小斌 (1953), which are all said to belong to the category of "new urbanites novels". Dong and Wang's analysis of these novels contains striking similarities to Sheng Kaili's analysis of Liang Fengyi's novels, as all of these narratives are said to describe how Southern China and the business world represented an opportunity for neglected and poor women to become the agents of their own lives and to step out of men's shadows. As this type of narrative seems to have represented a trend in the 1990s, it is difficult to determine if some of them have been neglected by scholars interested in workplace novels because they are not considered as "popular", "fashionable" or "mass" literature - as workplace novels and Liang Fengyi's novels might be - or because of other fundamental differences regarding their content.

We should keep in mind that none of the articles evoking the origins of workplace novels propose to establish a clear and exhaustive genealogy of the genre, and neither do we in the present research. We can observe, however, that the various works mentioned as possible predecessors or influences of workplace novels in the research papers mentioned above reveal different attitudes towards the novels, and the focus of each of the articles on different elements of their narrative structure and characteristics. Indeed, to choose to affiliate workplace novels with American non-fictional self-help and professional development literature reveals an emphasis on what is perceived as the actual and practical knowledge transmitted by workplace novels and on their usefulness for readers. To choose to mention Liang Fengyi, on the other hand, illustrates an attempt to place workplace novels in a literary continuity with other popular works set in a professional environment, thus giving more importance to the fictional dimension of the narratives. Finally, to mention Zhang Xin's and other similar authors' texts as precursors of the zhichang category would probably imply understanding them mainly as tales of women's emancipation and coming of age through professional achievements, an interpretation that we did not encounter among Chinese scholars.

We have observed that, when Chinese scholars interested in workplace novels attempt to identify the preexistent genres which could have influenced them, their attempts often seem to fulfill a function of justification and legitimation of the existence of the works, and of assertion of their cultural value. Lejeune made a similar observation about the studies attempting to establish the history of autobiography, as he described the purpose of these endeavors to be "contribuer au sentiment de permanence nécessaire au 'genre' et lui donner ses lettres de noblesses". This statement seems relevant for the apprehension of the Chinese critiques on workplace novels, as their

201. LEJEUNE 1996, 316.
lack of literary quality is often deplored but, in a way, compensated by the variety and richness of
the genres supposed to have influenced the category, which is apparently perceived as a sign that
future novels might be of better quality. For numerous scholars, the establishment of a continuity
between workplace fiction and earlier genres goes hand in hand with the assertion that the zhichang
genre itself is new. In that sense, workplace fiction would be the offspring of a certain literary
tradition, and the reflection of recent social and economic changes - the arrival of numerous foreign
companies in China, the expansion of white-collar professions, or the maturation of the Chinese
middle class, for example - and the precursors of potential future works, which might be of better
literary quality.

As for the determination of the earliest works of the category, in a 2006 article published in the
China Culture Daily (Zhongguo wenhua bao 中国文化报) - which seems to be one of the first
published articles evoking workplace novels - journalist Chen Yun 陈耘 mentions Tan Yiping's
novel Professional Diary of a White-Collar Woman, published in 2005, as the earliest example of a
workplace novel. For some reason, Chen Yun fails to mention Tan Yiping's 2003 novel Diary of a
Foreign-Owned Company Secretary (Yi ge waiqi nü mishu de riji 《一个外企女秘书的日记》),
which is supposed to be the first part of the 2005 novel. In a 2011 article attempting to describe the
zhichang category's evolution through the analysis of two novels, the scholar Feng Xue chooses
Yan Zhen's 阎真 2003 novel Troubled Water (Canglang zhi shui 《沧浪之水》), describing the
official career of an ambitious pharmacy student, as an early example of the category. In a 2010
article, scholars Zhang Yiwu, Xu Gang and Xu Yong choose the novels Work Unit (Danwei 《单位》), and Official (Guanren 《官人》), from Liu Zhenyun 刘震云, respectively published in 1989
and 1999, belonging to the "new realism" movement (xin xianshi zhuyi 新现实主义), as precursors of
workplace novels. In other articles, it is Wang Qiang's novel Circle and Trap, published in
2006, which is mentioned as one of the earliest examples of the category. As for the works
encapsulated in our inventory, the oldest publication we encountered was Man Yunlai's 满运来 Me,
Editor in Chief (Wo zai baoshe dang shezhang 《我在报社当社长》), published in 2001.

202. See, for example, ZHANG 2009, ZHANG & XU 2011, or ZHAO 2015.
203. See, for example, ZHANG, XU & XU 2010, or ZHANG & XU 2011.
204. CHEN 2006.
205. TAN Yiping 谭一平 (2003). Yi ge waiqi nü mishu de riji 《一个外企女秘书的日记》 [Diary of a
foreign-owned company secretary], Beijing: Xueyuan Publishing House.
206. FENG 2011, 49.
207. ZHANG, XU & XU 2010, 23.
jinnianlai 'zhichang xiaoshuo re' de xianxiang" “繁华背后是什么?——谈近年来‘职场小说热’的现象”
[What Lies Beneath Success? - Discussing the Craze for Workplace Novels], Literature and Art Criticism,
209. MAN Yunlai 满运来 (2001). Wo zai baoshe dang shezhang 《我在报社当社长》 [Me, editor in
chief], Shanghai: Fudan University Publishing House.
As we can see, there is apparently no consensus on the designation of a founding work of the genre, and none of the consulted articles seem to aim at establishing a complete genealogy of the category either. This might be linked to the fact that, usually, workplace novels, and the commercial success they encountered, are studied as a socio-cultural phenomenon, and that the works are rarely studied from a purely literary point of view. Thus, it seems that the only ascertainable elements on the genealogy of workplace novels are that they acquired notoriety and recognition around 2008, probably in relation with the success of *Du Lala Go!,* and that other works of the same type already existed, even without being classified in the *zhichang* category. According to the consulted articles, it seems that identifying a "first workplace novel" would be extremely difficult, as the category probably emerged progressively, as deviations of earlier genres focusing on urban life.\(^{210}\)

It seems that Philippe Lejeune reached similar conclusions when he mentions the two "illusions" characterizing the history of the autobiographical genre. According to Lejeune, contrarily to what is commonly believed, it is generally not possible to trace the history of literary genres back to a remote past.\(^{211}\) Lejeune also refutes the idea that the appearance of a literary category can be identified and dated precisely.\(^{212}\) When describing the emergence of literary works as "le produit d'une redistribution de traits formels en partie déjà existants dans le système antérieur, même s'ils y avaient des fonctions différentes"\(^{213}\), Lejeune admits that literary works do not appear out of nowhere, but also explains that readers and critics have not given importance to the same textual elements throughout history, leading to the classification of works in different categories at different times. Following Lejeune's theory, we infer that, at some point in recent history, a certain type of works started to be classified as "workplace fiction", a newly invented term, and at that moment, earlier works were also encompassed in the genre, even if the category did not exist when they were created. This anachronistic naming illustrates what Lejeune describes as a "redistribution du passé en fonction de critères modernes"\(^{214}\).

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\(^{210}\) CHEN 2006, ZHANG & XU 2011.
\(^{211}\) LEJEUNE 1996, 313.
\(^{212}\) LEJEUNE 1996, 317.
\(^{213}\) LEJEUNE 1996, 316.
\(^{214}\) LEJEUNE 1996, 316.
4.1 Western Studies

In the last decade, Western academia has provided valuable studies on popular culture and literature in contemporary China.\textsuperscript{215} However, we have observed that popular literature is rarely studied with a focus on its division into genres. The fragmentation of popular culture is often mentioned, but it is generally described as a commercial necessity linked to new patterns of consumption - buying a specific product has come to be used as a sign of distinction - but rarely as a cultural or literary phenomenon in itself. We consider that the categorization of literature, notably online, indisputably holds an important commercial dimension. However, we also believe that the internal structure of cultural production has a deeper significance, thus explaining our choice to select a corpus of works according to genre division. It seems that some literary categories, like martial arts novels, romances or urban novels, have existed for a long time in China, allowing us to think that they might have exerted an influence on how people perceive and consume literature. To our knowledge, no extensive study has been published in the West on workplace novels, but we have found mention of the phenomenon in five English publications, which will now be described in detail.

First, William Callahan has dedicated part of a chapter of his 2013 work \textit{China Dreams: 20 Visions of the Future}\textsuperscript{216} to \textit{Du Lala Go!}. In this research, Callahan describes and analyzes various intellectual trends interpreted as different versions of the "China Dream", a concept which has become omnipresent in the political, economic and intellectual discourses in recent years China. In this context, Callahan mentions the Du Lala phenomenon as a "Chimerican Dream".\textsuperscript{217} The researcher describes the movie \textit{Go Lala Go!} as a fusion between the American dream and the China dream:

\begin{quote}
Hence, the two national dreams dissolve into the Chimerican dream: the American "China dream" of the PRC as the "last great untapped market on Earth", and a Chinese woman's "American dream" of upward mobility in the PRC.\textsuperscript{218}
\end{quote}

For Callahan, the upward mobility of Du Lala in an American company symbolizes the entrance of China in the world economy, which is also the idea developed by Zhang Yiwu, Xu Gang and Xu Yong in their article.\textsuperscript{219} In this study, Du Lala is described as an ordinary woman, representative of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{215}See, for example, KONG 2005, LATHAM 2007, ROJAS & CHOW 2009.
\item \textsuperscript{216}CALLAHAN 2013.
\item \textsuperscript{217}CALLAHAN 2013, 163.
\item \textsuperscript{218}CALLAHAN 2013, 164.
\item \textsuperscript{219}ZHANG, XU & XU 2011.
\end{itemize}
the post-80s generation, who climbs the corporate ladder relying only on her hard work. Here we would like to point out that, in the novel, Du Lala actually belongs to the post-70s generation, and that the narrative contains various comparison between the two age cohorts, stating, for example, that post-80s individuals are less familiar with Mao's teachings, or that they are more selfish and entitled than their predecessors. We follow Callahan's analysis when he explains that Du Lala conforms to American professional standards and states:

Du Lala thus is an instruction manual both for how to succeed in corporate China and for how to be a global consumer. China's 12th Five-Year Plan promises that the country's economy will be fueled by domestic consumption. Du Lala's Promotion Diary gives an idealized view of how this would work. [...] Thus, the film and the novel both tell people how to be modern: how to work, live - and succeed - in the ruthless global market economy that knits together Chinese and American individuals, rules, aspirations, and values. 220

Callahan's analysis of the story of Du Lala generally follows a similar pattern to numerous articles written by Chinese scholars, stating that the story has an actual and concrete utility for the readers and viewers, and affiliating the book with American self-help works, for example How to Win Friends and Influence People. Moreover, Callahan describes Du Lala's "money worship"221 and individualistic dream of the "good life"222 as lacking a global vision of society, values and ideals, which has also been deplored by Chinese scholars. As an example of this tendency, Callahan emphasizes that, at the end of the movie, Lala renounces her original objective of professional success and comes to consider, through the vicissitudes of her relationship with Wang Wei, that happiness does not lie in professional achievements, and that the best she can wish for is to earn enough money to be able to retire early and live a comfortable life. For Callahan, Du Lala's story is voluntarily apolitical, thus making it political in the sense that it proposes alternative models of what success and happiness mean through Lala's escape from the "enterprise-state"223 where the rise of the company is perceived as more important than individuals' interests and benefits. For Callahan, this narrative illustrates the endless possibilities offered to the contemporary Chinese youth. As will be developed in more detail in the second part of this research, dedicated to text analysis, we consider that the narrative structure of most workplace novels presents upward social mobility through professional achievements as a necessity rather than as an individual choice, and that these works generally fail to provide a real alternative to this "there is no way but up" lifestyle, even when the heroines are not satisfied with it.

The second English contribution that we would like to mention here is the chapter that Cai

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220. CALLAHAN 2013, 166.
221. CALLAHAN 2013, 172.
222. CALLAHAN 2013, 173.
223. CALLAHAN 2013, 172.
Shenshen dedicates to the analysis of *Du Lala Go!* and to its adaptation to TV series and film in her 2016 research *Television Drama in Contemporary China: Political, Social and Cultural Phenomena.* Through a comparative reading of the different versions of the narrative, Cai explores three themes. Firstly, the integration, by Chinese white collars, of Western corporate practices and norms and the way this particular culture has influenced the country. Cai describes this phenomenon as a part of China's globalization process. According to Cai, in the professional world, the characters of workplace novels are detached from "traditional" Chinese ways of thinking and acting, which have been replaced by Western habits and values. In this sense, white collars working for foreign-owned companies participate in disseminating Western values and practices in Chinese society. Though we consider Cai’s analysis to be very relevant and valuable, we do not fully agree with her conclusions, as we believe that workplace novels characters remain in touch with part of a "Confucian tradition" in terms of moral values and personal behavior, while, at the same time, assimilating Western professional standards and consumption habits, thus transforming and localizing Western corporate culture.

Secondly, Cai describes the story of Du Lala, especially in its book and TV versions, as proposing positive role models for contemporary Chinese women. According to Cai, the earliest examples of workplace novels were usually choosing their heroines among secretaries and receptionists, who were described as "white-collar beauties" (*bailing liren* 白领丽人), meaning that, even though they were working in foreign-owned companies and were earning decent salaries, they were only entrusted with trivial and mundane tasks, and were sometimes described as "flower vases". Contrarily to these early examples, Cai asserts that Du Lala and other similar heroines are strong and autonomous women who gain financial independence through education and hard work. As these women do not need a husband for financial support, they are less eager to marry early, and thus choose to become "shelved women" or "leftover women" (*shennü* 剩女), terms usually used in a disparaging way in the Chinese media but which Cai perceives as positive. For Cai, the foreign companies represent a space where contemporary Chinese women are offered fair opportunities to grow into successful professionals, which is not yet the case in Chinese companies. In this aspect, Cai’s analysis concords with the interpretations of most Chinese scholars, who see workplace novels as feminist, as they depict independent career women. In the present research, we choose, instead, to follow the analysis proposed by Zhou Lina, who questions the asserted feminist dimension of workplace novels, emphasizing the fact that, for example, these narratives never address questions linked to the persistent difficulties for working women to juggle a career and their

224. CAI 2016.
roles as wives and mothers.  

Finally, Cai analyzes how, through its systematic association between white collars working for foreign-owned companies and a cosmopolitan, hedonist and consumerist lifestyle, workplace fiction contributes to the "manufacturing of a middle-class flavor". In that sense, Du Lala's transformation from inexperienced novice to successful professional is also accompanied by the transcendence of her modest family origins and her access to the middle class, and thus to its comfort and luxury. We follow Cai's analysis in considering that workplace novels occupy an important position in the creation of a middle-class imaginary in contemporary China, and that they equate professional apprenticeship with the acquisition of middle-class patterns of behavior and consumption.

In his 2016 article, Marco Fumian also proposes an analysis of the Du Lala phenomenon. The researcher draws a parallel between Wu Qionghua, heroine of The Red Detachment of Women (Hongse niangzi jun 《红色娘子军》), one of the Eight Model Operas of the Cultural Revolution, and the contemporary heroine Du Lala. In doing so, Fumian emphasizes the role played by popular culture and entertainment in the CCP's attempts to fashion the population's mind in a way that is favorable to the pursuit of its goals. According to Fumian, these attempts are more discreet than during Maoist times, but still exist nonetheless. The article states:

In building the socialist market, the party also reshaped the values and goals of the Chinese people so as to make them serve the new socioeconomic system, a fact that does not always seem sufficiently highlighted or analyzed. I argue here that Du Lala should be considered not simply a spontaneous manifestation of a capitalist ethos and lifestyle somehow naturally produced by the market, but rather a component, however indirect, of the ideological apparatus of the CCP with the goal of educating its citizens to the values, norms, and aims of the socialist market. This state ideological role is ultimately what links Du Lala to Wu Qionghua: whereas her elder cousin exemplified the ideal subjectivity of the communist society, Du Lala exemplifies the ideal subjectivity functional to the socialist market society. What Du Lala and her Maoist predecessor have in common is that they are both models: as such, they typify the most desirable attitudes and behaviors sanctioned by their social order and therefore help their audience internalize and emulate the same kind of attitudes and behaviors.

In his text analysis of the novel, Fumian focuses on the use of Du Lala as a role model entrusted with the task of teaching readers how to enter the middle class, which the CCP has aimed to extend

227. ZHOU 2011.
228. CAI 2016, 72.
229. FUMIAN 2016.
230. FUMIAN 2016, 81.
since the beginning of the 2000s, in order to foster economic growth and maintain social stability. In the chapters dedicated to text analysis, we will follow Fumian's interpretation of workplace novels' characters as stated here:

Rather strikingly, the qualities Du Lala exemplifies are the very ones this state sociological discourse attributes to the Chinese middle class and the government seeks to instill in Chinese youth through the national educational system. She exemplifies, I argue in this essay, the Party's ideal subjectivity for the socialist market. As "a typical representative of the middle class," she illustrates the most desirable attitudes and behaviors of her time, not unlike the way "proletarian types" of the Mao era illustrated the most desirable attitudes and behaviors of the socialist ethos.

As we will see, the norms and values promulgated in workplace novels show striking similarities to the political discourses of the recent years, notably those regarding the concepts of the population's quality, and of harmonious society, which, regarding the government's involvement in the production and promotion of popular culture, however indirect it may be, cannot be disregarded as mere coincidence.

Lastly, we would like to mention two English publications' treatment of the workplace fiction category as a whole. The first one, and the only one of academic nature, is proposed by Taiwanese scholar Grace Wu's 2017 article "The Making of the New Global Middle Class: China's Workplace Novels". Grace Wu describes workplace novels as Bildungsromans depicting the coming of age of inexperienced young people though their acquisition of new ways of interacting with their peers, superiors, subordinates, families and romantic partners. According to Wu, workplace novels teach their readers to perceive and use all their relationships in pragmatic and profit-oriented ways. This article concords with Cai's analysis by stating that workplace novels' characters are alienated from the Confucian moral values they have grown up with. However, Grace Wu interprets this phenomenon as a negative one, asserting that young white collars fail to integrate the positive values of foreign-owned companies - for example equality, fairness, or a democracy-oriented mind - because they only care about learning the Western professional practices which will be useful to their career advancement. Moreover, Wu points out that many workplace novels emphasize the importance of office politics, described as "hidden rules" (qian guize 潛規則), in order to succeed. Thus, workplace novels are described, in this article, as encouraging strategic thinking and scheming in order to undermine one's competitors, in a complete disregard of morality.

231. FUMIAN 2016, 84.
232. FUMIAN 2016, 85.
234. WU 2017.
235. WU 2017, 313.
article, as its title indicates, analyzes workplace novels as taking part in the formation of the Chinese middle-class mentality, norms and values. The author fears that, seeing their promotion of fiercely competitive and amoral individuals, workplace novels fail to encourage the formation of a middle class that would be favorable to China's transition to democracy.

On the basis of our observations of different narratives, we find Wu's interpretation of workplace novels as Bildungsromans to be relevant and useful, even though we do not consider that this analysis applies equally to all the stories encompassed in that genre. We consider that only the feminine branch of the category shows similarities with Bildungsromans. The same observation stands for Wu's description of the lack of morality of workplace fiction's characters. If it seems to be true in the case of some novels, our observations have revealed that, in numerous narratives, only the characters who behave in a moral way, despite the fierce competition of their professional environments and the despicable schemes of their rivals, obtain legitimate professional success and recognition at the end of the stories.

The second English contribution to the study of workplace novels as a genre is an article by Leslie Chang released on the New Yorker's website and titled "Working Titles: What do the most industrious people on earth read for fun?". In this article, Leslie Chang describes a few successful workplace novels and the different types of workplaces they usually depict. She also emphasizes the fact that the authors of these narratives are often involved in the professional environments they set their stories in, bestowing an aura of authenticity and realism upon the novels. Leslie Chang also mentions the influence of American self-help literature on workplace novels but ponders this element when she states:

Over the next two decades, though, many Chinese authors rejected the sunny self-actualization message of the American self-help movement. A favorite among factory workers was "Square and Round," which preached how to get ahead through manipulation and deceit. "Do not show concern for others," it advised. "It insults your self-respect and will only make other people look down on you.""237

The article goes on by explaining that, for contemporary Chinese white collars, the workplace is so competitive and ruthless that it is perceived and described as a battlefield, thus explaining the appearance of the "commercial warfare genre", the first example of which is Wang Qiang's Traps and Links.238

Mentioning Du Lala Go!, Leslie Chang states that numerous workplace novels deal with the subject

237. CHANG 2015.
238. In the present research, we have chosen to adopt Grace Wu's translation of this title: Circle and Trap.
of renewal and renovation - which is indeed the case of both *Du Lala Go!* and *Ups and Downs* - and that they are thus tales of modernization and of China's integration in the globalized world through the adoption, by the novels' characters, of American professional methods and standards of behavior. Chang's article is concluded by the mention of the works of Chinese author Zhao Xing, who mainly writes about her travels. According to Chang, Zhao Xing is representative of the "post-1985" generation, who supposedly rejects the models of success through hard work and professional achievements which prevail among older individuals. The article states:

Zhao Xing is part of what the Chinese call bawuhou, the post-1985 generation. Accustomed to a life of material comfort and choice, they don't define success in the standard ways. "We grew up along with China's reforms," she said. "You can't motivate us with money—you have to appeal to our dreams. For example, a post-85 may quit a job so he can take a trip. This is unimaginable to the older generation." 239

4.2 Chinese Studies

Let us now turn to the description of Chinese research papers on workplace novels, which represent a quantitatively more important corpus. In order to obtain a comprehensive outlook on the current state of research, we have used the platform China Knowledge Integrated (*Zhongguo zhi wang* 中国知网), or CNKI. Started and launched in 1999 by the Tsinghua University and Tsinghua Tongfang Holding Group, this database aims to "build the most comprehensive system of China academic knowledge resources", making it valuable for our research. 240 Indeed, even if the use of different databases would have been preferable in order to obtain a complete idea of the existing studies, to our knowledge, no comparable resource exists to this day. Moreover, if the study of Chinese articles on workplace novels seemed indispensable for the purpose of our research, to propose an exhaustive list and analysis of these studies would exceed by far the scope of the present dissertation, thus explaining our decision to limit our exploration to the available database.

In order to establish a list of relevant articles, we have decided to browse the database using different keywords: the terms "workplace novel" on the one hand, and the titles of the three major works of the category on the other hand. For a comparative purpose, we also searched the term "trade war novel" - an equivalent of the warfare workplace novels subcategory proposed by Zhang and Xu - as its use seems quite frequent and as it is sometimes considered as a genre separated from workplace novels. To delineate the scope of the results to one that could be apprehended and described, we have limited the results to the articles which titles contained the searched keywords,
supposing that this would allow us to focus on papers not only mentioning workplace novels but being centered on that topic. Through this method, we listed seventy-seven entries for "workplace novels" and eighteen for "trade war novels". Moreover, 252 articles were dedicated to Du Lala Go!, either the novel, the TV series or the movie, thirteen dedicated to Ups and Downs and four to Lose&Win.

Among the seventy-seven entries for "workplace novels", forty-seven were qualified as "periodical" (qikan 期刊 ), one was a Ph.D. dissertation, fourteen were Master theses, thirteen entries were articles of general press, and two were left undefined. Among the forty-seven periodicals, twenty-four were published in reviews associated with universities, research institutes, or specialized schools. The twenty-three remaining articles were published by various periodicals concerned with literature, economy, education or sociology. This distribution allows us to think that, if workplace novels have attracted the attention of students and scholars, their researches do not necessarily find their place in academic publications in the strictest sense. We could also observe that the general press articles were generally published before the appearance of academic interest for the novels, as the former were written between 2006 and 2012, and the later between 2008 and 2017.

As for the content of these various publications and studies, we have observed that the majority of general press articles deal with the quantitative importance and success of the category. Among the academic studies, including periodicals as well as Ph.D. and Master theses, the most numerous - thirty-nine out of sixty-two - are of sociological nature, meaning that they attempt to describe the socio-cultural background explaining the proliferation and success of the genre, the social issues appearing through the narratives, the didactic function of the novels, or gender issues. These are followed by literary studies and critiques - seventeen out of sixty-two - and finally by studies concerned with lexicology and translation - six out of sixty-two. These observations allow us to think that, among Chinese scholars, workplace novels are generally studied for what they can reveal about the society producing and consuming them, rather than as literary works. This trend seems to be frequent in the research papers on texts considered as "popular" and thus as not deserving of literary analysis.

Among the seventeen entries on "trade war novels", four were from general press, while the thirteen others were of academic nature. These articles were published between 1993 and 2015, allowing us to observe that the trade war label was preexistent to the workplace one, even if it seems to have only been used marginally. In this case, the general press articles appeared later than the academic ones, the former being published between 2006 and 2014. Among the thirteen academic publications, six were published in journals affiliated to research institutes or specialized schools, five in literary reviews and two in business or economy-oriented reviews. Regarding the content of these publications, as for workplace novels articles, the general press articles mainly deal with the proliferation and success of the genre. The academic publications, instead, are equally divided
between literary critiques - six out of thirteen - and sociological issues - six out of thirteen -, with one remaining article focusing on lexicology. As we can see, the publications about trade war novels, though less numerous than the ones about workplace novels, follow the same patterns of distribution among academic and non-academic publications, as well as among the different focuses of research. It should be noted, however, that the four academic articles published between 1993 and 1998 do not concern the same corpus as the remaining articles, published between 2007 and 2015, and as the articles focusing on workplace novels. These earlier articles are dedicated to novels from the 1990s - for example those of Liang Fengyi or Zhang Xin - which, as we have seen, are not mentioned in recent studies as predecessors of workplace novels, even if they are apparently described with the same vocabulary and thus appear in the results of our database browsing.

Turning now to the articles dedicated to Du Lala Go!, we can observe that they are much more numerous than the articles focusing on the genre as a whole or on any other particular work of the category, showing that the academic interest followed the unprecedented commercial success of the saga. The 252 entries dedicated to Li Ke's novels are dispersed between forty-five articles from general press, 196 periodicals, seven Master theses, two annual reports (nianjian 年鉴), and two undefined entries. We can thus see that the majority of the entries - 203 out of 252 - are of academic nature. Here, we do not observe any temporal difference between the first publication of general press articles and academic articles, as both sorts seem to have appeared in 2008, namely, the year after the publication of the first volume of the novel. However, the most recent general press article was published in 2012, while the academic interest for the novel seems to have maintained until 2017. This allows us to think that, if the popular and commercial craze lost its strength after 2012, the novels and its adaptations are still studied in academic circles to this day. We can also observe that 2010 was, by far, the year with the most publications on the novel, with 111 entries, followed by 2011, with fifty-one entries. As we have seen, 2010 was the year of the release of the first movie and of the first TV series adapted from the novels, probably explaining the peak of interest for the saga.

Among the 196 periodical entries, sixty-one have been published in journals affiliated with universities, research institutes or specialized schools. The great majority of the remaining periodicals were published in journals concerned with media or with economy and business, rather than with literature, sociology or education, as was the case for articles studying workplace novels as a genre. This seems to indicate a strong interest for the adaptations of the novels, in TV series as well as movies, and for the professional information the narrative contains. As for the content of these various publications, the majority of the general press articles concern the success of the novel and of its adaptations, as well as sociological issues revealed in the narrative. Among the periodicals, the articles are almost equally distributed between three topics, namely, sociological issues (especially related to gender and the life of urban white collars), the didactic dimension of the
novel and the possibility of seeing Du Lala as a model, and finally, descriptions, analysis and critiques of the novels, the adaptations, the characters, and the reasons for the narrative's success.

As we have seen, the two other best-sellers of the category did not give rise to numerous studies and publications as *Du Lala Go!* did. CNKI lists thirteen entries dedicated to the novel *Ups and Downs*, among which four are from the general press and nine are periodicals. Among the nine periodicals, only three have been published in journals affiliated with research institutes. All the publications were issued between 2008 and 2014, with a relatively stronger interest in 2012 - six publications - and 2008 - four publications. Among the general press articles, three out of four deal with sociological issues, namely, with what the novel says about contemporary society, while the last one attempts to analyze the reasons for the novel's success. A similar observation can be made about the academic publications, which, in their majority, deal with the representation of society and of the workplace in the novel or the TV series. Finally, we have found only four entries concerning the novel *Lose&Win*: two general press articles published in 2006 and both dealing with the potential utility of the novel for readers, and two periodicals published in 2007 and 2014, in an economy-oriented and in an information technology-oriented journal respectively. These two articles seem to be dedicated to a literary critique of the novel.

We will now describe in detail a sample of Chinese studies which have been especially influential and valuable for the present research. They have notably allowed us to distinguish a few common trends of analysis and evaluation of workplace novels, as well as to reveal how the characteristics of the feminine - and most popular - novels of the category have come to be considered as defining the genre as a whole. These different publications will be apprehended in chronological order. When multiple articles have been published the same year, we will classify them according to their relevance to the present research.

First of all, we would like to address the article of journalist Chen Yun, published in November 2006, as it seems to be the one of the oldest publication mentioning the term *zhichang xiaoshuo*.\(^{241}\) In this article, Chen asserts that workplace novels already constitute an established and fashionable genre, which is divided between different topics, for example "encouragement of trade war" (*shangzhanzhi* 商战励志), "real estate front-line" (*dichan qianyan* 房地产前沿), "officials' life" (*jiguan shenghuo* 机关生活), and "beautiful white-collar women" (*bailing liren* 白领丽人). Here, we can see that one of the four subcategories seems to be dedicated to women's experiences, and that it is the only one to be qualified according to gender rather than field of employment. The genre is described as having been influenced by Liang Fengyi's novels and as focusing either on the struggles necessary to succeed professionally, or on the revelation of secrets of the corporate world. According to Chen, the novels are realistic because their authors are not full-time writers but

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241. CHEN 2006.
businesspeople, and this proximity to reality, as well as their possible use both as entertainment fiction and professional guide, are the main reasons explaining the genre's success. Chen seems to consider these novels as useful for young college graduates. In this early publication, we can already distinguish recurrent tendencies of Chinese researches on workplace novels, for example the mention of the corpus' size and diversity, and its subsequent division into subcategories, the attempt to determine which earlier works could have influenced the category, considerations on the authors' identity, and the assertion of the novels' usefulness.

We will now present the article published in 2010 by specialists of literature and pedagogy Yang Yunsheng and Yan Hanying, as we consider it to eloquently illustrate widespread research tendencies among Chinese scholars interested in workplace novels. In this publication, the two researchers attempt to explain the great popularity of the category through an observation of its context of production, diffusion and consumption. To do so, Yang and Yan take four factors into consideration, namely, the fact that the genre belongs to the "mechanical reproduction era" (jixie fuzhi shidai 机械复制时代), the "appearance of non professional authors and the yin surplus phenomenon" (fei zhiyue zuojia de chuchang yu "yin sheng yang shuai" xianxiang 非职业作家的出场与“阴盛阳衰”现象), the "mislead of 'reality'" ("zhenshi" de wudao “真实”的误导), and "readers as gods" (duzhe shi shangdi 读者是上帝).242 The first element treats of the inscription of workplace novels in the realm of commercial literature. In this part, the authors assert that the pragmatic nature of workplace novels is a threat for "pure literature". However, they also see these narratives as a sinicized version of Western self-help literature, which is perceived as a liberation of Chinese authors from Western mindsets. Yang and Yan also seem to consider the ordinariness of authors and readers as positive. In the second part, the researchers assert that workplace novels' authors are usually businesspeople, making their narratives realistic and useful, but also explaining their lack of literary quality. They state that female authors are in the majority in the genre, and that the novels serve the feminist cause. As we have seen when discussing our inventory, the first assertion seems to be erroneous. The second one will be discussed in the last part of the present research, but we can already express our doubt regarding the feminist nature of the novels of our corpus. The third aspect treated by the article describes the content of the novels as realistic (zhenshi 真实), practical (shiyou 实用) and easy to read (haokan 好看). Yang and Yan assert that the novels are authentic but that they are also subjective and biased, and that they excessively emphasize the violence and competitiveness of the workplace, making it ill-advised and dangerous to use them as career guides. In the last section, the authors explain that workplace novels belong to an era when literature is perceived as a consumable good, and that the readers' preferences have played an important part in their redaction and marketing processes. They emphasize the role of publishing houses in the

production of commercially profitable novels. Yang and Yan conclude their article by listing the positive aspects of workplace novels - they provide support and advice to young professionals, enrich categorized literature, support the feminist cause and the democratization of the literary field - as well as their negative aspects - they are too violent, too utilitarian, they neglect spirituality, and they lack psychological depth. We have observed that numerous Chinese researchers seem to share the points of view displayed in this conclusion, making Yang and Yan's article an eloquent illustration of the Chinese academic production on workplace novels.

The article by Zhang Yiwu, Xu Gang and Xu Yong mentioned in the third chapter of this part is also representative of widespread perceptions on the appearance and success of the zhichang category, and especially of the Du Lala saga. Many researchers, as Zhang, Xu and Xu, see this phenomenon as a consequence of the growing importance of the urban middle class, both in terms of number and of influence in the cultural field. According to Zhang Yiwu, professor of Chinese literature and author of the first part of the article, the existence of the category is legitimized by its appeal for a wide readership who identifies with the characters' struggles, and the question of the literary quality of the works is thus not addressed. The Du Lala saga is here described as a source of hope and encouragement for numerous ordinary young people striving in the workplace. Zhang Yiwu also explicitly links Du Lala's professional success to China's economic growth and rise to prominence in the world order:

The "promotion" of "Du Lala" does not only fulfill the actual hopes and literary fantasies of contemporary white collars and members of the middle class. It is also a presage of China's historical destiny, namely, how both the self and China, through a difficult struggle and a lot of efforts, will manage to come to the fore and burst into the timelight of transnational capitalism and globalization, represented and symbolized by foreign-owned companies.

Here, we can observe that the Du Lala saga, a feminine workplace novel, is used as a reference for the genre as a whole, despite the fact that it is majorly masculine.

According to Xu Gang, specialist of Chinese literature and author of the article's second part, the white-collar group is still growing and evolving in China, and the particular culture of this group, to which workplace novels belong, will also continue its development. These processes are described positively, with a patriotic undertone, as a coming of age of the middle class and of its unique culture. Xu Gang deplores the lack of psychological depth of most workplace novels and also asserts that they have been influenced by American success stories, showing how the concept of American Dream has been adopted in China. In the last part of the article, Xu Yong, professor of Chinese literature, describes workplace novels as post-modern. According to him, their success is

244. ZHANG, XU & XU 2010, 22.
linked to their usefulness for white collars. Xu Yong concludes his argument by stating that novels form the zhichang category display how both their authors and their characters attempt and fail to get rid of Western mindsets. We have observed that numerous Chinese scholars express similar reservations on workplace novels, praising the fact that they encourage and help young white collars and symbolize China's economic maturity, but deploring their lack of literary quality, psychological depth, and spirituality.

Next, we would like to mention the article of Zhao Kun, professor of Chinese literature, published in 2010, which is valuable to the present research because it introduced to us the notion of division of mass culture, described by different Chinese researchers as a necessary condition for commercial success in the recent years. 245 Zhao Kun considers the success of workplace novels, especially of the Du Lala saga, to be surprising, and he thus attempts to analyze the reasons of the novels' popularity. According to the researcher, readers were attracted by the realism and usefulness of Du Lala's story, which allowed identification and was supported by the author's experience of the workplace. The novel is here described as light and entertaining, and as focusing on an ordinary woman. This particularity attracted more readers than earlier trade war novels, which had the tendency to turn their main characters into grand heroes, unrelatable for the readership. Zhao also asserts that white-collar women are a very profitable target readership, because they are numerous - more than male readers - and because they have the educational background, time, and means to consume literature. Thus, Li Ke's success is linked to her capacity to identify an important group of potential readers, and to understand their tastes and needs. Zhao concludes his article by asserting that the Du Lala saga is feminist, because it shows that women benefit from a fair treatment in the workplace, because it warns them against the threat of sexual harassment, and because the team who adapted the novel into movies was mainly composed of women. Like in many other publications, workplace novels, especially the ones written by women, are described here as authentic, relatable and useful - showing that researchers often accept the novels' advertising rhetoric as truth - and as serving the cause of women. We can also observe that, here again, the Du Lala saga and other similar, feminine workplace novels are described as the most typical, representative, and successful examples of the genre.

The article by Zhang Yonglu and Xu Daojun mentioned in the second chapter of the present research has been influential because it is the only consulted publication to focus on the narrative structure and characters of workplace novels, rather than on the apprehension of the genre as a socio-cultural phenomenon. 246 According to Zhang and Xu, the zhichang category blends elements from urban novels, trade war novels, officialdom novels (guanchang xiaoshuo 官场小说), coming

245.  ZHAO 2010.
246.  ZHANG & XU 2011.
of age novels (chengzhang xiaoshuo 成长小说), and romances (yangqing xiaoshuo 言情小说). The two authors seem to share the opinions of other Chinese researchers when they explain that this category appeared with the development of big companies in China, and that they picture the life and concerns of their employees, who form a new social group. In this article, as in many others, the emergence of new social groups resulting from the economic reforms is said to have created a necessity for literary works specifically targeted to these groups. The appearance of the zhichang category is thus depicted as a necessary outcome of wider social phenomena. The main part of the article then focuses on the narrative structure of the novels, and on the different subcategories constituting the genre, which have been apprehended in chapter two and will not be reiterated here.

We will now present Zhou Lina's 2011 article, because of the originality of her views regarding the representation of gender issues in workplace novels. The specialist of literature and pedagogy opens her argument by explaining that the literary establishment usually disparages workplace novels as commercial, and as being of poor quality, while mass media are generally favorable to them, because they illustrate the evolution of society and are useful for young readers. For Zhou Lina, workplace novels are a good example of contemporary Chinese issues linked to literature, gender and spirituality. First of all, Zhou asserts that the category illustrates how, in the contemporary market economy, people do not consume literature to seek moral guidance or esthetic enjoyment, but to obtain practical advice that they can apply to their own lives, explaining the success of the zhichang category. The part of the article dedicated to gender issues is, according to us, the most valuable of Zhou Lina's contribution. Contrarily to most Chinese scholars interested in workplace novels, Zhou does not consider the works encompassed in the zhichang category as feminist, despite the fact that they star financially independent and socially mobile heroines. The author of the article emphasizes that successful marital and professional lives are often pictured as incompatible in the novels, and that high-achieving women are masculinized. Moreover, the question of women juggling their careers and their roles as wives and mothers are never addressed in the narratives, illustrating that the authors tend to avoid this topic, which would necessarily question the asserted gender equality depicted in the novels. As we will see in the last part of this research, we share Zhou Lina's reservation regarding the feminist nature of workplace novels. Finally, Zhou asserts that workplace novels symbolize the lack of ideals of the contemporary youth, who measures its success and fulfillment solely through professional and economic achievements.

We do not support Zhou's conclusion on this final aspect, as we consider the novels of our corpus to display doubt about the meaning of success and happiness, as well as the importance of work, money, and upward mobility in one's life. As the novels of our corpus, the works forming the basis of Zhou Lina's article seem to mainly belong to the feminine branch of the zhichang category.

Professor of modern and contemporary Chinese literature Feng Xue's article also deserves our attention because it has the particularity to use the example of two novels - one published in 2003
and one in 2009 - to attempt to describe the evolution of the category. This research focuses on the definition of the genre, stating that novels of the zhichang category have to depict a workplace and center on the professional advancement of the main character. They are also said to be characterized by their positive tone and the advice they provide to help readers succeed at work. According to Feng, the evolution of the genre illustrates a shift towards more reasonable professional ambitions and more moral ways of reaching these goals, as well as the fact that women occupy higher and higher positions in the workplace and in society as a whole. We consider that the thematic evolutions described by Feng are a consequence of the growing involvement of women in the zhichang category, and of the unprecedented success of their narratives. In Feng's article, as in Zhao Kun's contribution and numerous others, the ordinaryness of relatable characters, their reasonable ambitions, and their work ethic are mentioned as the reasons of some workplace novels' success, and thus come to be considered as representative of the genre. These characteristics are generally linked to novels written by women, starring heroines, and targeting a female readership, while "masculine novels" are described as elitist, violent, and as not allowing readers' identification. As we will see in the last two parts of this research - respectively dedicated to text analysis and interpretation of the corpus - the heroines of the novels of our corpus are always described as ordinary, and are encouraged to embrace reasonable ambitions and to realize them while conserving their morality, threatened by the competitiveness and ruthlessness of the corporate world.

Finally, the 2013 article by literature specialists Pan Yuanwen and Peng Wenzhong offers an analysis of the reasons of workplace novels' success based on the three key words "workplace", "great professional Classic", and "ordinary hero", mentioned in the second chapter of this research. The first key word designates the need for each social group to be offered a specific literature. In that sense, the growth of the urban white-collar group and of the number of foreign-owned companies' employees explains the appearance of the zhichang category. The increasing competitiveness of the job market is mentioned as a proof of the usefulness of novels providing career advice to young readers. This leads the authors to their second key word, referring to the fact that most novels are advertised as career guides. In this article, the practical usefulness of the novels is not questioned and accepted as truth. Finally, the third key word emphasizes the appeal, for ordinary people, of being offered the success story of a character who is ordinary as well, and with whom they can identify. In that sense, workplace novels are said to provide hope to young readers, and to facilitate their professional development and social climbing. This article demonstrates that the trends of analysis observed in earlier articles maintain their influence through the years and emphasizes the homogeneity of Chinese studies on workplace novels. As ordinary heroes are mainly encountered in feminine workplace novels, this article also shows how this branch of the

247. FENG 2011.
248. PAN & PENG 2013, 94.
category has come to be used as representative of the whole genre.

These articles by Chinese scholars consulted for the purpose of the present research have allowed us to distinguish a few common trends of analysis. First of all, we have observed that academic interest was strongly attracted by the appearance, proliferation and success of the genre, which was perceived as sudden and unprecedented. This phenomenon is generally interpreted, with a patriotic undertone, as a sign of China's economic maturity - explaining readers' interest for corporate culture, which became relatable to their lives - or as an answer to the educated youth's need for identification, comfort, and advice to thrive in an increasingly competitive job market. Usually, workplace novels are described as valuable for their depiction of various social issues - the pressure endured by young college graduates, or sexual harassment in the workplace, for example - and for their utility for readers, as sources of encouragement, knowledge and practical tips. Often, they are also said to be feminist, because they depict successful and financially independent career women. However, they are generally considered as being of limited literary value and as lacking originality, and thus they are rarely studied in a purely literary perspective. Moreover, some scholars have deplored the novels disengagement regarding morality and ethics, which, they assert, are replaced, in the characters' minds and behavior, by materialistic values and, at times, aggressiveness towards competitors. We have observed that, in Chinese articles, the characteristics most typically associated with the zhichang term, and with the most successful and positively evaluated examples of the category, are all mostly encountered in feminine narratives.

In the present research, the vision of society and of the professional world proposed by workplace novels will of course be addressed, with conclusions which will, at times, differ from what we have observed in both Chinese and Western studies. However, we consider the study of their narrative structure, and thus of the works in their entirety, to be indispensable to the understanding of the category and of what its growth and success reveal about its authors and readers. As we will see when dealing with text analysis, in the second part of this research, workplace novels usually follow a teleologic pattern, where the paratext of the work encourages the reader to interpret all events and all of the character's decisions and actions as necessary steps towards success. This type of narrative structure, led by an overarching idea of progress and development through career, leaves virtually no space for personal life, individuality, or alternative models of success and happiness. This particular dimension seems to have rarely been addressed in preexistent contributions, thus supporting the direction adopted in the present research.
Chapter 5 - A Popular Category?

In the first chapter, we have attempted to show how contemporary workplace novels are inscribed in the wider realm of what is usually considered as popular or entertainment fiction in Chinese literary history. We have observed that they share striking similarities with the beginning of the 20th century novels described by Fan Boqun and Eugene Perry Link. In both cases, the important production of entertaining novels is associated with the particularities of the urban setting and of the lifestyle of part of the middle class. The two types of novel are also characterized by the authors' knowledge of the realities and difficulties of the target readership because of their shared socio-cultural background, contributing to the success of works perceived as a source of identification, support, guidance and advice. Finally, both types of texts are often criticized in intellectual circles for their supposed lack of literary quality and originality but have reached commercial success and a trans-media presence in the cultural landscape.

We have also apprehended the links between workplace fiction and Internet literature. First of all, the category itself, or, at least, its appellation, probably appeared on online reading websites to designate a new and growing trend. Then, numerous novels, including the three bestsellers of the category, were first published online. Here again, the socio-cultural proximity between authors, characters and readers connects workplace novels to the realm of online fiction because, as we have seen, Internet literature promotes communication between authors and readers, encourages them to switch between these two identities and roles, and participate in the creation of "communities" that form around literary taste and a shared experience and background. Finally, we have mentioned that the Internet literature format has influenced workplace novels in their use of short chapters and their integration of English words and extracts in the Chinese text, for example.

Thus, we can observe that, despite the particularity of their proximity with self-help books or professional manuals, workplace novels share strong similarities with entertainment fiction, both modern and contemporary, printed and online. We have mentioned that they are also apprehended in this way in articles by Chinese scholars, who study them as part of a socio-cultural phenomenon rather than as literary texts, and who designate them as "fashionable literature" or as "categorized novels". The idea of success and temporary trend associated with the term "fashionable" (liuxing 流行), seems to connect workplace novels to the realm of the popular. Indeed, Kevin Latham proposes the term liuxing wenhua 流行文化 as one of the four possible Chinese translations of "popular culture".249 However, we have also mentioned that workplace novels' authors describe their writing activities in relation to a sort of social mission that they endorse, namely, to help and guide the readers in a difficult and crucial phase of their lives. In the texts as in the paratext, authors and

249. LATHAM 2007, 29.
editors also flaunt the educational level, professional achievements, lifestyle and qualities of the writers, characters and thus, by extension, of the readers, associating the "community" formed around workplace novels to an economic and cultural elite. Moreover, researchers studying these texts often mention their authenticity and usefulness to demonstrate their value. We can observe that, in the contemporary Chinese context, the concept of popular literature, as well as the integration of novels of the zhichang category in that field, are problematic. We will thus discuss this concept and its implications regarding the classification of works in its realm.

5.1 What Does the Term "Popular" Imply?

When applied to literature, the term "popular" has often been used, in everyday life as well as in academic studies, to describe works attracting a wide readership, encountering commercial success, and perceived as being of little literary value. There seems to be no consensus on what exactly qualifies as popular literature in the studies consulted for the purpose of the present dissertation, but some criteria are frequently used to establish the classification, among which we can mention, for example, the composition of the readership (who supposedly benefit from a lower level of education than the consumers of "elite" literature), the format (which is expected to be cheap and to display the commercial purpose of the work), and the quality of the content (which is presumed to be lower, as popular novels are enjoyable for a wider array of readers than serious works that necessitate a higher level of culture, education and intelligence).\(^{250}\)

Nowadays, scholars interested in popular culture and the significance of this term generally agree on the difficulty to define and circumscribe it, and on the participation of the concept in power relationships between the "elites" and the "masses", as well as in a hierarchization of their respective tastes and cultural productions. For Roger Chartier, for example, the term "popular culture" is an academic category used to designate practices which their actors would not qualify as popular, because this concept illustrates the relationships pitting the intellectuals against an ambiguous alterity, the "people", or the "masses".\(^{251}\) The researcher does not believe that popular culture can be defined in contrast to what it is not, namely, mainstream elite culture. He does not consider the qualification of the public of certain cultural productions as "popular", nor the division of cultural expressions between intrinsically pure and popular ones to be possible either.\(^{252}\)

In his research of popular culture in China, Kevin Latham similarly distances himself from


\(^{252}\) CHARTIER 1996, 212.
qualitative criteria as a basis to distinguish "popular" works from "serious" ones:

I use "popular culture" to refer to cultural products produced for the mass market, which reflect market-determined popular taste and are for enjoyment. This is in contrast to more elite or high culture which has a much narrower appeal and poses more of an intellectual challenge to the consumer. It is also in contrast to politically contrived directed culture.  

This definition seems appropriate to understand the Chinese context because it combines criteria applicable to popular culture as a whole - the importance of market forces and an opposition to elite culture - with an aspect specific to the contemporary Chinese context, namely, the contrast with an official culture, motivated and constrained by ideological and political incentives.

In the following sections, we will focus on four characteristics and criteria frequently encountered in studies on popular literature: its relation to a literary canon, its links to specific genres, the identity of its readership, and its commercial incentives. Through the examination of these different aspects, of how they apply to contemporary Chinese literature in general, and to workplace novels in particular, we aim at revealing the difficulty of defining works as "popular", especially when attempting to distance oneself from subjective qualitative judgments and power relationships.

5.1.1 Relation to the "Canon"

In his research on popular literature, Marc Angenot emphasizes the importance of processes of exclusion in the definition of the concept. According to his theory, the works qualified as popular are the ones that are excluded from the literary canon because of a perceived inherent lack of talent, originality, or subtlety. Angenot explains that, for the cultural elite, there is a clear distinction between a legitimate, established and canonized literature, which benefits from social prestige and is promulgated as superior by literary critics, education, and society as a whole, and a heterogenous outcast literature, mainly defined by its lack of conformity to the dominant canon and perceived as being produced and consumed by the outsiders of the literary establishment. Adopting a similar approach, Jacques Migozzi asserts that the term "popular literature" is applied to all the works rejected from the realm of official literature, thus making it the mark of exclusion from the established canon.

Addressing the specificities of the Chinese context in the definition of a literary canon, Carlos Rojas

255. ANGENOT 2013, 8.

108
and Eileen Chow assert that, before the May Fourth movement, all fiction writing was discredited as "popular" and thus excluded from the realm of established literature. Even though Lu Xun described this phenomenon of exclusion as a "disease of canonicity"\(^\text{258}\), it seems that the May Fourth intellectuals, while valorizing certain forms of fiction writing, also practiced exclusion by asserting that Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies literature, for example, was dangerous for readers because it transmitted conservative ideas. Rojas and Chow’s research emphasizes the fact that canonic literature ceaselessly attempts to distinguish itself from popular literature while, at the same time, trying to appropriate the power of its success. According to the two researchers, the concepts of "serious" and "popular" literature cannot exist without the relationship linking and opposing them.

Rojas and Chow define literary canon as a corpus of works perceived by a social group as being representative of its essential values and useful for their transmission. This means that different agents of the literary field might have a different idea of what constitutes that corpus, thus explaining the coexistence of multiple canons, each of which includes and excludes different works at different epochs.\(^\text{259}\) Rojas and Chow use the example of martial arts fiction writer Jin Yong 金庸 (1924) to illustrate the transient and evolving nature of literary canons. They describe the perception of martial fiction among the intellectual elites as follows:

The cultural status of that genre as a whole, however, was that suggested by the paradoxical connotations of the English word popular: consumed, enjoyed, and in that sense valued by a large and broad-based readership, yet barred by the very breadth of its appeal, and the vulgarity that appeal was assumed to imply, from consideration as a literature of social, aesthetic, or cultural value.\(^\text{260}\)

Apparently, martial fiction was not perceived as "serious" literature in the intellectual circles, despite - or because of - the fact that it was widely read and appreciated.

Despite the reservations of the intellectuals, Jin Yong managed, through his tremendous success, to be recognized as a major figure of 20th century Chinese literature. According to Rojas and Chow, the valorization of Jin Yong's work can be seen as a symptom of the changing status of martial arts literature in academic circles and society as a whole. The role of the author in the canonization of martial arts fiction indeed seems to have been crucial: by creating a literary magazine dedicated to this genre, and by asserting that the category was deeply rooted in Chinese tradition, Jin Yong, and the positive critiques his works received, participated in the valorization of the genre as a whole. Rojas and Chow explain:

\(^{258}\) ROJAS & CHOW 2009, 2.
\(^{259}\) ROJAS & CHOW 2009, 75.
\(^{260}\) ROJAS & CHOW 2009, 75.
The crucial question in any act of consecration is that of how the authority to confer such consecration is generated, conferred, and acknowledged; and the answer to this question lies in the complex, mutually sustaining, and continually renegotiated relationship between the various players within the cultural field. Jin Yong achieved rare success in positioning himself not only as an author but also as a broker with a high degree of control over the distribution of his own fictional products and over a range of associated media channels.\textsuperscript{261}

Thus, we can observe that Jin Yong managed to transform his popular success into cultural standing through the cultural claims of his works, the support of the media, and the authority he gained thanks to the various roles he embodied in the cultural field. We consider the workplace novels' authors' claims of holding a social mission - supporting and guiding their readers, as well as giving a sense of belonging to a community - to illustrate similar attempts of transforming success into social and intellectual legitimacy, though to a lesser extent, as no workplace novel's writer has reached Jin Yong's fame and status so far. By asserting that the importance of the readership is linked to the professional and personal benefits that individuals gain by reading workplace novels, authors attempt to have the social and intellectual value of their works recognized, which would allow them to enter the realm of established and serious literature.

5.1.2 Belonging to a Genre

The possibility of classifying novels in a specific genre sometimes seems to be perceived as justifying their integration in the realm of popular literature. Works of "serious literature" are generally considered to either be impossible to classify in any preexisting genre or category, testifying of the work's originality and unicity, or as belonging to an established genre that has recognized literary value from the intellectual elite. On the other end of the spectrum, popular genre fiction can be criticized and disparaged because of the topics it focuses on, or because its conformance to the narrative and stylistic patterns making the category recognizable are perceived as causing repetitions, archetypes and predictability.

Thus, for a novel, to belong to a specific genre can be ill-perceived in the intellectual circles, especially if that genre does not benefit from literary recognition and legitimacy. We consider Liu Qilin's assertions about categorized novels to be representative of the contemporary Chinese literary establishment's opinion on genre fiction, which we have apprehended through different articles and studies.\textsuperscript{262} According to Liu Qilin, categorized novels often lack variety and originality because they have to conform to restrictive norms of topic and style, and because they are massively produced.

\textsuperscript{261} ROJAS & CHOW 2009, 85-86.

The researcher explains that the earliest examples of each category are usually well received in the literary circles, because they are innovative and often display a thorough knowledge of society. However, the numerous imitations published afterwards are generally of poor quality and disparage the image of the genre as a whole. Liu also asserts that the proliferation of categorized novels is a symptom of the commercialization of literature, where works of disputable quality are mass produced and sold for profit, which represents a threat for literature in general.263

It seems that, nowadays, intellectual circles greatly value originality of theme and style, and would thus tend to dismiss genre literature, which is often perceived as repetitive and unimaginative. However, this valorization of originality and of the author's subjectivity and unique point of view on the world in the evaluation of literature is relatively recent. Tzvetan Todorov describes this particular vision of the written text as a reaction of Romanticism against Classicism:

[...] for nearly two centuries, there has been a powerful reaction in literary studies against the very notion of genre. We write either about literature in general or about a single work, and it is a tacit convention that to classify several works in a genre is to devaluate them. There is a good historical explanation for this attitude: literary reflection of the classical period, which concerned genres more than works, also manifested a penalizing tendency - a work was judged poor if it did not sufficiently obey the rules of its genre. Hence such criticism sought not only to describe genres but also to prescribe them; the grid of genre preceded literary creation instead of following it.264

According to Todorov, Romanticism liberated literary expression from the constraints of genres by valorizing the unique perspective and experience of each author.

Focusing on the Chinese context, Lena Henningsen also asserts that imitation in literary creation has long been perceived as acceptable and legitimate in China, because it was seen as a way to acquire writing skills and to inscribe oneself in a literary movement. This represented an important part of the literary life and a valorizing factor, rather than a disparaging one.265 Alexander Des Forges proposed a similar observation in his research on 19th century Chinese vernacular fiction.266 Des Forges explains that the use of a pre-established and previously known narrative structure in the creation of a new work was a way of asserting the value of the text by inscribing it in a literary continuity, and was thus perceived positively:

The frame story establishes the background against which the main narrative will be read,

263. LIU 2015, 152.
265. HENNINGSEN 2010, 10.

111
In contemporary China, the proliferation of genre fiction online, and, to some extent, among printed books, is apparently answering the readers' demand for a possibility to consume various works focusing on a similar topic or written in a similar style that they particularly appreciate. In that case, it seems that it is precisely the belonging of a work to a specific genre that attracts the reader's attention.

5.1.3 Identity of the Readership

Researchers generally emphasize the determinant role of the perceived identity of the readership in the definition of popular culture. According to Migozzi, the term "popular" holds multiple meanings, including what found its source among the people - or the masses - what concerns and is destined to the people, and what is liked by the people. The researcher emphasizes the necessity to be aware of the different connotations applied to the term "people" when apprehending popular literature. Describing 19th century popular literature in France, Marc Angenot explains that the "popular" readership was said to be composed of "subaltern" groups, namely, women, the youth, and the masses. Angenot asserts that one of the earliest forms of illegitimate novels - from the point of view of the cultural elite - was literature written by female authors and targeting female readers which appeared in the second half of the 18th century. According to the researcher's observations, this genre was considered as inferior because it was targeting women, and it was thus its perceived "feminine nature" that justified its categorization in the realm of the popular. In that context, "feminine writing" were not opposed to "masculine writing" but, rather, to legitimate writing which did not target any specific readership. For Angenot, the fact that, at the time, women were often perceived as infantile and irrational explains the perceived necessity for them to be offered a specific kind of reading, as opposed to men who were the universal and legitimate recipients of any written text.

Apparently, the emergence of this distinction between a "popular" readership and an "elite" one can be situated in the literary history with a fair level of precision. Migozzi explains that, in France,
popular and elite literatures only started to be clearly separated in the 19th century. Various other studies on popular literature in the West also describe its rise as a consequence of, and as a parallel phenomenon to the rise of alphabetization observed in different countries in the 19th century.\textsuperscript{272} According to scholars, it is at that time when the social groups considered as subaltern started to be able to read and thus to consume texts, that the real fracture was created between elite and popular literature, and that reading a specific type of texts became a vector of socio-cultural distinction. Before that period, knowing how to read was a sign of distinction between different social strata in itself, and the "masses" were probably not important consumers of written literature. Starting in the 19th century, elite literature thus came to be described as a "pure" artistic creation, and popular literature as being compromised by its relationship to the market and commercial incentives. The basis of that assumption was that, in order to please an important amount of readers, and thus to generate profit, popular literature had to be narratively simplistic, easy to read, and stereotypical.\textsuperscript{273} Novels also started to be described as dangerous reading for the population, because they supposedly encouraged the base instincts and improper behaviors of poorly educated groups, instead of promoting education and moral values.

In his extensive research dedicated to urban popular fiction from the 1910s and 1920s in China, Eugene Perry Link has observed a similar phenomenon, though it seems to have occurred later than in Europe.\textsuperscript{274} The researcher asserts that, before the beginning of the 20th century, novels were relatively expensive and written in a semi-classical language, thus making them inaccessible for the lower strata. At the beginning of the 20th century, alphabetization began to rise, especially in the lower classes, and cheaper books, as well as novels published in episodes in magazines, started to spread. For Link, there is a strong correlation between the success of popular fiction and the development of a wide alphabetized urban population in search of entertainment, such as the one growing in Shanghai at the beginning of the 20th century. At that time, the successful authors of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies fiction were qualified as popular, in a derogatory way, in contrast with the "traditional" cultural elite - poets, essayists, and so on - and with the authors participating in the May Fourth movement. For the later, Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies literature lacked political engagement and was thus frivolous. As it maintained intimate links to earlier types of fictions instead of drawing influences from foreign models, it was also seen as a vector of feudal ideas, and thus as dangerous.\textsuperscript{275}

If it is probably accurate to assert that, to some extent, different social groups consume different


\textsuperscript{273} MIGOZZI 2005, 98-99.

\textsuperscript{274} LINK 1981.

\textsuperscript{275} LINK 1981, 18-19.
types of literature, we do not consider it possible to strictly segregate a "popular" readership from an "elite" one. It is probable that the cultural elite of different epochs consumed - and still consumes - popular literature. Moreover, the "masses", who were supposed to be the target audience of popular works, have not always benefited from the economic means and alphabetization level to be frequent and zealous readers. At least until the second half of the 19th century, with the appearance of specialized editors producing cheaper books, popular novels were still relatively expensive, indicating that they were probably mostly read by the bourgeoisie, and, even after that time, the bourgeoisie might have continued to consume popular literature in their leisure time.  

In contemporary China, the association between poorly educated readers and popular literature seems all the more inaccurate because, as we have mentioned, consumers of popular literature and online literature are mostly urban and educated people enjoying the leisure time and financial means necessary to regularly buy books - digital and material - and to read them. Moreover, in many cases, consumption of popular novels has come to participate in the way readers distinguish themselves from others and gain social status. It is notably true for workplace novels which, as we have mentioned, are advertised as a literature written by white collars for white collars, and as a representation of their unique experience and enviable lifestyle. We can thus observe that the criteria of the low education and socio-economic level of the readership, frequently used to classify works as popular, is questionable, especially in the context of contemporary China.

5.1.4 Commercial Incentive, Format, and Trans-Media Presence

The opposition between popular literature and "serious" literature is often associated with an opposition between commercial and "pure" literature. According to that vision, the purpose of popular authors would be to make as much money as possible out of their writing, while serious authors would be motivated by their creativity and need for self-expression and would not pay attention to the material rewards that their works might bring them. In order to sell, popular authors thus have the reputation of adapting to readers' taste, and of being highly productive, both in terms of speed and quantity of writing which, as we have seen, is often perceived as a sign of low literary quality in the intellectual circles. Link describes popular authors at the beginning of the 20th century as follows:

This was the producer of mass commercial fiction, who wrote for the appetite of "average

276. ANGENOT 2013, 95.
277. ANGENOT 2013, 11.
readers" he could not see and did not know, but to whom he could become a popular hero and in whose numbers he measured his success.  

As a consequence of popular works' association with a vast readership of relatively low socio-economic status, and with their authors' will to make as much money as possible, they are often expected to be published in cheaper formats than works of serious literature. It seems that, in the 20th century in China, entertainment fiction was indeed regularly serialized in magazines, because it made it affordable for a bigger part of the population. Angenot also evokes a "crisis" brought about by an important augmentation of the printing and selling of newspapers, many of which published novels in episodes, in 19th century France. At the time, "serious artists" were opposed to this new literary market, potentially profitable, but requiring fast writing, printing and consuming, which was perceived as incompatible with artistic quality. 279 "Serious" authors thus distinguished themselves from "popular" writers by the publication of books, as opposed to the publication of serialized novels in newspapers and magazines. In contemporary China, we find a similar principle of distinction between the publication of books, usually seen as a symbol of recognition in the literary field, as opposed to online writing, which is free, open to anyone, and usually involves a faster creation process and a greater quantity of texts. However, the publication of a book can also be the sign of a work's success among online readers, thus blurring the boundary between serious books and popular online novels posted in episodes.

The commercial incentive attached to popular literature is often used to explain the existence of various adaptations of successful novels for other media, with the aim of creating as much revenue as possible out of a single narrative. Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies fiction was sometimes turned into comics, theater plays or movies. In contemporary China, works of online literature, and successful novels in general, are often adapted into TV series, movies, video games and various other media, making them omnipresent in the cultural landscape. This trans-media presence, and the important source of income it represents, is generally perceived as a sign of the "popular" nature of a work, despite the fact that novels from established authors are also occasionally adapted into movies and TV series.

In the present research, we consider it virtually impossible to distinguish in a definite manner between "commercial literature" and "pure" literature, at least in the context of contemporary China, where the great majority of authors are financially independent from the state and are thus required to pay some attention to their books' commercial success. It seems that publications exempt from commercial purpose have always been rare, as illustrated, for example, by the diffusion of Buddhist scriptures at the turn of the 20th century:

279. ANGENOT 2013, 37-38.
Moreover, the question of an author's incentive to write is always problematic to apprehend, as authors very rarely assert to be writing for money, whatever the truth might be. In the case of workplace novels, for example, authors never mention the quest for wealth and fame as a motivation for their writing in the prefaces and postfaces of their works. In general, when mentioning that question, they focus on their desire to share experiences and to help readers. The criteria of the format does not seem sustainable either in the contemporary Chinese market, as most books, considered as popular or not, are sold at a similar range of prices and reveal marketing efforts in the covers and overall design, even if there generally are differences between the appearance of books which would be considered "serious" and the ones perceived as belonging to "entertainment literature", as book design is usually specific to genres and targeted readers. Moreover, the publication of a book is no longer a definite mark of quality and recognition in the literary field and can also be the sign of great popular success online. As for the adaptions for other media, they still seem to be more frequent in the case of works associated with entertainment culture, but do not concern them exclusively.

5.2 Are Workplace Novels Popular?

We consider the different debates and reflections concerning popular literature presented above to be relevant to our study of workplace novels because these works embody most of the discussed issues and ambiguities. We have mentioned the importance of the nature of the readership in the definition of popular genres, and that the identity of workplace novels' target readers plays a major part in the advertising strategies of the category. Whereas, in the studies on popular culture mentioned above, scholars describe how the identity of the readership can be used as a testimony of the lack of quality and of intellectual challenge posed by a work - because its readership is supposed to belong to a subaltern class - in the case of workplace novels, the identity of the intended readers takes part in the elevation of the status of the works. Indeed, those readers are said to be college graduates and young white collars, groups benefitting from a relatively high social standing in China nowadays. In that sense, we can observe that workplace novels, while still fitting into the pattern of popular literature as a literature marked by its belonging to a particular social group - as

opposed to serious literature, supposedly universal - transcends the derogatory connotation of that specificity by becoming the "mass culture" of an "elite". In that sense, we consider them to be representative of Internet literature as a whole. We have mentioned that the works published on online reading websites are sometimes considered as popular on the sole ground that they belong to the realm of Internet literature. Moreover, Hockx's interview with a representative of the General Administration of Press and Publishing conducted in 2011 revealed that, to the eyes of the officials, online fiction is mostly read by "modestly-educated readership, which would explain the popularity of genre fiction such as romance, martial arts, and science fiction." However, our 2015 interviews with professionals involved in online literature revealed that the majority of users is composed by young and educated urban residents, thus questioning the supposedly low social and educational background of entertainment literature consumers.

We have also mentioned that a "popular readership" - which generally means a wide readership - is often associated, in common perceptions, to low literary quality. This is also true for genres that are supposedly rapidly written and consumed, like serialized novels published in magazines or novels posted online. However, if the plots of some workplace novels might, at times, seem simplistic and stereotypical, it would not be accurate to assert that they are always poorly written. The appreciation of the stylistic quality of the texts is problematic for non-native readers, but, nonetheless, it seems to us that the novels consulted for the purpose of the present research display a certain attention to style, proposing, for example, poetic descriptions of different places and, most commonly, of the changes in weather and landscape accompanying the passing of time.

Moreover, while some of the narratives might appear as dull, and some of the characters as lacking psychological depth, it should be remembered that these works are not solely intended to be entertaining, but that they are also described as useful practical guides for young professionals. The usefulness of the information contained in the novels is difficult to evaluate for researchers who do not benefit from experience of the workplaces described in the novels and who did not follow a typical Chinese school curriculum. However, we can observe that the content of many novels is mostly dedicated to descriptions of workplace situations and to explanations on how to handle them, to presentations of tools and tricks used in specific fields, to tips on how to answer to an email and on what to pay attention during a job interview, etc. We do not assert that these novels are useful for readers and consumed as such but, rather, that the content of some of them cannot be completely dismissed as lacking value in terms of transmission of knowledge. We also follow Link's theory when he explains that literature has different "uses" - moral elevation, practical knowledge, entertainment, esthetic enjoyment, etc. - and that the readers' expectations, and thus the evaluation of the work, are determined by the intended use of the text:

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281. HOCKX 2016, 217.
Those uses in turn produced a range of senses for what people who lived within the system meant by "good" when they referred to literary works.\textsuperscript{282}

We consider the association of the \textit{zhichang} category to the realm of popular literature - in studies as well as in our perception - to be the result of its belonging to a specific genre, and of the association of this genre with Internet literature, which is usually seen as purely entertaining. The assertion of the novels' usefulness and of the social and educational standing of the characters and the readership might represent attempts to counter the negative stereotypes associated with online fiction. We also consider it possible for the genre to have been disparaged, in the intellectual circles, by the commercial success of some novels it encompasses. We have mentioned that the Du Lala saga was adapted for various media, and that it was notably turned into a film. This version of the narrative was significantly less "serious" and "useful" than the books, and focused on consumption, fashion, and romance, which could have possibly altered the perception of the narrative, regardless of the version. Moreover, having gained popular and thus financial success, some authors might have been perceived as writing solely to make money. We have seen that authors never evoke commercial incentives when describing the genesis of their novels. Of course, we cannot consider their statements to be completely reliable, as asserting to write for money would probably not be beneficial for their image, but we do not consider this criterion to be sufficient to classify a work in the realm of popular literature, as it is very difficult to apprehend and evaluate.

As we have mentioned in the second chapter, the present research follows Margaret Wan's analysis in considering that a work is popular if it is easily and widely available in a given society. This availability can be indicated by different conjunctions of factors, for example the publication of one or more books, the existence of the story online and the subsequent appearance of fan-fictions, or the adaptation of the story for different media. Mentions of a specific narrative in the press and in academic studies participate in the diffusion of a story in all realms of society but we do not consider this aspect to be a \textit{sine qua non} characteristic of a popular work. Neither do we consider that a work necessarily needs to have been consumed by a very important amount of readers in order to be considered popular. Indeed, some genres, for example science fiction, can be classified as "niche literature", meaning that they are very successful among a limited scope of readers and consumers. They represent a widespread tendency observed in entertainment culture in the recent years, where consumption of a specific type of cultural product is used as a sign of distinction and as a marker of identity. The fact that these works are easily accessible in a variety of formats and on a variety of platforms - online reading websites, bookstores, cinemas, and the like - motivates us to consider them as a major cultural element of contemporary China. As their existence and characteristics are well known among the population, independently of how many people actually

\textsuperscript{282} LINK 2000, 331.
consume them, they can be qualified as popular, in the sense used by Margaret Wan. It is also in this meaning of the word that we consider workplace novels to be popular.
PART 2 - THE NOVELS

Introduction: General Presentation of the Corpus and Method of Analysis

When discussing our inventory in chapter one, we mentioned that workplace novels are numerous and show variations in terms of narrative structures, settings, or authors' identity, for example. This variety made it difficult to select a corpus that would be manageable but also representative. In the present research, we chose to limit the scope of the corpus to the feminine, coming of age workplace novels evoked in chapter one. This choice is supported by the fundamental differences separating the two subcategories. As we have seen in the first chapter, warfare novels focus on a team of employees rather than on a single hero or heroine. Moreover, they generally attempt to create suspense and to describe the ingenious strategies deployed by the team in order to defeat a rival company, rather than addressing the interiority, aspirations, difficulties and professional development of a main character usually difficult to identify. In this type of novel, the main enemy is an outsider of the company or at least of the team. It is generally ill defined and abstract, even when it is embodied in a particular individual, and it often uses illegal or immoral methods to defeat the main team. Against this enemy, the company-hero - or the team-hero - is represented as cohesive and homogenous, and its members as displaying loyalty, mutual help, and righteousness toward one another, with virtually no representation of internal conflicts.

While this subgenre does not lack interest, the elements which attracted our attention in the coming of age subcategory - novels as guides to progress at work and in life, representations of individual goals, motivations and struggles, as well as depictions of a company's hierarchy, rivalries, gender inequalities, and potential abuses - are generally absent in warfare workplace novels, making it difficult to create a coherent corpus integrating the two subcategories. Moreover, our research addresses the question of the similarities observed between some novels from the zhichang category and official discourses on the population's quality and the building of a harmonious society. As masculine novels do not describe processes of learning, coming of age, and self-betterment, they are not suitable to apprehend these themes. Finally, we consider that the gender-related division of the genre reveals a feminization of ordinariness, lack of experience, immaturity, and need for self-betterment. This shows that women are the preferred examples of the processes necessary to raise the population's quality and build a harmonious society, and that they occupy an important position in the government's civilizing project, thus supporting our interest for the feminine branch of the genre, despite the fact that it is quantitatively less important than masculine novels.

This decision implied the exclusion of the bestseller Lose&Win - belonging to the warfare subcategory - from the text analysis section, and we were thus left with two of the three bestsellers
of the category, *Du Lala Go!* volumes one to four, and *Ups and Downs* volumes one and two, already introduced in chapter one. In order to select other novels of the same subcategory, we referred to the lists of works mentioned in the Chinese academic articles dedicated to workplace novels. We observed that the novels evoked by researchers were usually the same, making the selection relatively easy and merely limited by the availability of the books in stores, material and online. Through that method, we have selected the two novels generally presented as the earliest examples of the coming of age workplace novels, Tan Yiping's *Yi ge waiqi nü mishu de riji* 《一个外企女秘书的日记》, *Diary of a Foreign-Owned Company Secretary*, first published in 2003 and reedited in 2004, and *Nü hailing zhichang riji* 《女白领职场日记》, *Professional Diary of a White-Collar Woman*, published in 2005. Still following the examples of coming of age workplace novels mentioned in Chinese researchers' articles, we have also selected Qin Yuxi's *Zhichang xiaoxia bianshen ji* 《职场小虾变身记》, *Account of a Workplace Little Shrimp's Transformation*, published in 2014.

It appeared to us that all the novels mentioned in Chinese articles as belonging to the "Du Lala style workplace novels" were written by women, thus supporting our division of the category according to gender. From a narrative point of view, all these novels seem to follow the same pattern, describing how a young and inexperienced girl joins a foreign-owned company and tries to thrive in this new environment. All of the authors of our corpus are also said to be proficient in the field of work they choose to describe, and their professional background is mentioned somewhere on or in the books. The selected novels also hold the advantage of being regularly distributed in time when apprehended along with *Du Lala Go!* and *Ups and Downs*, which were published between 2007 and 2011, and 2008 and 2009 respectively. The fact that the year 2009 produced more novels of our sample than the other years also seems representative of the tendencies described when discussing the inventory created for the purpose of this research. However, we were not able to gather information about the popular success of these works, and they did not figure among the best sales of the most commonly used online bookstores, Dang Dang and Amazon China. The researchers mentioning them did not provide any data or analysis on the novels and seemed to merely mention

them in order to illustrate that workplace novels were numerous. Scholars do not explain why they mention these novels rather than others either, but we can infer that their choice was based on the visibility of those works in the cultural landscape of the time, and thus assume that these works were relatively successful and well-known.

To complete this first selection, we decided to include a novel conforming to the narrative pattern and author's identity described above and which had also been recently well ranked online on reading websites in terms of sales numbers. Through this method, we selected Liujing Bingbing's 六井冰冰 Li Bingbing fendou ji 《厉冰冰奋斗记》, Account of Li Bingbing's Struggle, published in 2011. As mentioned above, this novels was also written by a female author who is said to be professionally experienced. Moreover, it holds the advantage of displaying a slightly different work setting and main character. Li Bingbing, heroine of the eponymous novel, is a poorly educated girl from the countryside, which differentiates her from other workplace novels' heroines - who usually are urban college degree holders. Moreover, her career is set in a legal firm, while the other novels of our corpus set their plots in the foreign business realm. These nine novels written by business women and depicting the professional development and coming of age of young heroines compose the primary corpus of the present research.

In this part, we will propose a text analysis of the novels mentioned above. We will start by examining the most visible elements of the novels' paratext, namely the writing printed on the book covers and advertising bands, as well as the prefaces, postfaces, different appendixes and overall layouts of the novels. In this context, we will particularly focus on the authors' identity and background, literary as well as professional, and observe how they are used to advertise the novels and to establish them as useful career handbooks. The sections focusing on the authors will be based on their presentations printed on the inside covers of the novels. When necessary, these presentations will be completed by general information available online. We consider that these basic elements are the most easily available information about the authors and thus the most likely to be known by the readers and to influence their apprehension and evaluation of the books. An in-depth analysis of the author's interviews - available for Li Ke and Cui Manli - as well as blogs, microblogs and webpages - available for Tan Yiping, Cui Manli and Xiao V - exceed the scope of the present research.

The extra-textual elements surrounding the novels will be used to determine what "reading pact" is established with the reader, as we consider that the explicit belonging of the novels to a specific genre and the different texts and quotes to be read around the narrative itself influence readers' expectations, reading experience and evaluation of the novels. Regarding that matter, we will base

our analysis on the theories of Philippe Lejeune, which distinguish three different reading pacts: the
"autobiographical pact", asserting that the author, the narrator and the main character are the same
person,\textsuperscript{287} the "fictional pact" - or "novelistic pact" - , where the author and the main character have
different names and which states that the text is a fiction,\textsuperscript{288} and finally, the "referential pact" "[...] in
which are included a definition of the field of the real that is involved and a statement of the modes
and the degree of resemblance to which the text lays claim."\textsuperscript{289} As we will see, the workplace
novels' reading pact generally blends referential, fictional, and autobiographical elements.

In \textit{The Autobiographical Pact}, Lejeune explains that it is preferable to define a literary genre
according to the "contract" it establishes with the reader, rather than to its formal characteristics.\textsuperscript{290}
This method holds the advantage of allowing the apprehension of a category with acceptance for its
variations and its evolution, and to avoid the establishment of a strict set of norms and standards,
which is usually cumbersome when put in practical use. Thus, in the following chapter, we will try
to emphasize the characteristic shared by most workplace novels, which is precisely the "contract"
they establish with their readers, through their narratives but also their paratext. This contract states
that the novels are realistic, in the sense that they describe plausible professional environments and
common situations one might encounter in the workplace, and thus that they are useful, as a source
of concrete information about a specific sector of employment. This contract is based on the idea
that the readers are relatively young and professionally inexperienced, and that they want to pursue
a career in the field described by the novel, thus explaining their interest in the practical information
conveyed by the books, which is usually not taught in school.\textsuperscript{291} The authors, in turn, are generally
described as experienced and proficient businesspeople, which endows the novels with an aura of
authenticity and authority. As the writers are said to have succeeded in their careers, following their
advice can reasonably be perceived as an insurance of encountering success oneself.

We find Lejeune's way of defining literary genres extremely relevant for our object of study, as it
emphasizes the importance of the readers' attitudes and opinions in the definition of the texts:

\begin{center}
By taking as the starting point the position of the reader, (which is mine, the only one I know
well), I have the chance to understand more clearly how texts function (the differences in
how they function) since they were written for us, readers, and in reading them, it is we who
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{287} LEJEUNE 1992, 26.
\textsuperscript{288} LEJEUNE 1992, 29.
\textsuperscript{289} LEJEUNE 1992, 35. For English quotation: https://edocs.uis.edu/Departments/LIS/Course_Pages/
LNT501/RN/Rosina%27s_on-ground_course_storage/Rosina%27s_LNT_501_Readings/
On%20Autobiography%20pp3-30%20%20by%20Philippe%20Lejeune.pdf (consulted on January 11th,
2018).
\textsuperscript{290} LEJEUNE 1996, 8.
\textsuperscript{291} See, for example, LE Tian 乐天. “Zhichang xiaoshuo nengfou zhiyin women qianjin?” “职场小说能否指引我们前进?” [Can Workplace Novels Guide Us As We Go Forward?], \textit{Shenghuo xian shi xian shuo},
2009, 2009/06, pp.84-86, or ZHANG 2012, 006.
make them function.\(^{292}\)

As we have seen in the first chapter of part one, the readership has become highly important in the creation of contemporary Chinese novels. First of all, as novels have come to be considered as consumption goods and have become potentially lucrative, the readers' tastes and opinions are taken into careful consideration - through market studies and surveys of online reading websites, for example - in order to predict what will sell well.\(^{293}\) Moreover, in the case of Internet literature, it seems that direct interactions between authors and readers, allowed and encouraged by the structures of most websites - which provide comment boxes, awards systems, forums, and so on - play an important role in the writing process. Online novels are often posted in episodes, and the reading process can thus be contemporary and parallel to the writing process. For example, if we examine the comments following the first chapters of *Lose&Win*\(^{294}\) or *Ups and Downs*\(^{295}\) on the forum Tianya Club, we can see that the readers encourage the authors to pursue their writing or ask questions about some elements of the plot. Adopting the reader's point of view when apprehending the texts seems all the more relevant to the present research because of the importance given to the identity of the readership in the works' advertisement.

We will then focus on the novels' main characters according to Propp's categories of seeker (the heroine), helpers, and villains. Finally, we will apprehend the overall narrative structure of the stories, shaped by the professional development of the heroines, as well as the expression of the heroines' aspirations, goals and motivations, giving purpose and direction to the novels. To do so, we will again refer to Propp's theories, presented in the second chapter, and use the concepts of initial situation, lack, beginning counteraction, struggle and victory. In order to emphasize the chronological evolution of the genre, the novels will be classified according to the year of publication of their first volume.

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293. See, for example, KONG 2005.
Chapter 1: Yi ge waiqi nü mishu de riji 《一个外企女秘书的日记》, Tan Yiping 谭一平

1.1 General Information

The novel *Diary of a Foreign-Owned Company Secretary* was first published in 2003 by the Xue yuan chubanshe 学苑出版社. The version used in the present research is a 2004 reedition by the same editor. The novel counts 355 pages and is organized as a diary - the narrator and heroine are thus the same person. Through a series of anecdotes loosely connected to each other, the novel describes a young secretary's path towards professional experience and growth. In this story, the main narrative line is difficult to identify as it is composed of short scenes that can be read and understood independently from each other. According to a presentation to be read on the inside cover at the end of Tan Yiping's second novel, which will be analyzed below, the present story was first uploaded on the websites Sina and Sohu, where it accumulated more than twenty-thousand clicks.

1.2 Paratext

1.2.1 Author's Presentation

The 2004 reedition of Tan Yiping's 2003 novel used in the present research is the only volume of our corpus not containing any information about the author.

1.2.2 Preface and Postface

The preface to Tan Yiping's first novel mentions a few characteristics of the secretary profession, asserting, for example, that seventy percent of a secretary's job is to handle human relationships in the workplace, especially with superiors, and that, despite the low hierarchical position of secretaries, their job requires talent and hard work. The author also tries to provide the readers with professional advice, notably through a metaphorical comparison between pangolins and foxes. The former is said to work all day digging holes without caring about, or being distracted by its surroundings, while the later likes to wander in the mountains, where it looks at the moon and imagines how it could reach it. The author then explains that secretaries cannot be like pangolins, working all day without reflecting on what they are doing or on their aspirations because, while they will probably avoid getting fired, they will never progress. However, secretaries cannot be like foxes either, spending all day thinking about their career development and elaborating strategies to achieve their goals instead of working. Tan Yiping then states:
In conclusion, the author believes that a great secretary should be grounded and pragmatic and have a hard-working spirit, like a pangolin, but that she should also understand her surroundings and take time to reflect, like a fox. This is the only way to become an outstanding secretary.  

The preface also asserts the realistic and useful nature of the novel:

These are all real and vivid stories that a foreign company secretary named Yu Lei [the heroine of the novel] encounters every day, at work and in her personal life, and which she shares with the readers through her diary. Like a novel, her story is familiar, moving, lively and interesting, like a MBA teaching manual, it proposes an analysis of different situations and can be used as a practical working guide.

And:

The biggest particularities of this book are that it proposes brand-new ideas on how secretaries should handle human interactions, that it is ahead of its time, and that it is useful!

The author concludes the preface with an invitation to readers to ask her questions about the secretary profession. She provides her phone number, email address and website to make this contact possible.

As we can see, in the preface, the author describes her own narrative as close to reality - which is also illustrated by the use of the diary format - and useful. These qualificatives have become the distinctive mark and branding of later workplace novels. In the preface, Tan Yiping seems to occupy a position of authority to transmit knowledge about a particular profession to the readers, who are invited to read the book both as a novel and as a teaching manual, even if her professional status and personal experience are not described in detail as is the case in later novels. The authenticity of the novel is asserted by its association with a diary, even if it is the diary of a fictional character. As the book does not contain an author's presentation, it seems that the text's legitimacy as a guide is based solely on the author's assertions available in the preface. Through this element we can infer that, in 2004, Tan Yiping might have been famous enough to render her presentation in the novel unnecessary, or that her status as an author was sufficient to legitimize the transmission of knowledge to the readers.

296. TAN 2004, 2.
297. TAN 2004, 1.
298. TAN 2004, 2.
1.2.3 Cover, Band and Layout

The cover of Tan Yiping's first novel is black with a drawing of an office in blue tones and the silhouette of a woman about to enter the "manager's office" (jingli shi 管理室). On the back cover, we can read the comparison between secretaries, pangolins and foxes already addressed when discussing the preface. The novel is divided into twelve parts, each corresponding to a month, and into sixty-eight chapters introduced by saying "a certain day in March" (sanyue mouri 三月某日), "a certain day in April" (siyue mouri 四月某日), etc. This division supports the association of the novel with a diary, as asserted by the author in the preface. Each page of the book is decorated with a black and white print of four roses, and each of the chapters ends with a print of a different flower in addition. Each of the twelve parts is introduced by a drawing of a girl reminiscent of the manga esthetic. These sketches, different each time, do not seem to have any correlation to the content of the novel. The end of the book proposes a "list of important reference books" (zhuyao cankao shumu 主要参考书目), with the titles of two Japanese novels - the first of which has been translated by the author - Mishu changshi 《秘书常识》, Secretary's General Knowledge, and Mishu rumen 《秘书入门》, Secretary's Elementary Course, by Natsume Michitoshi, published in 1984 and 1987 respectively.

The list mentioned above is the only paratextual element supporting the seriousness of the preface and the narrative as a whole. The rest of the layout, feminine and juvenile, seems to indicate that the target readership of this novel is mainly constituted by young women. We can observe that the paratext is not very accentuated in the case of this novel, its authenticity and its usefulness seem to be only supported by the author's preface, the list of reference books at the end, and the general layout identifying the novel as a diary. Through the description of the profession in the preface, we can infer that, at the time of the book's publication, to be a secretary in a foreign company was probably still rare and seen as a very desirable profession - foreign companies started to massively enter China in the 1990s, only a decade or so before the publication of the present novel.299 Moreover, according to the preface, this kind of novel was uncommon in 2003-2004. This might explain why a book teaching how to master this new and fascinating profession was perceived as attractive and did not need very developed marketing strategies to sell well.

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1.3 Characters

1.3.1 The Heroine

In Tan Yiping's novel, the narrator and the main character, Yu Lei, are a single entity. The first chapter of the novel begins and ends as follows:

Today is a commemorative day. I was hired by this company exactly two years ago, officially becoming a foreign company secretary. As if it was arranged intentionally, today I have to pass a progress evaluation to determine if I meet the requirements and standards of the company. 300

And:

If today had been a test of my capacities as a secretary, according to the standards of the profession, I wouldn't have obtained more than sixty points out of one hundred. Let's try harder! Let's do it! 301

We can observe that the first information we obtain about the main character is that she has been working as a secretary in a foreign firm for two years and that she still has a lot to learn about the profession. Throughout the story, we understand that Yu Lei is hard-working, polite, modest and helpful. In the fifth chapter, her efforts are rewarded by a promotion making her the personal secretary of one of the company's directors. The eighth chapter provides one of the rare concrete pieces of information about Yu Lei when a journalist comes to the company and asks to take her photograph for an article, because she looks like the heroine of the TV series Xiandai dushi liren 现代都市丽人, Beautiful People of the Modern City, which allows us to think that she is beautiful. 302

Throughout the book, we also understand that Yu Lei lives with her parents and that she often turns to her father for advice. In some chapters, she encounters old friends, but the relationships are not explored in detail. In the fourteenth chapter, we learn that Yu Lei attended a specialized secretary school, and, in chapter eighteen, that she speaks English and Japanese. In the following chapter, we are told that she refuses to take part in office gossip, which is a demonstration of her honesty and morality. Later, we understand that, while most people apparently see the secretary profession as a way to enter a good company and be promoted to another position, Yu Lei seems to consider it as a suitable and honorable life-long employment:

No! I refuse to believe that to be a secretary is only suitable when you are young. 303

Through different hints, we also learn that the heroine keeps studying about the secretary

300. TAN 2004, 3.
301. TAN 2004, 8.
302. This TV show does not seem to actually exist.
profession, as well as about different fields she judges relevant to her job. By reading professional books as well as Classics, she thus aims at ceaseless self-improvement.

In chapter twenty-nine, Yu Lei is mentioned by her female colleagues as an example of appropriate outfit and makeup for secretaries. Many occurrences in the book describe appearance as very important for this profession because secretaries have the responsibility to maintain the company's image in front of clients and because, working with older men, they should maintain a feminine, discreet, modest and conservative appearance and behavior in order to be taken seriously. In the fortieth chapter, through Yu Lei's description of the most important requirements to be a good secretary according to her, the reader is given a glimpse of her personality:

The basic qualities that you need to be a good secretary or a good stewardess are the same: you should be introverted, patient, you shouldn't be arrogant nor bossy, and you should cultivate other outstanding qualities. These are two professions requiring us to go back to our feminine nature, to the indulgence and kindness of a mother's love.\(^{304}\)

In the case of Yu Lei, these qualities seem to be both actualized - as the book often implies that she is a good secretary - and aspirational - as she ceaselessly pursues self-improvement. In chapter fifty-four, she indeed asserts that her discreet and sociable personality fits the secretary profession perfectly.

In the fifty-fifth chapter, Yu Lei displays her filial piety when she decides to spend her end of the year bonus to buy presents for her parents. In chapter fifty-seven, we obtain vague information about her love life, when she confesses that she has feelings for a man she saw a few times on public transportation but to whom she never dared to speak. She explains that, if secretaries have to be rational and in control of their emotions at work, they are as romantic as other girls in their personal lives. Chapter fifty-eight evokes Yu Lei's literary activities:

After work, Mary accompanied me to the store to buy a diary and efficiency manuals. I take the efficiency manuals with me everywhere and I use them to take notes. Every night, I write about my thoughts on work and life in the diary.\(^{305}\)

She then explains that she has been writing diaries everyday since the second year of junior high school and that having a professional journal is very useful. She asserts that writing is an important part of her life, as it allows her to think back to some events and to evaluate her progression. It is also beneficial to a healthy state of mind. In the sixtieth chapter, we learn that Yu Lei majored in literature. The following chapter emphasizes that everything has a concrete utility in her mind. For example, she goes to a folkloric art exhibition and explains that this activity is useful to alleviate professional stress and to foster creativity. It is also important to accumulate knowledge outside the

\(^{304}\) TAN 2004, 214.

\(^{305}\) TAN 2004, 301.
profession.

The sixty-second chapter introduces a few criteria used to choose secretaries: most importantly, their superiors have to feel comfortable in their presence, which implies that they should have a pleasant appearance and behavior; they also need to be competent and loyal, to the company, but also to the country and its laws. One of Yu Lei's superiors proposes a loyalty test to the secretaries and the heroine obtains the highest score with ninety-nine points out of one hundred. In chapter sixty-five, we learn that two new secretaries are about to be hired, and that Yu Lei is now the most senior secretary of the team, giving her the responsibility of guiding and teaching the others. Later, the heroine meets the person who originally hired her and who emphasizes how much experience she has gained. At the beginning of the following chapter, we understand that she is about to replace Meng, the oldest and most experienced secretary of the company, and that she is scared that she does not have enough experience to do so. Meng encourages her and compliments her professional abilities. In the last chapter, Yu Lei becomes the personal secretary of another director.

We can observe that Yu Lei is depicted as a hard-working and competent secretary. She is also discreet, righteous and observes filial piety. She apparently considers the secretary profession to be a perfect fit for her personality and does not seem to be interested in being promoted to another position, even though she works tirelessly on her self-improvement, professional as well as personal. We consider that Yu Lei's identity is mainly and primarily defined by her professional occupation, a hypothesis supported by the fact that numerous passages of the book start with the sentence zuowei mishu, bixu... 作为秘书必须……， as a secretary, you should..., which links most of Yu Lei's behaviors and principles to her job. Moreover, her qualities are always described in relation to how useful they are to be a good secretary.

1.3.2 Positive Characters, or Helpers
Tan Yiping's novel does not explore the heroine's relationships with any other character in detail, making it difficult to identify helpers. Most of the characters appear episodically in the novel to share their knowledge with Yu Lei - the more experienced secretary named Meng, the "section chief" (kezhang 科长), or her father, for example - or to be taught by her, as it is the case for her younger colleagues. Yu Lei seems to gather knowledge from various sources and, even when a character appears a few times throughout the story, the relationship is not described as providing continuous help and support like it will be the case in other novels to be explored in this research.

1.3.3 Negative Characters, or Villains
This novel does not depict any villain. No character seems to be jealous of the heroine or to try to harm her. At some point in the story, Yu Lei is jealous of Jenny, one of her colleagues, because she
is offered a better job opportunity. However, this event does not trigger a long-lasting rivalry or resentment between the two characters as Yu Lei perceives it as a teaching experience making her realize that she has to work harder and that jealousy is a negative and useless feeling. The novel uses different characters to illustrate negative behaviors - smoking, disdaining people, having affairs with colleagues, changing jobs too often, being careless and sloppy, etc. - which are contrasted with the heroine's appropriateness, but these characters do not attempt to harm the heroine or her career. This depiction of exclusively peaceful work relationships will disappear in most of the later narratives of the category, which will further accentuate professional competitiveness.

1.4 Narrative Structure

As mentioned above, the initial situation introduces the heroine, Yu Lei, who was hired as a secretary in a foreign company two years before the beginning of the book. The chapter continues with an anecdote telling how she fails to correctly explain to a client how to reach the company's offices, located in Beijing. She is then scolded by the section chief who explains to her and her colleagues the importance of being able to guide clients through the city's public transportation system. Yu Lei's mistake represents the lack function in this narrative, as she realizes that she is not good enough at her job yet and that she has to keep learning and improving. Indeed, the end of the chapter emphasizes the importance for secretaries to ceaselessly study, progress, and develop. We have mentioned that the first chapter ends with Yu Lei's self-evaluation, when she decides that she does not deserve more than sixty points out of one hundred, and by her saying:

Let's try harder! Let's do it!306

This marks the beginning counteraction, as the heroine is determined to put more effort into becoming a better secretary, which seems to be her goal.

The following chapters constitute Yu Lei's struggle. Each chapter is dedicated to an anecdote narrating her work experiences and her reflections on how to handle the situations in the best way possible. Each chapter thus represents a step of the heroine's journey towards self-improvement. They also hold the didactic function of teaching the reader a principle of the secretary profession through a concrete example. Sometimes, the lesson is proposed by Yu Lei's reflections or her explanations to a younger and less experienced colleague, sometimes through the scolding and teaching of her superiors. The basic idea of the novel is that secretaries should be polite, helpful and kind, that they should be aware of everything that happens in the company and have basic knowledge of its different activities, to know the city and the country well in order to advise clients

306. TAN 2004, 8.
and to organize business trips, and, most importantly, to know how to maintain proper relationships with all their colleagues, superiors and clients. The tone of the novel is always uplifting and encouraging, promoting hard work, ceaseless learning and pursuit of self-betterment.

The narrative implies that the heroine's purpose is to become an ever-better secretary, but not to climb the ladder of the company to reach other positions, as is the case in later workplace novels. This ceaseless quest for self-improvement is depicted as necessary in an increasingly competitive work environment where one's position is never secure nor stable:

We work in a renowned company that has a good reputation, we benefit from good working conditions and good treatment, and we also have a lot of opportunities of promotion and formation. As a consequence, numerous outsiders are envious of our position, and many insiders are ready to step on us to climb the ladder, because with every step, you earn more! In this situation, how could we not sense the crisis and feel under pressure? 307

And later:

Following society's development, the competition between enterprises has intensified, and the companies' leaders have to deal with more and more pressure and responsibilities. Thus, their expectations towards secretaries have naturally grown higher as well and secretaries are also facing the challenge posed by increasingly harsh times! How can we face this challenge without self-confidence? Self-confidence allows us to take initiative, and to display our intelligence, talent and wisdom. Initiatives, intelligence, talent and wisdom, will allow us to face all challenges. 308

Yu Lei also evokes the fact that China joined the WTO and that it triggered important socio-economic changes in the country and in her work. She stresses the importance for secretaries "to align with international standards" (yu guoji jiegui 与国际接轨). 309

Towards the end of the novel, in chapter fifty-four, Yu Lei reflects on her career choices when she meets an old friend, Zhu Li, who does not understand why she became a secretary because she was an outstanding student:

[...] Would it make me happy to be a secretary for all my life? Would my life be worthless if I don't follow Wu Shihong's example, 310 as Zhu Li said? No! My mind firmly dispelled this thought as soon as it appeared. Secretaries are like managers, their work encompasses

308. TAN 2004, 197.
309. TAN 2004, 257.
310. According to the Bloomberg website, Wu Shihong is a famous business woman who was chosen as one of the "Most Powerful Business Women in the World, Year 2002" by Fortune magazine. She is also the author of the book "Up Against The Wind: Microsoft, IBM and I", referenced in the Chinese text translated here, which was published in 1999 and became a bestseller in China. See https://www.bloomberg.com/research/stocks/people/person.asp?personId=35428251&privcapId=2909294 (last consulted on March 13th, 2018).
modern society's economy and even politics, they are the necessary result of development, and they are valuable. I like to be a secretary. [...] This job does not only make me happy, but, more importantly, I think it fits me because I like challenges, but I am naturally discreet! I like that my job is based on human contact, that everything is standardized, that my position and salary are stable. People might say that becoming a secretary was the most pragmatic choice for me, but it was also my ideal choice.\(^\text{311}\)

Her reflections continue as follow:

Sadly, many people think that professional success is equivalent to life success. Moreover, for them, only extremely rich people like Bill Gates count as having reached professional success, so they don't care about what they like and what fits their personality, they go after what's fashionable and fight to be the second or the third Bill Gates. Most people pursue these hopeless endeavors all their lives without any result. Some of them will definitely reach success but the price to pay is so high that their whole life is usually a mess.\(^\text{312}\)

This chapter reiterates the heroine's goal of becoming better and better at a job she likes, and which fits her personality.

Throughout the book, when Yu Lei encounters difficulties or failure, her reaction is always to encourage herself to keep learning and work harder to not repeat a mistake or to be offered better opportunities. The last four chapters of the novel represent the heroine's victory, as they describe how she becomes the most experienced secretary of the team - giving her the mentor role formerly endorsed by Meng - and the personal secretary of director Jiang, which is apparently a form of promotion. However, as the lack felt by Yu Lei at the beginning of the novel is to not be good enough at her job and her goal to always keep improving, we can assume that the lack will never really be liquidated, and the goal never really reached, giving a sort of open ending to the novel.

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312. TAN 2004, 284.
Chapter 2: Nü bailing zhichang riji 《女白领职场日记》, Tan Yiping 谭一平

2.1 General Information

*Professional Diary of a White-Collar Woman* was published in 2005 by Huaxia Press (*Huaxia chubanshe* 华夏出版社). It is often presented as a sequel to *Diary of a Foreign-Owned Company Secretary* but, despite the fact that the heroines of the two novels have the same name, the narratives do not seem to be related. This 265 page novel is also organized as a diary and describes how a young college graduate recently hired in a company makes her first steps in the professional world and on the path towards independence and adulthood. Here again, the novel is composed of different anecdotes, making the main story line difficult to identify.

2.2 Paratext

2.2.1 Author's Presentation

In Tan's second novel, an author's presentation is printed on the inside cover at the beginning of the book. Through that short text, we learn that she is a professional researcher, writer, lecturer and trainer on questions regarding the workplace and white collars (*zhuanmen congshi xiandai zhichang ji bailing wenti de yanjiu, xiezuo, yanjiang he peixun* 专门从事现代职场及白领问题的研究、写作、演讲和培训). Apparently, she is also a figure of authority in the domain of research about human resources in China (*guonei renli ziyuan lingyu quanwei renshi* 国内人力资源研究领域权威人士). As for her literary activities, she is said to have translated two Japanese novels concerning the secretary profession - one of which is apparently used as teaching material for aspiring secretaries in China - before starting to write her own novels. According to the Sina website, she graduated highschool in 1976, before spending three years in the countryside and entering university in 1979, meaning that she was probably born in the late 1950s.\(^\text{313}\)

2.2.2 Preface and Postface

Tan Yiping's second novel does not contain any preface or postface.

2.2.3 Cover, Band and Layout

The cover of Tan Yiping's second book is divided between a black and white photograph of a woman working on her laptop, slightly blurred, in the background, and the picture of a cup of tea in sepia in the foreground. The title is printed in glittery pink. The back cover is white with pink inscriptions explaining that the book is a "manual-style novel" (jiaocai shi xiaoshuo 教材式小说), for the following groups: white collars, university students about to enter the workforce, and people currently looking for a job, especially in foreign companies. The following inscriptions assert that the book explains how to rapidly fit the requirements of one's professional role, how to deal with the complicated personal relationships at play in the workplace, how to win one's superior's trust and appreciation, and how to face an unknown environment and difficult clients. Finally, the last inscription explains that the novel is a sequel to *Diary of a Foreign-Owned Company Secretary*. The two books are described as "fictionalized manuals" (xiaoshuohua de jiaocai 小说化的教材), and said to reflect the everyday tasks of white collars. They are both said to be humorous, to allow identification and to motivate readers to reflect on their past mistakes and to reinvent themselves. This second book is then said to encompass a wider scope than its prequel because its intended reader group is more diversified - it does not target only secretaries but "all the white collars who hope to deal with their work with a peaceful mind and pursue brilliance".

The inside cover at the beginning of the book gives the author's presentation discussed above. The inside cover at the end of the book explains that *Diary of a Foreign-Owned Company Secretary* was first uploaded on the websites Sina and Sohu, as mentioned in the former chapter. Tan Yiping's first novel is said to be "China's first manual-style novel" (Zhongguo di yi bu jiaocai shi xiaoshuo 中国第一部教材式小说), and its heroine to be "Modern China's first secretary" (Zhongguo xiandai di yi wenmi 中国现代第一文秘). The second novel is said to follow the same style as the first one, to also focus on the workplace and to also have an enlightenment and teaching purpose. The description of the second opus continues as follows:

Through a series of lively examples organized like a diary, the novel transmits quick, efficient and practical rules to survive in a foreign company. The book is interesting and moving and can be considered as an essential manual for beautiful white collars working in foreign companies and as a laissez-passer for those who look for a job in that sector.

Finally, the presentation mentions that the author is currently discussing the adaptation of the first book into a TV series, which would be China's first workplace series. However, we did not find mention of the existence of this show online. *Diary of a White-Collar Woman* is concluded by a short section titled "Questions to test white collars' abilities and standard answers" (Bailing nenglı ceshi ti ji biaozhun da'an 白领能力测试题及标准答案). This section, contrarily to the rest of the book, is written using the third person and contains three questions, each followed by five possible answers and an explanation about the correct one. These questions concern the handling of
company's secrets, when to take initiatives and when to ask for one's superior's opinion, and how to communicate one's superior's refusal to a client.

We can observe that this book conserves the feminine look of its predecessor, with the pink touches, the woman's face on the cover, and the mention, on the inside cover at the end of the book, that the novel is a guide for "beautiful white collars" (bailing lirenren 白领丽人们), a term referring exclusively to women. However, the juvenile impression given to the first novel by the flower and manga prints has not been conserved here and the second book takes on a more serious and mature appearance. The paratext of this second novel contains more information about the author and the genesis of her works, which might illustrate the rise of her popularity and thus of the power of her image as a marketing instrument, or the beginning of the trend of using the author's professional background as a selling argument. Moreover, the paratext emphasizes more strongly than in the case of the first book the didactic dimension of the novel and its use as a workplace manual, probably illustrating the beginning of that trend in workplace novels' advertisement around 2005.

2.3 Characters

2.3.1 The Heroine

In Tan Yiping's second novel, the heroine is also named Yu Lei and seems to share personal characteristics with the heroine of the first novel. However, the stories are not narratively related. This seems to indicate that Tan Yiping's heroine is a young female professional's archetype which can be adapted and used in different plots. The first chapter, titled Bi'an 彼岸, The other shore, explains that Yu Lei, who studied Chinese literature in college, just finished two weeks of professional training and is about to start her new job as a white collar:

I'm finally a white collar, I feel so free!314

We understand that she still lives with her parents who prepared a celebration dinner for the occasion. Apparently, this first job is perceived as a rite of passage between school and society, and between childhood and adulthood:

My dad said with emotion: "Xiaolei, this time we are sending you into society."315

Despite the association between white-collar identity and independence, we also understand, in the following chapter, that Yu Lei respects and conforms to the company's rules:

Many new employees have troubles adapting to the company's rules and regulations. As they just graduated from university and were used to a free and undisciplined life, it is

314. TAN 2005, 1.
315. TAN 2005, 2.
understandable that they have ambiguous feelings about these rules. But we have to face reality, how could a company work without rules?316

According to Yu Lei, to not respect professional rules signifies not taking one's career seriously.

The fifth chapter, titled Di er zhong shenfen 第二种身份, Second identity, focuses on the importance of employees' appearance and behavior because they represent the company. Yu Lei describes how her new job is changing her:

I suddenly feel depressed. The white-collar identity is making us more and more insipid. From the clothes we wear to the way we speak, we enter in a slow but steady process of uniformisation, standardization and stylization. It has not taken long for me to understand that, behind the elegance of the life of white collars working in fancy office buildings, which I was longing for, is hidden a lot of loneliness, exhaustion and helplessness.317

In chapter seven, we learn that the heroine follows online classes to become more proficient at work:

With the progress of time, we can now study whenever and wherever we want. We have to ceaselessly study to keep up with the progress of our times.318

The ninth chapter proposes a contrast between Rene - one of Yu Lei's colleagues - who spends a lot of money shopping for herself, and Yu Lei who is more reasonable and conservative in her use of money - she does not trust credit cards, saves for her wedding, and considers that having money on the side is indispensable considering the instability and competitiveness of the job market. She emphasizes the importance of financial independence:

As a white collar, you should be completely independent. Economically, you should not rely on anyone because a strong economic basis is indispensable to protect your dignity. Only by being financially independent can you fully enjoy your success.319

Chapter sixteen emphasizes Yu Lei's respect for rules and her morality. She considers that uncivil behaviors are dangerous, even when they seem unimportant, because they lead to more uncivil behaviors. Moreover, civil behavior is associated with self-cultivation:

The purpose of civilized behavior is not to show off but to practice one's own virtue for oneself.320

She explains that contemporary society is full of opportunities and temptations and that everyone should be careful because it is easy to slide from taking advantage of the system to corruption. The

318. TAN 2005, 32.
319. TAN 2005, 44.
320. TAN 2005, 72.
twenty-second chapter emphasizes Yu Lei's moral values when she warns the reader against the threat competitiveness represents for morality. She considers that, ultimately, one should sacrifice one's own benefit for one's team or company, which will necessarily be rewarded at some point in the future. In the twenty-fifth chapter, Yu Lei links her high moral standards with her white-collar identity:

White collars are the elite of society. As society's elite, we have to be more knowledgeable than the average people and to have higher moral expectations towards ourselves.\(^\text{321}\)

Chapter thirty-eight proposes a reflection on the necessity of knowing how to present oneself in the most positive light possible while remaining modest. According to Yu Lei, discretion is a virtue, a protection and a way to display honesty. She believes that talent is always recognized without the need for showing off. The forty-seventh chapter also displays Yu Lei's zeal by stating that she always arrives at the office ten minutes early to plan her day and that she never fails to tidy her desk before leaving.

As we can see, as in Tan Yiping's first novel, Yu Lei is modest, hard-working and moral. Here again, her identity is mainly defined by her professional occupation, which is illustrated by the numerous occurrences of the sentence zuowei gongsi xinren... 作为公司新人……, as a new employee... to introduce her advice and the principles she abides by.

2.3.2 Positive Characters, or Helpers
The observations proposed when discussing Tan Yiping's first novel also apply to this second narrative, to an even further extent. Here again, Yu Lei obtains advice from different characters, but they are less numerous and appear less often than in the first novel, and none of the relationships are described in detail.

2.3.3 Negative Characters, or Villains
This second novel uses a few characters to illustrate undesirable behavior and concentrates most of it in the character of Mark, described as lazy and careless. However, none of the characters play a negative role in Yu Lei's life and their flaws are usually relatively easy to correct.

2.4 Narrative Structure

In Tan Yiping's second novel, the initial situation introduces a heroine, Yu Lei, who just finished

\(^{321}\) TAN 2005, 106.
two weeks of professional training and is about to start her new job as a white collar. For her family, this new employment is a sign of her transition to adulthood and independence:

At that moment, I imagined the difficulties and setbacks I might encounter in my career, and I felt a little bit worried. But, after all, I chose to be a white collar, so I have to be brave and to go forward, because that is a responsibility I have to endorse in my life. I will work hard, and I will fight until I succeed.322

And later:

Just like that, we entered society and started a new chapter of our life. We had great expectations towards society, but did society have great expectations towards us as well?323

Through these quotes and the following chapters of the book, we understand that Yu Lei's lack is her inexperience as well as the remains of her dependency on her family, which still attach her to childhood. Her goal is to become independent and to succeed, which she perceives as a duty inherent to her white-collar status rather than as an individual choice. The beginning counteraction in this novel is Yu Lei's decision to work hard and to seize every opportunity to learn and grow as a professional.

The struggle function seems to begin in the fourth chapter, when the reader is told that Yu Lei feels lost and helpless at work because she does not have much to do and is isolated from her colleagues. One of her coworkers, Hanna, explains to her that it is normal to be only entrusted with unimportant tasks at the beginning and to have the feeling that one's potential is not fully exploited. She advises Yu Lei to take time to learn about the structure of the company, its activities and the domain it belongs to - electrical home appliances. Thanks to Hanna, Yu Lei realizes that she does not know anything about her new job and that she has to learn by herself, emphasizing the importance of dynamism and initiatives. Despite Hanna's advice, Yu Lei expresses her disillusionment towards her new life and its norms of behavior and appearance:

When I was studying at the university, an image was often appearing in my mind: simple and elegant makeup, confident bright smile, a suit and high heels... The image of the typical professional. The white-collar model was already deeply engraved in me. It is probably at that moment that my dream was born: one day, I will be like them, shuttling back and forth between the buildings, showing off my wisdom and my demeanor. It is this dream that pushed me to abandon the opportunity of staying in school to enter the office building. But now I realize that the white-collar life I was longing for is like an oil painting: from afar, it is gorgeous and makes people's imagination roam, but when you take a closer look at it, you

322. TAN 2005, 4-5.
323. TAN 2005, 5.
discover a messy pile of color lumps.\textsuperscript{324}

We can thus see that the heroine's original purpose, to become a white collar, rapidly leads her to a form of disappointment. However, she does not seem to abandon nor to replace her goal.

Following the model of the first novel, each chapter of the present book proposes an anecdote illustrating how to embrace the white-collar identity and fulfill the responsibilities associated with this status. Through Yu Lei's reflections, as well as the advice and lessons from her superiors, we understand that young professionals are expected to be efficient and competent, but also to depart from the careless habits of their student life, in order to conform to stricter professional rules and standards. Like in the first book, Yu Lei emphasizes the necessity of ceaseless study, learning, and progress. Trying to meet these two sets of expectations represents the heroine's struggle in the novel. She also stresses the importance of patience, hard work and humility to succeed despite difficult work conditions:

When you finish university, you might think that earning a hundred thousand yuans a month, to rapidly become the company's vice president and to drive a luxury car are easy goals to achieve. It is true, it's not difficult to reach these objectives, but you have to conquer them on your own, little by little.\textsuperscript{325}

Apparently, the heroine is convinced that hard work, self-reliance and honesty are always rewarded by success:

Actually, life is fair, if you work hard, your benefits will match your efforts. If you always spare your strengths and don't agree to do any extra work, you will go nowhere. [...] If we go forward step by step, why wouldn't we have the opportunity to become general managers, or even chairmen of the board? We are not donkeys, but we always limit our own growth and let ourselves stagnate in the donkey's position. We just need to want it, and we will have opportunities to grow.\textsuperscript{326}

The whole book emphasizes the importance of having a "direction" \textit{(fangxiang 方向)}, in one's career, as illustrated by the explanations of Yu Lei's father:

"In the past, people used to say that a fine man aspires to travel far and leave his mark in the world. The general idea of this saying is right, young people need ambition and to go out in the world, they cannot stay with their parents forever. But, concretely, from an individual point of view, travelling far and leaving your mark in the world is not a proper life goal. When you plan your career, you have to be as concrete as possible. This way, as soon as you enter the workplace, you can start working on realizing your objectives, and this objective

\textsuperscript{324} TAN 2005, 21.
\textsuperscript{325} TAN 2005, 37.
\textsuperscript{326} TAN 2005, 128.
will also be your motivation.\textsuperscript{327}

We thus understand that young people are advised to have clear professional goals in mind as soon as they finish studying. However, the fifty-sixth chapter reveals that Yu Lei never gave much thought to her career plan:

"I'm not sure about what I want to do yet, but I really admire our company's vice-president who manages the sales department, Xu Lifan. I think I would like to be like her."\textsuperscript{328}

Follows a description of Yu Lei's model:

The major she chose in college is not a plus for our field, her appearance is very ordinary, and her abilities seem to be average too. But, since she entered the company six years ago, she obtained great results in all the departments she worked for, and she was promoted every time she was transferred.\textsuperscript{329}

Yu Lei admires the fact that Xu Lifan's success depends only on her hard work - which illustrates what the narrator considers to be desirable professional behavior - and emphasizes the usefulness of having a professional model.

Like in the first novel, Yu Lei's reaction to difficulties is always to encourage herself to work harder and to keep pursuing self-improvement, which are associated with becoming an adult:

We have to renew ourselves constantly, this is how we mature. Some people are like pets, they don't realize that they are stagnating and they are satisfied with what they have. There are also people who realize that they did not grow up psychologically only when they are old, when it's too late to change anything. [...] We have to face a world more wonderful but also more complicated than ever. To survive and realize our value in this world, we have to mature. To mature, we have to keep an open mind and an open heart, to gather information, to inhale knowledge and progress towards the goal that we established for ourselves. [...] We are not pets, we have to mature.\textsuperscript{330}

At times, the heroine describes the path to adulthood as difficult and scary:

Everything has changed! I have to handle everything by myself, and I also have to think by myself. Suddenly, I feel very helpless, and I realize that building the stage is actually more difficult than getting on it to perform. Maybe this is the difference between white collars and students. [...] Now I really understand the meaning of "independence".\textsuperscript{331}

The description of the workplace as increasingly competitive and fast evolving justifies the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{327} TAN 2005, 50.
\bibitem{328} TAN 2005, 238.
\bibitem{329} TAN 2005, 238.
\bibitem{330} TAN 2005, 70.
\bibitem{331} TAN 2005, 91.
\end{thebibliography}
necessity, asserted by the heroine, of always trying to learn and to get better. Everything in Yu Lei's life seems to aim at increasing her professional abilities. For example, the twenty-third chapter, describing her trip to a book store, clearly distinguishes useful books - like professional manuals and guides - from useless ones - like romances. In the forty-third chapter, Yu Lei goes to the hospital to visit her uncle, a businessman whose health was endangered by important professional problems. Through her uncle's experience, Yu Lei realizes that the workplace can be a cruel and ruthless environment and that she should not trust and rely on her company entirely but prepare backup plans. This event seems to raise her anxieties towards the future. The last chapter of the novel proposes some consideration about success and happiness, at work and in life. It is concluded as follows:

Since even sixty year old people have aspirations and dreams, what reason could there be for us, young people, who are like the morning sun, to not exert ourselves to go up, and to pursue our dreams and glory?332

Here, even more obviously than in the first novel, the heroine's objective being a ceaseless quest for self-betterment and an abstract success, there is no way to reach victory and to solve the initial lack of the narrative. This endless pursuit is associated with a social responsibility rather than with an individual goal, and the heroine seems to be determined to continue on this path, despite the difficulties and the process of normalization she goes through and deplores.

332. TAN 2005, 260.
3.1 General Information

The four volumes of the Du Lala saga were originally published in 2007, 2009, 2010 and 2011 by the Shaanxi Normal University Publishing House and were then reedited in 2013 and 2015 by the Nan Hai Publishing Company. The online origins of the novels have been described in chapter one, as well as the different adaptations into TV series, movies, theater play, talk show, etc. In their original version, the volumes constituting the saga count 262, 288, 287 and 336 pages, making it a lengthy narrative. However, the story can be summarized quite simply: it describes the professional evolution of a white-collar woman from her early twenties, when she tries a few jobs before settling for the American IT company named DB, until her early thirties, when she has become an experienced HR professional who decides to start working independently with a friend and former colleague. The saga also gives great importance to the heroine's relationship with a colleague, Wang Wei, who she ends up marrying after numerous misadventures and plot twists.

3.2 Paratext

3.2.1 Author's Presentation

All four volumes of the Du Lala saga used in the present research contain an author's presentation, even though they do not belong to the same edition - the edition used for the first two volumes, originally published in 2007 and 2009, is a 2013 reedition of the whole saga, while the ones used for the third and fourth volumes are the original 2010 and 2011 versions. According to the inside covers at the beginning of the first and second volumes, Li Ke is a freelance writer (ziyou xiezuozhe 自由写作者), who used to be a manager and has twenty years' experience in the workplace (qian zhiye jingliren, lijing ershi nian zhichang 前职业经理人，历经二十年职场). The author's presentation in the third and fourth volumes, however, only describes Li Ke as the author of the Du Lala saga and other texts and emphasizes the success of the novel and its adaptations into movies and TV shows. Li Ke seems to be a discreet public figure and interviews of her are rare, despite her celebrity. There is no indication of her age on the Internet, and we can only assume that she must be born in the early 1970s, as she is said to hold a Bachelor degree and to have been working for about twenty-years in 2013.
3.2.2 Preface and Postface

In the preface to the first volume, Li Ke starts by evoking the necessity for everyone to work and to make a living, preferably a good one. She continues by mentioning the importance of handling relationships with superiors, subordinates, colleagues and clients in order to work efficiently, as well as different difficulties one might encounter in one's career. The author then states:

You can read this purely fictional story for fun, but you can also use it as a practical, experience-sharing professional guide.\(^{333}\)

She then asserts that everyone will meet numerous opportunities at work and in life and that being able to grasp them or create them is every individual's responsibility. She supports this claim by describing the heroine, Du Lala, as a "typical representative of the middle class" (dianxing de zhongchan jieji daibiao 典型的中产阶级代表), who does not have any particular background (meiyou beijing 没有背景), who received a good education (shouguo lianghao de jiaoyu 受过良好的教育), who follows the rules (zou zhenggui lizi 走正规路子), and who succeeded through her own efforts (kao geren fendou huoqu chenggong 靠个人奋斗获取成功), emphasizing the main character's ordinariness - she is contrasted with a "person of talent" (tiancai 天才) - and her proximity to the readers and thus the "feasibility" (kexingxing 可行性) of her experience.\(^{334}\) Li Ke then asserts that, for her, a good book is a helpful book:

I believe that a good book has to provide logical, lively and efficient information. In order to achieve that goal, sharing one's experience is not enough: these experiences should be easy to understand and to remember, they should also be useful and interesting. The content should be thorough and applicable to every situation in order to be considered as general knowledge, or even as principles that people can abide by and profit from.\(^{335}\)

She concludes by expressing her hope for her novel to conform to this description:

My biggest hope for this book is for Du Lala to be able to make your life a little easier and to be profitable to you.\(^{336}\)

As we can see, this preface contains all the characteristic elements of workplace novels' description. It emphasizes the relevance of the topic to everyone who wants to do his or her job well and to be rewarded accordingly, reminding us of the considerations about the term zhichang proposed in the third chapter of the first part. It also asserts that, despite its fictional nature, the novel is realistic and useful and can thus be read as a career guide. Moreover, the author emphasizes Du Lala's ordinariness and self-reliance, as well as the "feasibility" of her success for everyone able to grab

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333. LI 2013, 1.
335. LI 2013, 2.
336. LI 2013, 2.
the awaiting opportunities, implying that readers should follow the book's advice and the heroine's example in order to live up to their potential and succeed. The fact that the main character's career is described as a success supports the normalizing dimension of the author's assertions. Li Ke also expresses her perception of good literature as holding a mission of helping and supporting the readers, giving the novel a higher social purpose.

In the preface to the second volume, Li Ke explains that the narration, covering events from 2005 to 2006, will focus on the concepts of dingwei 定位, position or positioning, and shiji 时机, opportunities. She emphasizes that, at any given time, everyone occupies a specific position, and that this position is determinant in one's relationships to others. Li Ke thus enjoins the readers who are reaching the end of their studies to ask themselves what they like to do, what are their talents, what kind of lifestyle they want, what salary they need to maintain it, and if they would be able to endure the pressure of the position they aim for, which are the defining questions of the concept of dingwei:

We can say that position encompasses who you are, where you are, where you are going, the people who will be important to you on the way, and the things that you must do to achieve your goal. Without understanding that since the beginning, you might still succeed, but it will be difficult and you will waste time and resources. Life is difficult enough as it is, it would be a shame to waste it like that.337

She then emphasizes the importance of being able to rapidly distinguish and seize opportunities and concludes as follows:

I hope that the Du Lala saga will have a real meaning in people's life and will exceed its role as workplace manual. I owe it to the market and to readers.338

We can observe that, as the basic elements asserting the novel's realism and usefulness have already been laid out in the preface to the first volume, the second one provides more specific information on the concept of dingwei. Moreover, the author keeps emphasizing her will for the book to transcend the characteristics it is marketed for, namely, its potential use as a professional handbook, by mentioning the possibility of a broader reading of her work.

In the preface to the third volume, Li Ke reminds us of her character's ordinariness and thus her proximity to "most people" (da bufen ren 大部分人).339 She then states:

The Du Lala-style middle-class dream is full of contradictions. Anxiety and potential opportunities are omnipresent. It may look bright and exquisite but, behind all of that, there is a lot of patience and endurance. Promotions and raises are so alluring because we really

337. LI 2013b, 2.
338. LI 2013b, 3.
339. LI 2010, preface.
look forward to a life without pressure.\textsuperscript{340}

The preface evokes the difficulty of seizing opportunities in a fast-evolving society, and the time and efforts necessary to obtain promotions and salary raises:

Actually, in most cases, it is not very realistic to hope to join the middle class before having worked for fifteen to twenty years after graduating. Without taking into consideration the very lucky ones, the typical members of the middle class succeeded through continuous individual efforts.\textsuperscript{341}

The author mentions Lala's debut in her new company and the difficulties she encounters there and emphasizes the importance of being happy at work. She then lists the professions which endure heavy work pressure and are thus the most susceptible to anxiety. Apparently, work pressure is perceived as very common for most people. The preface ends with the same sentence as in the second volume.

As we can see, while retaining an important focus on work, this preface introduces new elements linked to lifestyle, like the middle-class dream, work pressure, the difficulty of keeping up with the changes over time, and the importance of happiness. This illustrates the changes in the narration itself, as the third volume of the saga emphasizes Lala's access to the middle class and introduces her personal reflections about work-life balance and her personal development.

Following the evolution discernible in the third preface, the fourth one emphasizes the omnipresence of competition for the "proletariat" (普罗大众\textsuperscript{342}) as a consequence of recent social changes. The fact that, twenty years before the publication of the final opus of the saga, only eight percent of the population was attending university, against eighty percent at the time of the book's publication, making it more difficult for graduates to find a job, is used as an example of these recent evolutions.\textsuperscript{343} Li Ke asserts that, following that trend, human resources employees have started to take IQ, personality and moral values - rather than solely diploma - into consideration when choosing an applicant, exerting more pressure on job seekers. She explains that the situation changed tremendously since the publication of the first volume of the saga, notably because of the 2008 world financial crisis. She asserts that competitiveness will continue to grow fiercer and emphasizes the importance of career guides in that context. The author then mentions that the key concept of this final volume is lixiang 理想, ideal, which, she explains, is more abstract and noble that its English equivalents "aspiration" and "ambitious".\textsuperscript{344} The preface also contains a poem on the difficulties of life and the need for persistence and ends with the same sentence as the

\textsuperscript{340} LI 2010, preface.
\textsuperscript{341} LI 2010, preface.
\textsuperscript{342} LI 2011, 4.
\textsuperscript{343} These numbers, found in the novel's preface, are not accurate.
\textsuperscript{344} LI 2011, 5.
second and third volumes' prefaces.

We consider that the aim of this preface is to reveal how the author proposes for readers to follow the heroine in embracing an "ideal" in order to cope with work pressure, competition and general hardships. We can thus see that, despite their differences, all of the Du Lala prefaces contain a form of advice to the readership, as the narratives do.

3.2.3 Cover, Band and Layout

The first volume of Li Ke's saga has a bright blue cover decorated by a white sketch of feet wearing high-heels. The lower right corner of the cover reads:

Du Lala: no particular background, advocates freedom and wisdom, low-key, respectful of rules, dependable, hard-working, obtaining success relying on her own efforts.

The text on the back repeats some elements already addressed when discussing the preface and then explains that the book describes Du Lala's first ten years of professional experience in a state-owned company, a private company and a foreign company. In this decade, she will be promoted from sales assistant to HR manager. The text also evokes Lala's love life and her difficulty in finding happiness. As we have seen, the inside cover at the beginning of the book proposes a brief presentation of the author followed by the mention of the saga's success and of its adaptations into movies and TV shows. The inside cover at the end of the book is blank.

The volume is accompanied by a yellow advertising band. On the front, a medal says that the novel has been greatly polished and revised in the past three years. The band states:

Wisdom to grow up in the Chinese workplace, last book to read before graduating university.

It also mentions that the novel has been printed more than a hundred times and has sold more than five million copies. It then evokes that Du Lala Go! was the bestselling novel on Dangdang for eighty-eight weeks, and on Amazon China for eighty-seven weeks. According to the band, Li Ke's work was the first Chinese workplace novel to attract international attention and was apparently mentioned in the British journal The Independent, and in the Japanese newspaper Nikkei. The book was also recommended by the founder of Lenovo, Liu Chuanzhi. The back part of the band states:

From inexperienced white collar to independent member of the middle class, experience allows you to grow up. You need wisdom to light your path and to insure each of your steps.

Du Lala belongs to an era when people strive for the life and happiness they long for.

Finally, after the table of contents, the book provides a list of the characters working for DB, the company where Du Lala will stay the longest.

The second volume of the saga, Lala 2: Those Shinning Years, follows a very similar lay out. The cover is bright red and shows a white sketch of a finger on a computer keyboard. The lower right
corner shows the same inscription as the cover of the first volume does. The back evokes the fact that, in first-tier cities, people's salaries fail to match the rise of real estate prices. It then explains that this volume will describe the difficulties Lala encounters on her way to becoming an HR manager and mentions her love life's problems as well. The text finishes as follows:

An ongoing revolution depresses and embarrasses Lala. She is constantly under attack and her assets are limited. To brave the heat, Lala starts looking for another job, she wants a change.

The inside cover at the beginning of the book shows the same author's presentation as the first volume and the inside cover at the end of the book is also blank. The book is accompanied by an advertising band showing similar inscriptions as the one of the first book. The only difference is that the mention of Dangdang and Amazon rankings as well as of the evocation of the book in foreign publications have been replaced by the following statement:

Life struggle in the big city - I hope this novel will have a real meaning for people and overcome its role as workplace guide; I could thus repay the appreciation of the market and the readers. - Li Ke

This second volume also contains the list of DB's employees.

The first editions of the third and fourth volumes do not have the fresh and feminine look of the 2013 reedition. The cover of the third volume is black and red with the title and subtitle written in white both in Chinese - Du Lala 3: wo zai zhe zhandou de yi nian li 杜拉拉3:我在这战斗的一年里 - and English - Lala 3: Fighting for Flying. Between the two parts of the Chinese title we can also read:

A workplace training novel that Chinese white collars should absolutely read.

The upper right corner of the cover is decorated with a golden medal indicating that the saga sold more than three and a half million copies. On the lower section of the cover, we can read:

Beyond the workplace, she loves life, her story is more valuable to read than the one of Bill Gates.

The back cover proposes a summary of the third volume: the novel starts at the beginning of 2007 and Du Lala has joined the middle class. She is also reunited with her lover, Wang Wei, after a year of separation. In this volume, Lala goes through with her plan to change jobs and is hired by the American Fortune 500 company SH after having worked for DB for eight years. The beginning of this new experience is described as difficult.

The inside cover at the beginning of the book gives a description of the author very similar to the one of the first and second volumes, emphasizing the success of the saga and its adaptations. The inside cover at the end of the book shows the pictures of the covers of the first two volumes and
The "typical representative of the middle class" Du Lala is of upper-average beauty, does not have any particular background, received a good education, succeeded relying only on her efforts, enacts the success story of an ordinary person and is relatable for ordinary people who yearn for wealth and freedom.

It is possible that this volume was originally accompanied by an advertising band, but the exemplar used for the present research was not.

The design of the fourth volume is very similar to the third one's. The cover is white with the title printed in red and white, in Chinese - Du Lala da jieju: yu lixiang youguan 杜拉拉大结局：与理想有关 - and in English - Follow Your Heart, Follow Your Dreams. This volume is also said to be an indispensable read for Chinese white collars. The medal on the upper right corner indicates that the saga has now sold more than five million copies. On the lower part of the cover, we can read:

Acting dependably, following wisdom, loving life, persevering for her ideals, from inexperienced white collar to independent member of the middle class: Du Lala belongs to this era, no matter if she goes through ten golden years or touches rock-bottom for the second time.

The back cover evokes the difficulty of finding a new job and Lala's trouble to adapt to her new profession, for which she was not trained. The text also evokes an event from Lala's past coming back to haunt her, creating difficulties in her relationship with Wang Wei. The text finishes as follows:

Going through great joys and pains, Lala grows up step by step. She is always ready to work for her ideals. I've been there. I shared my experience. There never was a Savior, we cannot rely on any god, our happiness depends only on us. Li Ke

The inside cover at the beginning of the book shows the same author's presentation as the third volume, and, on the inside cover at the end of the book, the same text follows the picture of the four volumes' covers. The advertising band accompanying the volume proposes the same inscription as the one printed on the lower part of the cover followed by the injunction:

Read the "Du Lala" saga, grow up with Du Lala.

And:

Bestselling contemporary Chinese realist novel, reviewed by tens of thousands of moved readers.

The band also presents the recommendations of Liu Chuanzhi and Feng Lun, celebrity of the real estate world. The back part of the band mentions the success of the first volume on different websites like Dangdang, Amazon and Douban, and two awards won by the first and third volumes.

149
respectively. Before the preface, the reader is offered a "Chronicle of Du Lala" (Du Lala dashiji 杜拉拉大事记). The Chronicle states, for example, that the first volume was published in September 2007 and that, in December of the same year, it was already the most popular book on Douban and Dangdang, and then on Amazon a month later. The Chronicle also mentions the publication of the following volumes, the adaptations into films and TV series, and the awards evoked on the advertising band.

As we can see, all of the four volumes are advertised in a similar way, despite the fact that they do not belong to the same edition. The Du Lala saga is heavily advertised for its usefulness and for the relatable nature of its every-woman heroine. It also emphasizes the difficulties she has to go through to mature, succeed and find happiness, supporting the assertion of the book being a necessary read for white collars and its emotional echo for those who endure similar hardships. The 2013 reedition and the original editions of the third and fourth volume all use the success of the saga, or of the precedent volumes, as advertisement, mentioning sales numbers, adaptations, famous people's recommendations and so on. While the first edition followed a similar layout as most warfare workplace novels - using almost exclusively red, white and black and taking on a serious and "official" look also reminiscent of officialdom novels - the 2013 reedition, with its bright colors and sketches evoking glamorous working women, seems more youthful and feminine. Liang Chunfang's article explains that the first edition of the first volume used a feminine look inspired by the novel The Devil Wears Prada. According to this article, the appearance of the third and fourth volume described here is the result of a re-branding process aimed at presenting the book in a gender-neutral and serious way, to link it to self-help books and manuals. The addition of different prints on the covers is described as a rational use of space.

3.3 Characters

3.3.1 The Heroine

On the first page of the introduction of the saga's first volume, here is how Du Lala is introduced to the reader:

Du Lala, Southern girl, upper-average beauty.

We then learn that both her parents were "ordinary engineers" and that she has a brother named Du Tao. Lala's family background is described as modest. The reader is then told that Du Lala's parents always insisted on her being financially independent, as they did not have the economic means nor

345. LIANG 2014.
346. LI 2013, 1.
the strong health necessary to support her after her studies. Lala is then described as showing great filial devotion by rapidly graduating from university, and by finding a handsome boyfriend, Zhang Dongyu, who holds a Master's degree and who satisfies her mother greatly, even though the neighbors gossip about him being too good for Lala. Through a description of Lala's first professional experience, we understand that she is smart and hard-working, so much so that she is disliked by her colleagues who feel forced to adapt to her high standards. After Lala changes jobs and is hired by an abusive boss, the reader realizes that her will to be financially independent pushes her to accept positions that are beneath her, as well as poor work conditions. Lala's relationship with her boyfriend Zhang Dongyu is described as difficult because of the heroine's emotional immaturity. Zhang Dongyu is depicted as wiser and more mature than she is. In the introduction, we are also introduced to Lala's friend Xia Hong who prank calls Lala's boss, Hu Afa, as a revenge against his psychological and sexual harassment.

In the first chapter, three years have already gone by and Lala is hired as a sales assistant in the American Fortune 500 company DB. She then befriends the receptionist Helen who informs her of the company's gossip and hidden rules. In the third chapter, two more years have passed, Zhang Dongyu broke up with Lala who is promoted to administrative manager. Later, we understand that Lala is competent through the important assignments she is entrusted with. We also learn that she is having an affair with her colleague Wang Wei, which has to remain secret because the company forbids employees to be involved with each other. In the rest of the first volume, Lala successfully fulfills her tasks but also breaks up with Wang Wei.

At the beginning of the second volume, set in 2005, the reader is told that Lala developed a strong interest for the stock market to distract herself from her breakup with Wang Wei. Lala's friend Xia Hong reappears and we are introduced to another of Lala's friends, Cheng Hui. We understand that Lala is still sad about her breakup with Wang Wei but that her professional achievements allowed her to reach a certain level of material comfort when Xia Hong says that her apartment conforms to "five stars hotel standards" (wuxing jiadian de biaozhun 五星酒店的标准). In chapter two, we learn that everyone at DB knows that Wang Wei, who was a valued and appreciated employee, quit the company because of personal problems involving Lala, making her very unpopular at work. The novel emphasizes how Lala remains hard-working and professional despite the difficulties caused by gossip. Through the eyes of Chen Feng, a colleague who still seems to appreciate Lala, we understand that she is valued for her "realism" (xianshi zhuyi 现实主义), and her "every-man style" (pingmin fengge 平民风格). The first chapter also allows the reader to understand that Lala is now working in the human resources department.

347. LI 2013b, 7.
348. LI 2013b, 19.
In chapter eleven, we understand that a relationship is burgeoning between Lala and her friend Cheng Hui, and we obtain some information about the heroine's private life, for example that she cooks well and likes to buy expensive brand clothes. Lala's deep knowledge about her job is emphasized on different occasions through descriptions of her handling difficult tasks or through the explanations that she provides to other employees. Throughout the story, Lala also displays a great ability to solve problems rationally and diplomatically. In this volume, as an HR manager, Lala often has to intervene to solve interpersonal problems. We also understand that Zhang Dongyu keeps writing to her at least once a year. The fifty-second chapter proposes a detailed description of Lala's status at DB:

In the Southern area, many regional managers had great consideration for Lala and were coming to discuss with her when they encountered problems. The local managers were even more polite when asking her for help - this meant that, in the popular opinion of the Southern sector, Lala was recognized as able to discuss peer-to-peer with big regional managers, or that her status was higher than the one of local managers. But when Yuan Fei, from the important clients department of the Eastern sector, gave Lala a call, the impoliteness of his tone made her instantaneously realize that this particular regional manager considered her status to be lower than his. 349

Towards the end of the volume, we understand that Lala is unable to commit to Cheng Hui because she still misses Wang Wei, which leads to a difficult breakup. Moreover, the only important task Lala was entrusted with in 2006 is apparently a failure, which is problematic for her career, especially considering the fragility of her position in the company due to the gossip on her personal life. In chapter fifty-nine, the company releases a new system of hierarchization of the employees - and thus of the salaries. Lala is categorized in the lowest possible rank for managers. She considers it unfair, and it will apparently make it difficult for her to deal with some colleagues as equals. Her official title is also changed from HR administrative manager to administrative manager. She would like to discuss the issue with an important HR manager, Zhu Qidong, but knows that it will not take her anywhere:

Lala knew that Zhu Qidong, the organization strategy manager, fundamentally despised her. According to his own values, young women were only suitable employees if they were able to socialize in a tasteful and gentle way, and if they knew how to spend their money. Only working as a donkey was something he despised and Lala was well-known to be a "stubborn donkey" - not only a donkey, a stubborn one - . [...] In the eyes of Zhu Qidong, the socializing style of Du Lala was extremely unrefined, she had never been to Europe nor to Africa, and, even without taking this into consideration, she was obviously feeling forced to

349. LI 2 2013, 315.
In the sixty-fourth chapter, through the eyes of Cheng Hui, who has known Lala since she was young, we learn that she has become more restrained and gentle (kezhi wenwan 克制温婉), in the recent years. The volume ends by indicating that Lala will probably change jobs soon and that Wang Wei is ready to contact her when she has done so.

The beginning of the third volume emphasizes Lala's love for shopping and luxury goods. Through the job interviews she goes to, we also learn that she is considered as being of "good quality" (geren suzhi bu cuo 个人素质不错), and that her biggest strengths are hard work and determination. Chapter four is dedicated to Lala's relationship with Zhang Dongyu. It explains that, apparently, when they were dating, no one understood why such an outstanding man was spending time with such an ordinary girl:

Lala's family had a genetic particularity: everyone was aging slowly, but they were also developing late. Most girls finish puberty around eighteen year old, but Lala was still transforming at the age of twenty-five. When Zhang Dongyu left China, she had not completely bloomed yet and still looked frail. Even if her features were well-proportioned, she could only be described as being of upper-average beauty at best, because, unluckily, she was not fully developed. During her Bachelor, she was gifted in a few subjects but only average for the majority of them. Moreover, her knowledge was very limited, and every time Zhang Dongyu tried to discuss with her about economics or philosophy, he ended up desperate. Du Lala's relations with the masses were normal, neither good nor bad.

We understand that Lala greatly admired Zhang Dongyu while he was not entirely satisfied with her. Apparently, after Dongyu's wife left him around Christmas 2005, he started to think about Lala again. He also came back to Guangzhou and created his own company. He sometimes calls or visits Lala who has matured and is now more confident, gentle and attractive.

In the eleventh and twelfth chapters, through a professional dinner, we understand that Lala does not know Western food nor wine very well and that she also has some difficulties with English, which raises the disdain and mockery of some of her colleagues. In chapter seventeen, Lala goes to spend the New Year celebrations with her family in Hangzhou, which is, as we finally learn, her hometown. The chapter emphasizes that Du Lala received a very strict education, especially from her mother who always insisted on the necessity to study hard, to have clear goals, and who did not allow Lala to read novels, fearing that she would fall in love and neglect her career. For Lala's mother, it was not appropriate to think about love before twenty-five year old. However, in this volume, the heroine is thirty-two year old and considered old to be single. Her mother thus takes it

350. LI 2013b, 341-342.
351. LI 2010, 27.
on herself to introduce her to men. We understand that, usually, Lala does not share anything about her private life with her parents, who thus do not know about Wang Wei. Later, Lala hears her mother saying that her breakup with Dongyu had been a great loss for the family and she feels humiliated and angry. The same night, she reconnects with Wang Wei. In the twentieth chapter, Wang Wei describes Lala as "not common" (bu zhengchang 不正常) - contradicting the paratext depicting her as ordinary - and as too ambitious (guanyin tezu 官瘾特足). In the following chapter, Lala and Wang Wei are back together.

In the twenty-fifth chapter, when Lala leaves DB for SH, we understand that she was valued in the company, despite the gossip:

Qu Luoyi stayed silent for a while and sighed with emotion: "Lala, you are one of the most hard-working managers I have ever encountered. Yesterday night I couldn't stop thinking about how much I regret your resignation. I speak for the whole company when I thank you for your diligent work and your contributions in the past eight years."\(^{353}\)

In the thirty-sixth chapter, we are offered another description of Du Lala:

Wang Wei pondered before answering: "Lala? She has ideals and will power, she belongs to a generation that pursues progress. As for her character, it is neither good nor bad. She might be a little stubborn, but she is also able to make her superior feel very appreciated. Oh, right, she is also a little bit defiant."\(^{354}\)

We also learn that Lala's professionalism and dedication impress everyone at her new job. However, she apparently works too hard and puts too much pressure on herself. She thus has to take tranquilizers, looks exhausted and loses a lot of weight.

The first chapter of the fourth volume starts with a long description of Du Lala and her career:

Two things had made Lala famous at DB: the first one was her personal relationship with Wang Wei, and the second one her spectacular rise. These two elements are revealing of some of Du Lala's particularities. DB was promoting at least twenty managers a year, all of them were hard workers, but Du Lala had shown more ambition than anyone else. Before being promoted, she had accumulated more than seven hundred extra hours in six months in order to be entrusted with a project. These seven hundred hours represent eighty-eight working days, and, as a month corresponds to twenty-one working days, she had worked the equivalent of four months in extra hours. This record proves the woman's inhuman perseverance. [...] In most cases, when someone is promoted, he or she will mostly receive congratulations, but everyone told Du Lala "You deserve it!" [In English in the Chinese text] which means "that is your due", or "fame follows merit". [...] Lala was well aware of this characteristic of hers, she had never hoped to be so lucky to earn a lot of money without

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353. LI 2010, 183.
working a lot. Through the years, working was becoming increasingly exhausting and difficult, but Lala always kept believing that she could endure difficulties, that she had will power, and that she was able to encourage herself to keep going. Moreover, she was also a masochist and was secretly feeling proud of her ability to endure all kinds of difficulties, because her perseverance and endurance had often changed the mind of people who had looked down on her. She was a little bit like a movie character, like a hero who cuts his own arm with a knife and uses the dripping blood to scare away the rascals: his face might lose its color, but he wins.355

The first chapter also states that Lala is pessimistic, insecure, and that she needs to be in control of every situation. We understand that Wang Wei is worried about Lala's deteriorating health and that he is not as ambitious as she is.

In the ninth chapter, Lala and Wang Wei get married. Through Helen's comment during the celebration of the wedding, in the following chapter, we learn that Lala has been putting on weight and not paying much attention to her clothes and makeup because of her heavy work load. In this volume, work pressure forces her to realize that her strengths and will power are limited. Throughout the story, difficulties between Lala and Wang Wei arise because of Lala's past relationship with Zhang Dongyu, who is now dating Lu Baobao, Wang Wei's colleague and superior who is also linked to his family and in love with him. We discover that Lala is incapable of lying to Wang Wei even if she is ashamed of having lived with Zhang Dongyu without being married. Wang Wei also seems bothered by Lala's persistent focus on work and career, preventing her from thinking about starting a family with him. Despite her personal difficulties, Lala keeps displaying her talent at work and is entrusted with important projects and critical problems. She still shows great respect for the rules and for the employees. In chapter fifty-six, Lala is promoted to a high-ranked manager.

Towards the end of the novel, Lala's marital difficulties worsen, and she and Wang Wei are considering the possibility of divorcing. The situation is made more complicated by Wang Wei's mother, who does not approve of Lala and tries to take her son away from her. We understand that Wang Wei blames Lala for being too controlling:

Wang Wei's heart softened, he sighed and suggested: "Lala, maybe what I will say is wrong but don't get angry - I think that you should learn to give people a bit of space, especially to the people closest to you, you cannot control them all the time. Everyone has one's own independent thoughts, and one's own goals. Of course, I also have to improve, I have to take better care of you, especially when you encounter difficulties."356

Lala seems willing to change to save her marriage, but the situation keeps deteriorating. In the

356. LI 2011, 289.
sixty-first chapter, Li Weidong, Lala's rival, is promoted to HR director instead of her. Lala believes that she has not been chosen because she was too kind (ruanruo 软弱), and not ruthless enough while dealing with the lay-off of an employee:

"I'm sure that this is the reason, Chen Feng [on of Lala's superiors] was very angry about it. Of course, it is not the only reason, I already thought about it. When Chen Feng will be promoted, if Yi Zhijian does not cooperate, he will probably have to fire a bunch of people. He needs someone ruthless and decisive in HR to assist him, and he obviously thinks that I'm not that kind of person." "Are you that kind of person?" [Question asked by Wang Wei] Lala laughed softly, "Maybe not. If my boss asks me to be ruthless, I can do it, but I would feel bad. Many years ago, Lester said that I have no professional prospects because of that."357

In the same chapter, Lala and Wang Wei separate.

In chapters sixty-three and sixty-four, we learn that Lala quits her job at SH to work freelance. The reader is told that she wants to pursue a writing career. She had already started it by helping her friend and former colleague Tong Jiaming write a training book for young employees, which had been selling very well. In the sixty-fifth and last chapter of the novel, we learn that Lala and Wang Wei reconcile even though the divorce papers were actually ready to be signed.

As we can see, throughout the saga, Du Lala is described as an ordinary and down-to-earth woman who obtains everything she has through hard work. In the first volume, she is described as too harsh and as lacking femininity, which changes with time. We can observe that her perseverant and hard-working spirit is treated in an ambiguous way in the third and fourth volumes. Indeed, it gains her recognition and, to some extent, success, but also causes her to be associated with a donkey and creates difficulties in her marriage. Even if she seems to have acquired the codes of appearance and behavior of big international companies, we have seen that she is still criticized by some colleagues for having acquired these luxury tastes, which seem artificial on her. She is also described as too ambitious, as revealed by Wang Wei's considerations. The last volume, especially, describes how Du Lala is perceived as too focused on work in the private sphere - she does not seem to care about her wedding, she has no plans to settle down or to have children in the immediate future, she lets her marriage go astray, etc. - and as not fierce enough in the workplace, which ultimately costs her a promotion. Rational and competent at work, Du Lala is also represented as a romantic who cannot settle for imperfect love in her personal life. Starting from the first volume, we see that she will always love Wang Wei and their relationship ultimately survives all the difficulties that the couple encounters.

357. LI 2011, 305.
3.3.2 Positive Characters, or Helpers

The Du Lala saga depicts a set of characters who episodically help and support the heroine. We can observe that only the first volume describes long-lasting relationships between Lala and her helpers, which is probably due to the fact that the first opus focuses on her professional debut. As the story goes on, the heroine's need for guidance lessens, explaining the more sporadic nature of the help she receives and the fact that she starts supporting and helping other characters as well. We will see that most of Lala's helpers, and the most important among them, are male characters.

At the beginning of the first volume of the saga, Lala is pushed in the right professional direction by her boyfriend Zhang Dongyu, described as older, more experienced and wiser than she is. She is then motivated to quit her abusive boss by the intervention of her friend Xia Hong, but both of these characters disappear after the first chapters. When she enters DB, the heroine also gains the friendly support of Helen, the company's receptionist, who teaches her about the informal functioning of the company. However, the most important relationships in this volume are the ones linking the heroine to her superiors, Lester and Howard. Lester is a sixty year old American man recently arrived in China. Apparently, his goal is to spend the last years of his career peacefully - he is thus reluctant towards change and rapid decisions. He is described as elegant, polite, kind and benevolent to all the employees. He is also accepting of his subordinates' mistakes and provides good professional advice. He is compared to a "kind grandfather" (cixiang de zufu 慈祥的祖父). However, his wish to stay away from trouble and controversy as well as the fact that he is at the end of his career do not make him an ideal mentor for Lala, even if he is impressed by her, trusts her and tries to support her.

Lala eventually resents Lester because she thinks that he does not mentor her properly, underestimates her and does not provide her with the right opportunities to grow. Before the end of the volume, when Lester retires, he protects and helps Lala in her difficulties involving Wang Wei and her love rival Daisy. In the same volume, Lala often seeks guidance from Howard Hermann, DB's general director, who is well-versed in Chinese culture, highly appreciated for his kindness in the company, and who looks like Bill Clinton. Howard's sympathy for Lala is triggered by her hard work and dedication, and he thus becomes her mentor, speaking highly of her to Lester to make him realize her potential and make him entrust her with bigger responsibilities. At the end of the first volume, Howard and Lester quit DB.

In the second volume, Lala loses a lot of support in the company because of the rumors circulating about her affair with Wang Wei. Her friends Xia Hong and Cheng Hui provide her with discreet emotional support, and Wang Wei secretly protects her from Daisy's schemes, explaining his resignation from DB and the fact that he cuts off all contact with the heroine. Xia Hong will remain present in the whole saga, episodically providing advice to the heroine. At work, only a few people keep supporting Lala despite the gossip. First of all, Chen Feng - a character only briefly evoked in volume one but who is said to have always been helping Lala in volume two - who will support the
heroine throughout volumes two to four, until he joins her at SH, in the last volume, and promotes Lala's rival instead of her. In the third and fourth volume, Lala helps Chen Feng at least as much as he helps her. Lala's colleague Tong Jiaming, who makes a brief appearance in the first volume, will also stay by her side until he leaves DB at the beginning of the third volume. His help will really manifest in the fourth volume, when he asks Lala to join him in a new professional endeavor for which the heroine will ultimately leave SH. In the second volume, Qi Haotian - a Belgian man who took Howard's position when the later resigned in volume one - who has a high opinion of Lala, talks her up to her direct superiors and thus slightly alleviates her exclusion from important tasks in the company.

In the third volume, when she joins SH, Lala also wins the trust and admiration of her superiors Chen Jie - who rapidly leaves the company - and He Chali, who will keep supporting her in the fourth volume. At the end of the third volume, and throughout the fourth, the heroine also manages to win over her direct superior, Huang Guodong, who was originally hostile towards her but who changes his mind because of her hard work, competence and kindheartedness. When she joins SH, Lala is helped by Shen Qiaozhi to get accustomed to her new tasks. However, as he is apparently not very competent, throughout the story, she will end up helping him more than he helps her. Finally, when Lala starts seeing Wang Wei again in volume three, he represents an important support for her. Every night she tells him about her professional problems, and he offers her comfort and guidance. This remains true in volume four, though to a lesser extent because of their marital problems.

As we can see, Du Lala is mainly guided and helped by older, more experienced male superiors who are impressed by her hard work, dedication and determination. These men are mostly positive characters depicted as wise and kindhearted. As we have seen, the most detailed positive mentor figures of the saga are found in the first volume, when Lala needs guidance the most. At work, Lala does not create real friendships with female colleagues and even Helen eventually starts to spread gossip about her. This is a recurrent trope in workplace novels which usually depict women's interpersonal relationships as based on jealousy, gossip and schemes.

3.3.3 Negative Characters, or Villains
The Du Lala saga contains numerous characters who, at times, despise, criticize or try to hinder Lala's progression at work. However, her fiercest enemies are linked to her personal rather than professional life. As we have seen, in the first volume, Lala is bullied and sexually harassed by her second boss, Hu Afa, who is described as an uneducated and vulgar new rich from the countryside. Lala gets rid of Hu Afa by quitting her job, and he will never be punished for his actions. Lala will then encounter rivals at DB in the characters of Rose, her direct superior, and Daisy. Rose is described as beautiful and delicate but also as an impatient and easily angered superior. She seems...
to be controlling and refuses to teach Lala anything valuable. Throughout the story, it becomes evident that Rose believes that she is unfairly treated in the company. She thus purposely fails to help Lala, hoping that her mistakes will make Lester realize her own value for the department. Apparently, Rose is not competent enough to obtain the positions she aspires to. She is also jealous of Lala, who she despises, and, when the later is entrusted with a task she wanted to accomplish herself, she fakes a pregnancy and a miscarriage to be able to take a maternity leave and avoid helping the heroine. At some point, Rose also tries to convince Lala to quit DB but ends up leaving herself.

In the first volume, Lala also encounters difficulties with Daisy, a colleague working in the sales department. Daisy is described as the most beautiful employee at DB. She is also rich and talented and thus too picky with men, explaining her single status. Daisy is actually Wang Wei's ex-girlfriend, and she is determined to break up his relationship with Lala. To do so, she manages to sleep with him and to have Lala find out. She also pays Wang Wei's cleaning lady to spy on the couple and to place a recorder under their bed to expose their relationship and damage their careers. By seducing her superior, Daisy manages to be promoted to a position where she will often work with Wang Wei. Finally, she succeeds in breaking the relationship between Lala and Wang Wei before being fired for fraud. In the second volume, we learn that Daisy forced Wang Wei to cut contact with Lala by threatening him that she would never stop trying to hinder Lala's career. As we have seen, in the second volume, Lala is isolated at work and kept away from important tasks because of the rumors about her affair with Wang Wei. We learn that the gossip was initiated by Daisy and her friend Dong Qing, who still works for DB and is described as bitter and incompetent. The second and third volumes depict a few female characters who gossip about Lala and criticize her - Helen, She Nansheng and Sha Dangdang - and male characters who despise her because of the affair and because of her so-called unrefined personality - Qu Luoyi, Zhu Qidong, Qi Jietian. These male figures are responsible for Lala's lack of advancement opportunities, for her receiving a low hierarchical rank in the company and, ultimately, for her resignation. However, they are not depicted as being as vindictive as Lala's female rivals.

In the third volume, Lala attracts the disdain of some of her new superiors at SH, Mai Daiwei and Huang Guodong, who question her abilities and intelligence. However, she manages to win Huang Guodong over, and these two characters do not cause major problems for the heroine. A rivalry will progressively arise between Lala and Li Weidong, who was hired at the same time as her. Li Weidong is described as less hard-working and less competent than Lala. On multiple occasions, he tries to undermine her in front of their superiors. At the end of the fourth volume, even if Lala's projects are more successful than Li Weidong's, he is promoted instead of her, which motivates the heroine to resign from SH. In volumes three and four, on the personal front, Lala faces the schemes of Lu Baobao, who is in love with Wang Wei and tries to separate them. Lu Baobao's hatred for Lala
reaches a pinnacle in volume four, when she learns about Lala's relationship with Zhang Dongyu. However, at the end of the saga, Lu Baobao's anger is somehow appeased, and she tries to help Wang Wei and Lala save their marriage. The relationship between the two characters is also hindered by Wang Wei's mother who disapproves of Lala, especially since she learned that Lala was living with her first boyfriend without being married. Wang Wei's mother goes so far as faking serious illness to drive Wang Wei away from Lala. At the end of the last volume, when Wang Wei and Lala finally reconcile, no indication is given of a possible change of heart on the mother's side and, most probably, Wang Wei decided to overlook her opinion.

As we can see, Lala's fiercest adversaries are women - Daisy and Lu Baobao - whose resentment and aggressiveness are triggered by jealousy and by the heroine's relationship with Wang Wei. As we will see in further detail in the third part of this research, jealousy and gossip are depicted as inherent to the female nature throughout the saga. Interestingly, Lala's biggest difficulties - professional and personal - are engendered by her relationships with men. Indeed, it is her affair with Wang Wei which compromises her career at DB, and her past with Zhang Dongyu which almost destroys her marriage.

3.4 Narrative Structure

The narrative structure of the first volume was already presented in chapter one. Thus, we will continue here with volume two. In the second volume, the struggle continues with Du Lala being sad and lonely after her break up with Wang Wei. At work, she faces the disdain and hostility of many colleagues and superiors who have heard about the affair, and she is kept away from interesting assignments. The beginning of this volume thus emphasizes the harshness of the professional world:

No matter their code of conduct or their core culture, you will discover that transnational companies always declare proudly that their mission is for their products to have a unique and profound meaning in people's lives. They advocate honesty, defend the shareholders' interests, and even insure that each collaborator receives a fair share of the benefits. But, in all of that, you will never hear the word "kindheartedness".358

We can observe that, here, the heroine suffers from her lack of romantic love and of professional motivation and prospects. Her dispiritedness is illustrated in the following passage:

Lala woke up when the plane reached its cruise altitude. She turned her gaze towards the window. The daylight was bright, and a few clouds were floating around. There was nothing

358. LI 2 2013, 11.
to declare, like in the life of unimportant people in contemporary cities, who kill themselves to save money. They are unable to change their lives in any fundamental way, but they keep saving money at all costs. The ceaseless repetition of their days is monotonous and gloomy, and the day when they will finally be free is so far in an uncertain future that they feel lost.\footnote{LI 2 2013, 359}

Lala seems to be still working hard and doing her best for the company despite her depressed state of mind. She solves numerous interpersonal problems in the company and works on two important projects.

In chapter forty-five - out of sixty-eight - Lala launches a new beginning counteraction in order to address the lack of love she feels in her life, by asking her friend Cheng Hui for help in different matters instead of dealing with her problems alone. From then on, their intimacy grows, and they eventually start dating in chapter fifty-one. However, Lala is unable to commit to him, and they separate in chapter fifty-six, re-establishing the lack. On the professional front, Lala's beginning counteraction takes place in chapter fifty-nine, when she receives a low rank in the company's new system of employees' qualification and loses her title as HR specialist. She realizes that no one in the company values her work or supports her:

Lala froze for a moment, and thought: why am I still making all this effort? Let's change jobs! If there is an opportunity to go up I will seize it, and if there isn't I will create one and go up anyway - in any case I cannot remain passive, I want a change!\footnote{LI 2 2013, 360}

Thus begins the heroine's new struggle to find another position. She puts a lot of effort in revising her CV and preparing for interviews, with the advantage of her long experience in HR, but still receives numerous negative answers to her applications.

At that point of the story, we learn more about her professional goals:

To be a "pure HR manager" was Lala's ideal, but she had only three years of experience in HR and had only worked in recruiting. The only specific HR project she had participated in was the management trainees' program, which failed. Wanting to be hired as a HR manager with such a weak basis would be completely unrealistic, or at least very difficult. Among the six divisions of HR, she did not want to work in recruiting nor training, and even less in staff relations or performance management. She wanted to become an OD (Organization Development) manager or a C&B (Compensation & Benefits) manager.\footnote{LI 2 2013, 361}

Lala also starts feeling guilty about wanting to change jobs when her professional situation betters thanks to the high opinion Qi Haotian - the CEO of DB China - has of her, and because her superiors start to trust her again when they hear about her relationship with Cheng Hui.

\footnotetext{359}{LI 2 2013, 70.}
\footnotetext{360}{LI 2 2013, 345.}
\footnotetext{361}{LI 2 2013, 347.}
Through a discussion between two of Lala's subordinates, we understand that she has fundamentally changed since her arrival at DB:

After the meeting, Zhou Jiuyi took Zhou Liang aside: "Lala really changed a lot, it is hard to believe that she was so vindictive in her negotiations with Lester. Look at her now, she doesn't look like a stubborn donkey anymore. This name doesn't fit! She has been bullied so much that she doesn't even dare to speak with Qu Luoyi, she assumes that he will refuse without even trying. She admits defeat without even fighting! Today she wouldn't have agreed to go talk to him if I hadn't insisted." [...] Zhou Jiuyi laughed: "At that time Lala didn't have much to lose, she was at the bottom of the company's food chain; but now she has risen to the middle, she still has room to go up, so she has to think carefully before acting and, when in doubt, she prefers not to do anything. Why is the proletariat the most resolute and diehard revolutionary class? Because they have nothing to lose. Now Lala is a woman of property, revolution will not come from her." 362

This statement describing Lala's access to a higher lifestyle is supported by numerous mentions of the material comfort she reached.

In chapter sixty-five, Lala asserts her personal life goals to her friend Xia Hong:

"You are right, Xia Hong, life is short. To love someone a little bit will not make me happy, what I want is... a fulfilling love, for which I would agree to die." 363

However, Xia Hong makes her realize that, until that moment, she has not pursued that objective consistently:

"It's useless to die for love, what counts is what you can touch and see. Back then you liked Zhang Dongyu, he wanted you to go with him to the United States, but you refused, didn't you? Of course, you might not have stayed together even if you had gone with him, and by not going at least you saved your job, so you probably made the right decision. Then later the situation was even simpler, you were good with Wang Wei, and you loved him enough, right? But instead of leaving DB for him you let him drag you into a clandestine relationship. Of course there is nothing wrong with giving importance to both love and work, and it was not easy for you to get this manager position. But, as I see it, you say that you yearn for a spectacular love that makes you forget about danger, while you actually act with great caution, prudence and reserve. It makes people think that... you contradict yourself, no?" 364

Following Xia Hong's advice, Lala decides to find a way to contact Wang Wei to get a sense of closure, marking a new beginning counteraction to address the lack she feels in her love life. This

362. LI 2 2013, 367.
363. LI 2013b, 379.
364. LI 2 2013, 379.
begins her struggle to reach him.

In the last chapter of the volume, we learn that Lala still has not found a new job and that she still feels lonely and helpless at work and in life. Apparently, she is earning a significant amount of money because of her investments in the stock market, but her consumerist lifestyle fails to make her happy and making money without working seems morally problematic for her. The chapter ends with a focus on Wang Wei who decides to contact Lala when she finally resigns from DB. We can thus observe that none of the lacks are liquidated at the end of the second volume, illustrating the author's will to continue the saga.

The beginning of the third volume emphasizes Du Lala's belonging to the middle class and her inclination for shopping and luxury brands. The reader is reminded that Lala is still struggling to find a new job, and that she has been looking for six months. The reasons for her wish to leave DB are also reiterated:

According to the company's rules, before an employee resigns from DB, the HR department has to conduct an interview to understand the reasons for the departure. Many people had said similar things to Du Lala: they were leaving to save face. Du Lala had always thought that the concept of face was superficial and that taking it too seriously was stupid. However, when she had to face this kind of situation herself, she realized that she could turn a blind eye to the fact that she was underestimated or treated unfairly, but that she could not stand to lose face.  

The story insists on the fact that Lala has no more opportunities to grow at DB, which gives her the impression of losing face if she stays.

In chapter seventeen, in which Lala spends Chinese New Year at her parents' place in Hangzhou, we are reminded that she is still struggling to reconnect with Wang Wei as well. During a discussion with her brother she asserts her need to solve her personal problems on her own:

Lala twitched her mouth: "I'm a representative of the middle class, people like me find happiness relying only on their own efforts, why should I need your help?"  

After the conversation, Lala calls Wang Wei and asks for his permission to contact him again in the future. In chapter nineteen, she is informed that she will receive an offer to work for SH. However, she does not seem happy because she worries about which kind of position it will be. In the following chapter, she finally meets with Wang Wei again, and their relationship gets a fresh start in chapter twenty-one, marking Lala's victory in the personal realm. In the same chapter, a conversation between Lala and her brother introduces the question of how she plans on balancing

366. LI 3 2010, 128.
professional and personal goals:

Lala explained: "Listen, I just found a new job, I will think about that [moving to Beijing with Wang Wei] after having been a C&B manager for two years. This is very important for my professional development. I always refused to move to Shanghai because of my personal preferences and because of the moving costs, but I have no obligations to stay in Guangzhou in the future, and I actually really like Beijing." Du Tao nodded and continued warning his little sister: "And when do you plan on having kids?" Lala simply answered: "Before I turn thirty-five!" Seeing that Lala seemed very relaxed with that topic, Du Tao asked again: "Wang Wei is about three years older than you, right? Do you know what his family thinks about all that?" Lala smiled: "This only concerns Wang Wei and me. I'm sure that he will support me. Wang Wei is very optimistic, and he understands my professional pursuit, I like this about him. As for what his family thinks, to be honest, I don't want to think about it too much, it's my life, the most important thing is what makes me feel satisfied and happy. See, I don't care about what mom says."367

In the twenty-fifth chapter, Lala resigns from DB, marking her victory on the professional front, as her most recent objective was to find a new job and to have the opportunity to work in the C&B field. She is sad to leave the company where she worked for so long but seems determined:

No matter how nostalgic she felt, she had already decided to start a new life. At that moment, Lala finally understood the real meaning of the saying "life is a journey, today, my boat has to weigh anchor and head toward a new harbor..."368

However, when she starts working for SH, Lala apparently feels a new lack, because some of her superiors seem unhappy with her hiring and because the structure of the company is not as clear and standardized as the one of DB. In chapter twenty-nine, we understand that Lala's new goal is to obtain the recognition and approval of her direct superior, Huang Guodong, who seems hostile towards her, and to contribute to the growth of the company. Thus begins a new struggle phase for Du Lala who has to practice her Cantonese and who decides to change her dressing style and hair color to please Huang Guodong. She also pours her heart and soul into work and accumulates extra hours. Despite her hard work, Huang Guodong still seems to hold her in disdain. She fears that he does not see her value and capacities and that it puts her at risk to be laid-off.

In the thirty-fifth chapter, Lala's relationship with Huang Guodong seems to start changing for the better. However, we learn that Lala's health is suffering from her work overload. In chapter forty-three, when we understand that Lala's most important project is a success and that she gained Huang Guodong's approval, which could constitute a victory, she suddenly expresses new professional objectives, implying that she is still not satisfied with her achievements and is still feeling a lack.

367. LI 3 2010, 165.
368. LI 3 2010, 184.
Apparently, her new goal is to become SH's HR director:

"I want to try - if I give up before being a director I will regret it, I worked so hard until now. But, actually, what I want even more, is to one day be able to share my life experiences with people who need it."  

The chapter ends with an announcement that Lala's struggle is not about to end:

Behind Lala, out the window, there was a beautiful lawn with luxuriant trees. The birds perched in the trees were singing to express their sorrow about human affairs. One day that Lala was not feeling very well, He Chali teased her by saying: "Do you understand what they [the birds] say? The richer, the poorer health, the richer, the poorer health." Li Weidong added: "What I hear is: It never ends [in English in the Chinese text], It never ends!" Lala understood that Li Weidong was laughing about the fact that there was so much work to do at SH that it would be impossible to ever finish it.

At the beginning of volume four, we understand that Lala is exhausting herself working for SH, but that the results she obtains do not match her expectations. Apparently, Wang Wei is worried for her deteriorating health and does not understand why she works so hard, as he is not excessively ambitious himself. Lala's professional goal is reiterated at the beginning of this volume:

"My dream is to specialize in sharing workplace experiences and to work freelance. I don't like to do many things at the same time, I want to focus on doing one or two things well and dedicate my life to do those things right. Now I need to accumulate some HR experiences to reach this ideal. What do you think?" [...] That evening, the word ideal had ignited a light in Lala's heart that she had not felt for a long time, she was a person who lived for her ideals.

Throughout the volume, we understand that, at work, Lala is less appreciated than her rival, Li Weidong, even if she works harder. Her struggle in this volume thus aims at obtaining enough professional experience and recognition to be promoted to HR director, or to start her own business activities.

We understand that tensions are emerging between Wang Wei and Lala because her focus on career delays any discussion about settling down and starting a family. They nonetheless decide to get married but, shortly after, Lala discovers that Lu Baobao, Wang Wei's boss and relative, who seems to be secretly in love with him, started dating Zhang Dongyu. Zhang Dongyu asks Lala to not speak about their former relationship, but she refuses. Wang Wei seems to accept her past even if he is upset to know that she was living with Zhang Dongyu without being married. Instead, Lu Baobao develops a strong hatred for Lala and tries to sabotage her relationship with Wang Wei, thus starting

369. LI 3 2010, 284.
370. LI 3 2010, 286-287.
371. LI 4 2011, 5.
a new struggle for the heroine who has to try to save her marriage. We also learn that it is more and more difficult for Wang Wei to accept that Lala postpones their common plans to further her own career goals:

Wang Wei asked: "What progress do you plan to make at SH?" Lala answered very proudly: "As I am so hard-working and smart, I will stay two more years to learn all there is to learn about HR. Then, I will have many options - I can see if there is an opportunity to become director, I could even try to start my independent career and specialize in offering professional HR guidance to twenty to forty year old people. At the very least, finding a position of HR manager in a big firm in Beijing would not be difficult." Wang Wei nodded, thinking that her ambition came back with her health! Wasn't she saying that she would stay in SH only for a year, two maximum? Moreover, she had never mentioned wanting to become director before, and now that she had been at SH for almost a year, she was suddenly saying that she wanted to stay two more years and that she wanted to become director - if she really wanted to be director, it would probably take more than two or even three years. Wang Wei asked: "You have added many elements to your plan, will it change again?" Lala waved her hand: "How can I answer to that? Plans always have troubles to keep up with changes!"

In the following chapters, Lala works harder than ever, and her relationship with Wang Wei keeps deteriorating because of Lu Baobao's scheming and Wang Wei's mother's disapproval. In chapter forty-one, Lala is offered an opportunity to get closer to her professional ideal when a former colleague from DB, Tong Jiaming, informs her that he is creating a training center to help young people find jobs. Lala agrees to help him with this endeavor while still focusing most of her energy on becoming a director. Later on, we learn that they write a manual together as part of the project. In the fifty-ninth chapter, Wang Wei's mother has a stroke, apparently as a consequence of her learning about the common past of Lala and Zhang Dongyu. After this event, Lala and Wang Wei decide to separate for a while. In the meantime, Lala seems happier with the work she does with Tong Jiaming than with her position at SH. In chapter sixty, Li Weidong is promoted to HR director, putting an end to Lala's professional aspirations at SH. In the sixty-third chapter, she resigns from SH, despite Huang Guodong's attempts to make her stay:

Lala said hastily: "Boss, thank you, really. But stop fighting. I don't want to leave because I'm not happy with my salary or with my position. To tell you the truth, I already made up my mind, I want a different life." Huang Guodong sighed: "So I'm just going to congratulate you. To be honest, Lala, I really envy your ability to make that choice." Lala felt a bit embarrassed, she smiled and asked him if he was angry. Huang Guodong answered straightforwardly: "When I had just heard you say that you were leaving, I was not happy. But I had already heard about your situation and I prepared myself for this eventuality, so I

372. LI 4 2011, 142.
got over it fast. Actually, don’t we all work so hard to be able to live the life you are choosing?\textsuperscript{373}

We understand that Lala wants to keep writing for the project she started with Tong Jiaming.

The sixty-fifth and ultimate chapter of the saga happens in the fall of 2010, namely, three years after the beginning of the volume. We learn that Wang Wei received the divorce papers from Lala and that her book is selling very well. It thus seems that she has finally reached victory on the professional front, as she now works independently and is able to do what she loves, writing manuals to help young professionals in their careers. In this last chapter, Wang Wei and Lala randomly run into each other and, after spending a night together, decide to renew their relationship, giving the impression that Lala obtains victory on the personal front as well.

As we can see, the main story line of the saga is relatively simple, even if the last volume is rendered more eventful by the marital problems of Lala and Wang Wei. Numerous chapters of all the four volumes describe how Lala deals with the tasks she is entrusted with and the problems she encounters at work. These events emphasize her hard work and competence and provide the reader with detailed information about different aspects of the HR profession, but they do not contribute significantly to the main plot.

The volumes two to four also give great importance to a side story centered on the character of Sha Dangdang, a young employee of the Chengdu branch of DB. She apparently comes from a modest family and seems very ambitious. Her dream is to join the Guangzhou office, where Lala works. To achieve this goal, she will try, in vain, to sleep with Sun Jiandong, one of Lala's colleagues. She will also try to gain the favor of another manager of the Guangzhou office, She Nansheng, by giving her a photo of Wang Wei with a woman, which She Nansheng will use to destabilize Lala. However, there does not seem to be any opportunity for her to reach her goal at DB, and she thus starts working for a smaller company based in Guangzhou. After moving there, she starts dating Ye Tao, a young drifter whose sister is married to Sun Jiandong. Sha Dangdang has a great influence on Ye Tao and helps him to get better jobs and to become more serious with his life and career. Sha Dangdang seems to be ready to do anything to increase her wealth, join the middle class and earn the respect of Ye Tao's family, who all despise her because she is seen as a migrant worker from the countryside. Described as not very beautiful, she will go through plastic surgery to improve her looks. She also lies to Ye Tao about her attempt to sleep with Sun Jiandong and about the amount of money she spends to renovate his parents' apartment. When Ye Tao learns about these events, he breaks up with her. Later in the story, Sha Dangdang asks him for help because she accumulated large debts by making risky investments in the stock market and by buying an apartment she could not really afford. Ye Tao will agree to help her because he realizes that she always supported and

\textsuperscript{373} LI 4 2011, 313.
loved him. In the last chapter of the fourth volume, we learn that they got married despite the disapproval of Ye Tao's parents.

The reasons for the importance of this side story are unclear. One of them might be that it adds suspense and excitement to the main story line. Sha Dangdang is very different from Du Lala, she is ready to use morally questionable means to succeed while the heroine is always honest and strictly righteous. In a way, Sha is also manipulative and utilitarian in her relationships with men: she tries to use Sun Jiandong for professional advancement and uses her own professional and economic status to get Ye Tao - described as much more attractive than she is - interested in her. Like Du Lala, but to a greater extent, she is despised by other characters in the story because of her background and her lack of sophistication. However, she also seems to develop real feelings for Ye Tao and helps him greatly throughout the story. The fact that she also seems to find her happiness at the end of the saga shows that her story is not used to illustrate how morally questionable behaviors are always punished.
Chapter 4: *Fuchen* 《浮沉》, Cui Manli崔曼莉

4.1 General Information

The two volumes of *Ups and Downs* were first published in 2008 and 2009 by the Shaanxi Normal University Publishing House before being reedited by the same entity in 2012. Before that, the first volume was published in episodes on the forum Tianya Club between September 21st, 2007 and April 25th, 2008. The online origins of the novels have been described in chapter one, as has its adaptation into a TV series. The two published volumes of the incomplete trilogy count 337 and 336 pages respectively. They narrate how a young college graduate moved from Hangzhou to Beijing to work as a receptionist in an American IT company before being transferred to the sales department thanks to the trust and support of the director of the company's China branch. The heroine is then entrusted with a complex contract - the technological reform of Jingtong Electronics - which will be the main focus of the two volumes. Through this work assignment, the inexperienced heroine gets involved in a complicated and, at times, illegal affair between her company, Saisi, Jingtong Electronics, some rival firms and the government.

4.2 Paratext

4.2.1 Author's Presentation

The edition of *Fuchen* used in the present research is a 2012 reedition of the 2008 and 2009 volumes. According to the author's presentation printed on the inside cover at the beginning of each of the two books, Cui Manli studied literature at the University of Nanjing and started a career in freelance fiction writing (*ziyou chaungzuo* 自由创作) in 2001. The presentation evokes the publication of a few short stories in different literary magazines and three awards Cui received for her early short stories and novels in 2003, 2004 and 2006. The presentation then mentions that *Ups and Downs* was originally posted online in 2007, under a pseudonym, and that it was first published in 2008. In 2009, the author is said to have received an award for a historical novel. In 2010, the second volume of *Ups and Downs* was apparently chosen as one of the "fifty best must-read novels" (*zuijia de du de wushi ben xiaoshuo* 最佳得读的五十本小说). The presentation is concluded as follows:

She defines herself as a writer, or, even, as someone who never stops writing.

The addresses of Cui Manli’s blog and microblog, as well as portraits of the author, are also printed on the inside covers. We can observe that, in this edition at least, the author’s presentation focuses on her literary rather than professional achievements - even if, as we learned from an interview,375 she is the vice-director of a company, the Beijing Yingpai Ruike Keji Fazhan Youxian Gongsi 北京英派瑞克科技发展有限公司.376 According to the same interview, she was nineteen year old at the end of the 1990s, meaning that she was probably born at the end of the 1970s.

4.2.2 Preface and Postface

In the preface of the first volume of Ups and Downs, titled "Doing something I really love" (Zuo yi jian zhenzheng ai de shiqing 做一件真正爱的事情), Cui Manli starts by evoking how she juggles work and her writing activities, and how the former inspires the later. She explains that writing allows her to transcend her own existence and to share it with other people. She then emphasizes the difficulties and loneliness of the writer's profession, despite the romantic image many people have of the life of authors. She asserts that the only motivation able to push someone to overcome these difficulties is a real love of writing. The preface ends as follows:

Many people ask me how to be successful. Actually, those people should ask that question to themselves. If they really love the things they plan to do, will they fear the price to pay? Will failure really feel like a loss?377

We can observe that, like the author's presentation, this preface is centered on the literary rather than professional activities of the author. Her profession is merely mentioned as a source of inspiration for writing. As we will see when discussing the rest of the paratext, in the case of Ups and Downs, the author seems to give little importance to the establishment of a referential pact. Instead, she emphasizes the creation of the novel as an artistic endeavor, which cannot really fail because it is ultimately justified by her love of this activity. Here, the referential pact and the appeal to readers to use the novel as a model and as a guide are solely distinguishable in the elements of the paratext that are not from the author's hand, like the writing on the cover and the chapters' appendixes. As Li Ke does when asserting that she hopes for her book to make a difference in people's lives, Cui Manli seems to be willing to distance her work from the characteristics for which the genre is often advertised - namely, the works' usefulness as career handbooks. However, while Li Ke embraces a social mission as the transcendent purpose of her writing, Cui Manli seems to be choosing an artistic one.

375.  DORA. "President Writer - Cui Manli youzhou zai zongcai he zuojia zhi jian" “President Writer - 崔曼莉游走在总裁和作家之间” [President Writer - Cui Manli between director and author], People Beatles, 2009, 2009/6, pp.86-89.
376.  No relevant result appears when searching for the name of this company online.
377.  CUI 2012, preface.
In the preface of the second volume, Cui Manli explains that, even if the first opus of the novel became a bestseller, the writing process is difficult. She also describes how she overcame these difficulties and managed to complete the second volume, realizing that:

I am a writer, I write to write.  

The author then refers to readers' letters and emails stating that they enjoyed *Ups and Downs* because they were able to identify with the heroine. She asserts that she did not write the novel only to "tell a story" (*xie yi ge gushi 写一个故事*), but to share the experiences of people around her and her own feelings about them. She continues:

My readers are the strongest people in the world. They created a community around me and, through that community, they made friends, shared life experiences, asked questions and advice, and told their own stories. I am not their idol, I am their comrade-in-arms. Borrowing a sentence from "Fuchen": We are a team! We are a group of people who are doing their best and are trying to master their own destinies. Churchill said that a nation able to forget is a great nation. I want to tell my readers that, even if we are a team, my only hope is that writing will enrich my own life and theirs. I have no other expectation. It is difficult to master destiny, and that's what makes life interesting.

We can observe that, in this second preface, Cui Manli keeps emphasizing the importance of her literary activities and her identity as a writer. She also evokes the feedbacks of readers and the community formed by the fans of her novel. As we have seen, interactions between writers and readers is a specificity of contemporary Internet-related literature in China. Moreover, numerous workplace novels are advertised for the sense of community and belonging they provide to their white-collar readers, showing them that they are not alone in their hardships, doubts and anxieties. This preface seems to be a good illustration of these tendencies and shows that they are not limited to the realm of advertisement but that they have been integrated by the authors themselves.

4.2.3 Cover, Band and Layout

The two volumes of Cui Manli's saga used for the present research belong to the edition commemorating the sale of a million copies. Both book covers show a golden medal with that inscription on them. Both covers have straps of different shades, the first volume red and the second one golden. Both are subtitled "Most popular survival urban novel" (*zui jili renxin de dushi shengcun xiaoshuo 最激励人心的都市生存小说*). The first volume's cover also holds the inscription:

378. CUI 2012b, preface.
379. CUI 2012b, preface.
380. CUI 2012b, preface.
Dedicated to those who experiment in the workplace and drift in the sea of business without ever giving up.

On the back cover, we can read:

Apprehend the workplace's highest realms, understand the apex of trade war - a novel authentically revealing a coming of age in the foreign workplace and the wisdom necessary for business.

Following that are the recommendations of three writers, including Li Ke, a movie director, an editor and three businessmen. The back cover of the first volume also shows the logos of the websites Sina, Tianya and Sohu.

On the inside cover at the beginning of the first volume, over the presentation and picture of the author, the reader is given a summary of the plot. The novel is then said to focus on displaying the vicissitudes and hardships of the workplace, specifically in foreign companies, and on the suspense and thrill of business war. The presentation finishes as follows:

No matter if you are a newbie or a veteran of the workplace, from this book, you will gain the wisdom and motivation to strive and a sympathetic response to your feelings!

The inside cover at the end of the book presents a "Ups and Downs Chronicle" ("Fuchen" dashiji 《浮沉》大事记). The first events mentioned in the chronicle are the sudden resignation of Chen Yongzheng, Microsoft's global vice-director and China branch CEO, on September 19th, 2007, and the appearance of Ups and Downs on the forum Tianya Club three days later. The interest of readers in the novel and the author's identity are here presented as a consequence of the resemblance between the beginning of the text - also taking place in the IT field - and this event. Five days later, a special column on the novel is created on Sina and is clicked more than a hundred thousand times on the same day. Six days later, more than a hundred websites and forums relay and discuss the novel and its mysterious author. Seven days later, a competition starts among editors to publish the book. Three months later, a contract is signed with the Shaanxi Normal University Publishing House.

The book is also accompanied by an advertising band reminding us of the existence of a TV show adapted from the novel and that it was recommended by Zhang Yaqin, global vice-director of Microsoft, Mai Jia, winner of the Mao Dun literary award, and Li Ke, author of Du Lala Go!. The band also states:

Cui Manli, the young female writer who has attracted so much attention, proposes a powerful work of realism displaying the full picture of contemporary China's trade war and workplace turmoil. You are not alone, let's face life's ups and downs together.

The book contains a list of the important characters of the novel, hierarchically classified according to the different companies they work for. Before the first chapter, readers are also offered a short
Looking back at the IT sector’s past twenty years in China, full of ups and downs, we can see that the progress of foreign owned companies and of the talented people working for them has followed the progress of the era. I, the author, thought about these complex changes and couldn't help but expressing my feelings about them. I wrote *Ups and Downs* to comfort myself and to share my feelings with all of you.\(^3\)\(^{381}\)

It is then asserted that the novel is fictional and that resemblance with real people or events is coincidental. The last noteworthy paratexual element is that each chapter of the book is followed by reflections and advice related to the content of the chapter, which are listed in a "guide to progress in the workplace" (*zhichang xingzou zhinan* 职场行走指南), and a "Classic of trade war" (*shangzhan shengjing* 商战胜经).

The second volume presents a very similar layout as the first one and has the same title and subtitle. The cover of the second volume also states: "a book with the power to change your destiny, a self-help book transcending the workplace" (*yi ben gaibian mingyun de litiang zhi shu, chaoyue zhichang de lizhi jingdian* 一本改变命运的力量之书，超越职场的励志经典). On the back cover, we can read "an excellent self-help book on contemporary Chinese trade war and the turmoil of the workplace" (*yibu zai xiandangdai zhongguo shangzhan yu zhichang fengyun de lizhi jiazuo* 一部再现当代中国商战与职场风云的励志佳作). Following that are the recommendations of five businesspeople and a writer. The inside cover at the beginning of the book proposes the same author's presentation as the first volume but accompanied by a different picture. The inside cover at the end of the book provides summaries of each of the volumes. The summary of the second volume ends as follows:

Contrarily to other trade war workplace novels, *Ups and Downs 2* covers all the levels of the professional hierarchy, it treats important questions like the reform of state enterprises and movements of capital, as well as more personal matters related to love and relationships. Everything is described in a clear, lively and unique way in the novel. No matter which kind of workplace person you are, this book will provide you with a beneficial experience and help you find your own way!

As we can see, this novel is mostly advertised for its suspense, its revelations about the business world, and its contribution to creating a sense of community and mutual support for people thriving in a ruthless workplace. All of these elements are similar to the way warfare workplace novels are usually advertised, and it should be emphasized that *Ups and Downs* is not described as a workplace novel but as an "urban survival novel", even if it is usually classified in the *zhichang* category in bookstores and academic articles. The emphasis on the novel's didactic function is less

\(^{381}\) CUI 2012, foreword.
prominent than in the cases of other books but is still present through the advice lists to be read at the end of each chapter and in the mention that the novel describes a "coming of age", which is generally not the case for warfare novels. The book is also advertised through the reminder of its own success - with the mention of sales numbers, popularity, adaption into TV series, famous people's recommendatons, etc. - and through the mystery surrounding its genesis online, linked to an important event of the business world.

4.3 Characters

4.3.1 The Heroine

At the beginning of *Ups and Downs* we learn that the heroine, Qiao Li, who sometimes goes by the English name Annie, is a "typical IT white-collar woman" (*dianxing de IT jie bailing nüxing* 典型的IT界白领女性).\(^{382}\) Through a meeting with the executive director of her company, we learn that she has a deep knowledge of the functioning of the company, despite the fact that she is only a receptionist. In the eyes of her boss, Qiao Li is apparently different from the other female employees of the company: she is discreet and polite but also smart, ambitious and determined. She is also described as having a strong sense of appropriateness (*feichang you fencon gan* 非常有分寸感), which is appreciated.\(^{383}\) We understand that she is kindhearted when she buys an incomplete newspaper from a street child. Qiao Li is described as down to earth and as having been strongly influenced by her father, a former official and philosophy aficionado. For example, she refuses to compromise her health or her well-being in order to lose weight or to buy expensive clothes and accessories. She seems to follow a simple and healthy lifestyle and often turns to her father for comfort and advice. She works hard and studies the specificities of her job in her free time.

Through the comments of Liu Mingda, one of Qiao Li's colleagues, we understand that she is perceived as serious (*yansu* 严肃), and unapproachable (*buhao jiejin* 不好接近).\(^{384}\) The reader also learns that Qiao Li lives alone in Beijing, away from her family who are still in Hangzhou. Apparently, Qiao Li makes a good first impression on her new superior, Lu Fan, who sees her as smart and fast-learning. Lu Fan also notices that she is inexperienced and naive and feels uneasy with the idea that he will have to use these characteristics to his advantage. In general, Qiao Li's male colleagues and clients seem to find her pretty and attractive, but her female colleagues criticize her for being fat and unsophisticated. Qiao Li seems to have an outstanding memory and good analysis capacities. However, at times, some of the older and more experienced men she encounters

\(^{382}\) CUI 2012, 2.

\(^{383}\) CUI 2012, 4.

\(^{384}\) CUI 2012, 13.
at work, including Lu Fan, mistake her inexperience and straightforwardness for stupidity. Lu Fan seems to believe that she is too ambitious and has an excessively aggressive approach to business, which he considers to be outdated. Qiao Li’s serious, determined and bold attitude is described as a consequence of the way she was raised, as her father taught her how to face difficulties with optimism and to never give up. She is often said to be different from other girls her age, to be more poised, serious and simple, which older colleagues seem to appreciate.

Throughout the story, we also understand that Qiao Li feels helpless and lost in the important business strategies unfolding around her, which frustrates her and gives her the impression of being used. She will show a strong competency for scheming and protecting herself, which is not appreciated by her superiors who interpret her attitude as a lack of trust and excessive individualism. She is often described as lacking femininity and gentleness, as a consequence of her education, which emphasized strength, independence and courage. Even her parents seem to partly regret not teaching her how to be more feminine, fearing that it will be difficult for her to find a partner. Her superiors and parents apparently think that she is too strong and susceptible, and that she acts like she does not need anyone's help, which seems to be a problem at work. These characteristics of the heroine are associated with an outdated, socialist vision of women, which is appreciated by older men but not by Qiao Li's peers and potential partners. Apparently, the heroine's social life is almost nonexistent, and she feels lonely and isolated in Beijing. One of her only friends is a mysterious man she talks with online. Qiao Li feels abnormal because she does not share the interest in love and relationships of other women her age. Contrarily to her female colleagues, she is not interested in fashion and does not know how to flirt or seduce men. The story implies that Lu Fan and Qiao Li might have feelings for each other but nothing concrete happens in the two published volumes.

In the second volume, we learn that Qiao Li is becoming slightly more mature and feminine but that she is still serious and disinterested in her physical appearance. She now seems to trust Lu Fan more, and he looks more satisfied with her work than before:

Lu Fan nodded. No matter what happened, Qiao Li's quick reactions were very satisfactory.

Even if her tendency to think herself clever brought many annoyances, she was dedicated, a fast learner and tenacious, which he all appreciated.385

Despite this improvement, Qiao Li still feels lost in the important affairs of the company. Lu Fan seems to think that Qiao Li has a good moral standing (renpin 人品), which is more important than talent in his eyes. Qiao Li's kindheartedness is emphasized one more time when she gives one month of her salary to the Red Cross after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. We also discover that Qiao Li's Internet friend is a finance specialist named Zhou Xiong who happens to be involved with her

385. CUI 2012b, 61.
work. They go on a date, but Zhou Xiong is unwilling to start a relationship with her as long as they are professionally involved in the same affair. We also understand, throughout the volume, that the heroine has lost the naïveté and innocence characterizing her in the first opus. At the end of the volume, Qiao Li realizes that she has feelings for Lu Fan.

Like Du Lala, Qiao Li is mainly characterized by her hard-working, determined and serious attitude at work. She is described as strong willed, determined and ambitious. She seems to be so focused on her career that she has no time to develop any bond with people her age. As she was educated by a former official, her personality and behavior are said to be outdated and unfeminine, which illustrates the changes in requirements for women in the past decades. Indeed, neglecting romantic love, consumption and physical appearance to dedicate oneself to ideals was once perceived as positive but, nowadays, women are apparently expected to be able to consume the products necessary for the improvement of their physical appearance, as well as to be feminine, gentle, and seductive, which Qiao Li fails to accomplish.

4.3.2 Positive Characters, or Helpers

Contrarily to the Du Lala saga, Ups and Downs focuses on events occurring in a short time period and describes a tumultuous and difficult beginning of career for the heroine, who does not benefit from a lot of sincere and consistent help throughout the story. In the professional realm, the only character who seems to help her without ulterior motives, only because he believes in her, is Cheng Yiqun, the administrative director of Saisi, who resigns at the beginning of the first volume. When Qiao Li wants to quit Saisi after having worked as a receptionist for a year, because she is not offered any development opportunity, Cheng Yiqun convinces her to stay and gives her the chance to join the sales department, which is her dream. Cheng Yiqun's kind smile is often mentioned in his interactions with Qiao Li, and he is compared to a caring parent. We do not have a lot of information about Cheng Yiqun, but we know that he is from Taiwan and came to work in mainland China about twenty years before the beginning of the story. He seems charismatic and always polite and kind. Apparently, he sincerely cares about all of his employees, as illustrated by the help and support he gives to the heroine. However, as Cheng Yiqun resigns at the very beginning of the story, he cannot keep supporting Qiao Li throughout the narrative. Moreover, the fact that he obviously favored her by giving her an unlikely promotion raises jealousy and resentment.

Throughout the first and second volumes, Qiao Li is assisted and guided by different characters. Liu Mingda, a colleague of approximately her age introduces her to her first clients. Lu Fan, the new director of the sales department, also assists her in her work. He is about forty year old and lived and studied in the United States for a long time. He is depicted as elegant, cosmopolitan, westernized and, at times, detached from China's realities. When Qiao Li is entrusted with a major case, the restructuring of Jingtong Electronics, Lu Fan is brought to work with her and guide her. He
Chengfeng, an American born Chinese man who takes Cheng Yiqun's place after his resignation, will also be involved in the Jingtong case and thus be in contact with Qiao Li. He is described as warm and kind and as making people forget about hierarchical differences. He will consistently show kindness and support to Qiao Li, as will Ouyang Gui, a friend of He Chengfeng and the new vice-president of Saisi, who also joins the Jingtong case. Ouyang is described as a fierce man who spent some time in jail for mysterious reasons around 1989. He seems nostalgic for the socialist era and highly values Qiao Li's "Iron girl" appearance and behavior. He will help her with her work throughout the two volumes and even secretly help her to blackmail a man who is sexually harassing her. Finally, Di Yunhai, friend of Lu Fan and He Chengfeng and newly hired in the sales department, will often play the role of mediator between Lu Fan and Qiao Li - who he seems to really appreciate - because their relationship is often tense.

However, all of these male figures have ulterior motives to help Qiao Li. Liu Mingda wants to start a romantic relationship with her and treats her harshly and unfairly when he understands that his efforts will not lead him anywhere. Lu Fan, He Chengfeng, Ouyang Gui and Di Yunhai all use Qiao Li, to some extent at least, to further the goals of the company. Indeed, they take advantage of her inexperience and naïveté to protect themselves in case a problem occurs in their affairs, making her the scapegoat of the team. Despite his positive feelings for Qiao Li, Lu Fan is generally harsh and severe towards her and does not always have a very high opinion of her capacities. He Chengfeng, Ouyang Gui and Di Yunhai show more kindness and support to the heroine than the other characters throughout the two volumes. At the end of the second opus, Lu Fan, Di Yunhai and Ouyang Gui all resign from Saisi, leaving Qiao Li fully accountable for the newly signed contract with Jingtong and raising her doubt on the possible illegality of the agreement. Apparently, Di Yunhai is the only one involved in the Jingtong case who feels uncomfortable with leaving Qiao Li to face the consequences of the affair alone.

On the personal front, Qiao Li is described as isolated and solitary both in the company and in her private life, which is linked to the fact that she is described as too independent and unapproachable. However, she seems to have a close relationship with her parents, especially her father, to whom she frequently goes for comfort and advice. At times, their relationship encounters difficulties because Qiao Li feels that some of her father's teaching are incompatible with the new world she is discovering, and which her father does not seem to understand. The story mentions only two friends of Qiao Li's: Fang Min, who still lives in Hangzhou and seems to care greatly about the marital status of the heroine, and the Internet friend she often talks with online and who turns out to be Zhou Xiong, a partner of Saisi in the Jingtong case, as the reader discovers in the second volume. We believe that *Ups and Downs* purposely represents Qiao Li as isolated and helpless when she goes through all sorts of professional difficulties in order to emphasize her will power, hard work, determination and self-reliance.
4.3.3 Negative Characters, or Villains

In *Ups and Downs*, as soon as Qiao Li is promoted to the sales department, her colleague Rebecca displays jealousy and resentment towards her. She constantly criticizes and mocks her. Rebecca is described as a childish and superficial young woman whose bitterness is linked to her problematic relationship with a boyfriend she eventually marries in the second volume. She is depicted as excessively emotional, gossiping, and irrationally jealous. However, she does not really manage to undermine Qiao Li's work or status in the company, and their relationship slightly improves in the second volume. In the first volume, Qiao Li also meets the hostility of Linda, a fierce and highly competent saleswoman who is said to be jealous of her youth and whose aim is to be entrusted with the Jingtong case, originally given to Qiao Li. Even though Linda's competency is recognized in the company, she is pitied and criticized for being in her late thirties and still single. Her marital status is often referred to in order to explain her jealousy and bitterness, but also her professional proficiency and focus on material gain. In the second volume, Linda gets married and her resentment for Qiao Li vanishes. At the beginning of the story, the heroine's progress is also slightly delayed by Qiang Guojun, an old employee appointed to be her mentor. Qiang Guojun used to work with Linda and to benefit from her high performances by receiving important bonuses. He is thus very displeased about working with a newbie like Qiao Li and refuses to teach her anything valuable.

The novel depicts a few more negative characters working for Saisi. Some of them display ill intentions or behavior towards Qiao Li, others do not seem to have any influence on her professional or personal path. Shi Difu, the vice-president of the marketing department, tries to make the Jingtong case fail and, at times, uses Qiao Li to do so, but his main goal is to have He Chengfeng fired, not to harm the heroine. In the second volume, Jessy, another superficial and manipulative female colleague of Qiao Li's, is asked by her boyfriend - who previously worked for Saisi and later joined a rival company - to spy on Qiao Li and on the Jingtong case, but her attempts to obtain information seem to fail. The superior of Jessy and Rebecca, Vivian, arrived from Hong Kong in the first volume, is a highly negative character represented as emotionally unstable, unprofessional and sexually promiscuous. She is protected by Shi Difu and is supposed to help him in his plot against He Chengfeng but does not seem to make any substantial damage due to her personal problems and imbalance. Finally, towards the end of the second volume, Bai Zhong is hired in the sales department and works with Qiao Li on a few occasions. During dinners with clients, he forces her to drink heavily and jokes about her sleeping with some of their guests to facilitate the transactions.

Outside of Saisi, numerous characters working for rival companies try to hinder the advancement of the Jingtong case. However, their attacks are generally not directed at Qiao Li, and she is usually
not the one dealing with them. In the first volume, Qiao Li is sexually harassed by Fang Weijun, chief engineer for Jingtong Electronics, who threatens to make Saisi lose the contract if she refuses to become his mistress. With the discreet help of Ouyang Gui, Qiao Li manages to contact his wife and to force him to leave her alone.

We can observe that *Ups and Downs* depicts an isolated heroine who has to face numerous threats both from inside and outside the company. As we have seen, the jealousies she raises eventually fade, probably in relation to a change of attitude occurring towards the end of volume one, when she tries to become more approachable and to build relationships with her colleagues, and the jealousy does not really affect her private life in the long term. The difficulties she encounters in the Jingtong case are generally linked to professional schemes and politics that she is not really aware of and fails to fully understand. Most of the depictions of Qiao Li's relationships with the other characters of the novel give the impression of a lack of agency on her part, as she is constantly being used by different characters, negative and positive, who all have their own personal agenda.

4.4 Narrative Structure

The narrative structure of the first volume has already been presented in chapter one and will not be reiterated here. The first chapter of the second volume starts exactly where the first volume ended, with Wang Guilin, the director of Jingtong Electronics, announcing to the representatives of SK and Saisi that he needs seven hundred million yuan for the reform of his company and that he will sign a contract with the firm able to obtain that money for him. Qiao Li seems excited by everything she will have a chance to learn in the process. However, she soon realizes that her superiors are keeping her away from the discussions on the case and feels alienated and hopeless. Moreover, she has to close another deal rapidly to not be fired:

At that moment, Qiao Li didn't get any support from her superiors Lu Fan and Di Yunhai, nor any help from pre-sales managers, and she could rely only on her own contacts to go forward. She was not asked to help with the other tasks of the sales department and, little by little, the weekly meetings became her only interactions with her colleagues. No one in the department was asking for her help even when facing big difficulties, she was not invited to the coordination meetings between the pre-sales and the marketing departments and she was progressively becoming the company's loner. Everyone seemed to believe that she would not be there much longer and no colleague ever called her even to go to lunch or to chat. At the end of the trimester, Qiao Li received only half of her salary and became the only
In that difficult period, which represents the continuation of Qiao Li's struggle, she obtains Shi Difu's unlikely help to close a minor deal. Shi Difu also tells her that Lu Fan and He Chengfeng will hold her responsible for the failure of the Jingtong case, which he considers unfair. On the personal front, Qiao Li feels the pressure of her prolonged single status when her friend Fang Min calls to announce that she is pregnant and to urge her to get married and start a family before becoming a leftover woman. In the third chapter, Lu Fan assures Qiao Li that it was never his intention to keep her away from the Jingtong case and emphasizes the importance of her trust in him. As Qiao Li keeps struggling with her professional and personal life, the news of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake makes her question the meaning of her life and work:

At that moment, her everyday struggles seemed meaningless - if nature's smallest anger can destroy everything in an instant, isn't there something more in life than pursuing promotions and raises?  

Throughout the book, we understand that the Jingtong project, formally the responsibility of Qiao Li, is actually handled almost without her intervention. We also learn that Di Yunhai, Lu Fan, Ouyang Gui and He Chengfeng are creating a company together. Shi Difu explains to Qiao Li that she has been chosen as a scapegoat in case He Chengfeng's illegal manoeuvres in the Jingtong case are discovered:

Qiao Li repressed a cold laugh, so that's how it is in the workplace, when she was not used by He Chengfeng, she was used by Shi Difu... That was not what she wanted.

After a discussion with her father, Qiao Li questions her aspirations and goals:

What were her convictions? This was a very difficult question. And what was her original dream? When she was transferred from the reception desk to the sales department, what did she say to Cheng Yiqun? She said that the sales department guaranteed the functioning of the whole company. She said that she wanted a challenging job, that she wanted to be useful. Could this be her original dream?

Apparently, the fact that she is being used pushes her to question her agency and her motivations in the professional realm. She also tries to determine if the Jingtong case is really handled in an illegal way.

In chapter fourteen, the Jingtong reform begins, which is perceived as a great victory for Saisi, but which does not seem to satisfy Qiao Li:

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386. CUI 2012b, 10.
387. CUI 2012b, 111.
388. CUI 2012b, 187.
389. CUI 2012b, 201.
Everyone was excited by this seven hundred-million-yuan contract and was dreaming about the bonuses and the profits it might generate in the future. Qiao Li was the only one who, though not completely hermetic to the joy generated by this success, was feeling that this joy did not really belong to her: she couldn't decide if she wanted to play so big and to continue with this case.\(^{390}\)

Through conversations with Di Yunhai and He Chengfeng, Qiao Li keeps questioning her agency and her goals:

"So, who is my boss?" "Yourself," said Yunhai, laughing, "How can people become rich without being their own bosses?" "Myself?" Qiao Li laughed, "How can I be my own boss if I'm not paying my salary?" "You are wrong to think that way," answered Yunhai, "many people think that, because the company pays them, their bosses are the managers of the company. But in reality, every person is his own company, you are the only one able to make yourself your own boss, you have to understand that everyone works for himself, for his own development. That's the only way to do better and to go further in the workplace." Hearing that, Qiao Li started thinking and stayed silent for a while. Yunhai said joyfully, "Haven't you always been your own boss? Why do you seem so surprised?" "When have I been my own boss?" "Why are you working in sales?" "I..." "To earn money? To earn money fast? To earn a lot of money?" "No!" Qiao Li interrupted him straight away, "I just want to be capable." "Excellent! [in English in the Chinese text]" Said Yunhai, "To be your own master?" "Yes!" "So, you are your own boss, you are accountable only to yourself."\(^{391}\)

We understand that Qiao Li's vision of her work, goals and sense of loyalty are changing but that they are not fully determined yet.

In the last chapters of the novel, Lu Fan, Di Yunhai and Ouyang Gui all resign from Saisi. Qiao Li realizes that Lu Fan was waiting for her name to be on the Jingtong contract to leave and that she is now the sole person responsible for anything that might happen with that project in the future. She blames herself for having trusted him. The heroine grows more convinced that there is something illegal going on with the Jingtong case. In the final chapter, Qiao Li, desperate and helpless, goes alone to a bar, gets drunk and calls Lu Fan:

"I know I wanted to work in sales at the beginning, I just wanted to work hard enough to change my future. I want to earn money, is that so wrong? I want to earn money in an honest way: I sell products for the company, and the company gives me bonuses. I want to have a family in Beijing, I want to prove myself to my father, who supported me for twenty years. I got a Chinese college education, so I also want to prove myself to society. I want a life, a

\(^{390}\) CUI 2012b, 217.
\(^{391}\) CUI 2012b, 247.
good life!" [...] "I also want to prove myself to you."392

The volume ends the following day, with the discovery of a problem with the Jingtong case and Lu Fan having a car accident.

As we can see, the entirety of the second volume is dedicated to Qiao Li's struggle. Her original assignment, obtaining a contract with Jingtong Electronics, might be a success, but she does not consider it as her own victory, as she realizes that she has been used by her superiors all along. Instead of giving her a feeling of accomplishment and success, this event only pushes her to question her role and agency in the company, as well as her professional goals. The Sichuan earthquake also pushes her to reflect on the meaning of her own life. She seems to face a dilemma regarding her loyalty to the company, to the national laws and to herself. The last passage quoted above illustrates Qiao Li's goals of being in control of her own destiny and making money to have a good life and a family. We can observe that her goals are still far from being accomplished at the end of the second volume. The suspenseful end of the volume indicates the author's original intention to publish a third opus to the saga. The fact that this has not been the case to this day complicates the analysis of the novel.

392. CUI 2012b, 320.
Chapter 5: Miya, kuai pao 《米米娅，快跑》, Qin Yuxi 秦与希

5.1 General Information

Run, Mia was published in 2009 by the Peking University Press (Beijing daxue chubanshe 北京大学出版社) and originated online, on Tianya Club. In this 234 page novel, the narrator and heroine are the same person. The story describes how a Chinese literature major recently graduated from Beijing University is hired in a foreign company and how she tries to adapt to this new environment. Despite the heroine's good results, the process seems difficult and painful because her relaxed and carefree personality do not really fit the corporate world's expectations. Ultimately, the heroine quits her job and goes to France to continue her studies.

5.2 Paratext

5.2.1 Author's Presentation

According to a short presentation to be read on the inside cover at the end of Run, Mia, Qin Yuxi graduated from Beijing University, worked in a Fortune 500 company, and then studied in Europe. At the time of the book's edition, she was working in the media sector (muqian renzhi yu mou meiti 目前任职于某媒体). The 2009 article mentioned at the beginning of this part - an interview with the author - also reveals that Qin Yuxi was born in the 1970s, has a Master's degree in Chinese literature, and works as an editor for the Beijing University Publishing House, which produced her book. 393

5.2.2 Preface and Postface

In the prologue (xiezi 楔子), of Run, Mia, Qin Yuxi explains that the novel narrates the events of the past seven years. She also evokes that, according to her friend Xiao Han, she has always been a lucky person. However, the author considers the fact that she always had a purpose in mind and was always the master of her own fate to have been more determining in her life than luck.

The novel also contains a postscript (ba跋), where the author wonders what kind of readers might have liked "this dull novel" (zhe bu bing bu renao de xiaoshuo 这部并不热闹的小说). She then asserts that her work is different from any workplace novel they might have read before. She explains that most workplace novels - like Lose&Win, Du Lala Go!, and Ups and Downs, which she

393. ENG 2009.
mentions explicitly - give too much importance to trade war, to complicated love stories, and to the traps and schemes of the workplace, and thus become too exuberant and exaggerated. She explains:

I joined the workplace many years ago, I am not a newbie. Most of the people I met at work are like me, they never had the opportunity to take part in big trade wars, they were never entangled in complicated love stories, and no one ever wasted so much energy to set a trap to harm them either. All we ever do is work, and, once we are used to the pressure, we search for the meaning of this kind of life.  

Qin Yuxi then mentions four motives for the creation of the story: she wanted to explain that any work experience will make people gain maturity; to find a way to survive that did not imply working all day and all night; to show readers why Mia is so lucky; and to illustrate the importance of friendship between women, which is often overlooked in workplace novels. She then asserts that she is writing about her own experience in a Fortune 500 company, because it is the only type of workplace she knows. She also emphasizes that the workplace can be a place of friendship, mutual help, growth and happiness, not only of competition and rivalries. She concludes the postscript by evoking the online origin of the novel and by thanking the people who commented and enriched the text while she was posting it on Tianya Club.

Run, Mia is one of the most "autobiographical" novels of our corpus, which is illustrated in the prologue and postscript. Indeed, in the prologue, the author implies that the novel uses events from her own past and mentions a friend, Xiao Han, who is also the best friend of the novel's heroine. In the postscript, Qin Yuxi evokes her personal experience and knowledge of Fortune 500 companies. She also implies that her novel is more realistic and close to people's actual work experience than other workplace novels which are "exaggerated" (kuazhang 夸张). This novel is thus a good illustration of how the story's asserted realism, authenticity and proximity to readers' lives participate in a form of community building between the author, the character and the readership. Here, the author uses criticism of other works to emphasize the qualities of her own. The fact that Qin Yuxi refers to her own book as a workplace novel and that she mentions some recurrent narrative elements of the category allows us to think that, by 2009, when the novel was published, the zhichang category was already established as a genre and that this genre was already perceived as stereotypical, justifying the author's attempts to break away from those patterns.

5.2.3 Cover, Band and Layout

The design of Run, Mia is plain but gives a fresh and juvenile impression with its bright green cover decorated with the yellow silhouette of a girl walking or dancing, which reappears at the top left of each even page as well as on the back cover, to illustrate the journey of the heroine throughout the

book. On the front cover, the subtitle reads:

A heart-warming and interesting workplace novel.

And a supplementary sentence is printed on the lower right corner:

This book lets a group of like-minded people know of each other's existence.

On the back cover, we can read:

Would you rather be like a hero who obtains a dreary victory through innumerable hardships, or be happy like Mia?

Following that are the comments of three public figures of the literary realm - a literature professor of the Beijing University, a press publisher, and an author - and of a business woman. These comments emphasize the unicity of the narrative among workplace novels, attributed to the fact that it describes the everyday life of an ordinary employee, which can resonate with most readers, and holds a sort of universal truth and appeal. For example, the business woman's comment states:

*Run, Mia* is a story that could happen any day, in any company, and to any white collar, [...].

To read this novel is like looking into a mirror, you see yourself and all the people and the things that surround you.

The commenting author, Chen Tong 陈彤, also asserts that this novel will be mostly appreciated by white collars, especially women.

On the inside cover at the beginning of the book, we can read that the novel does not follow the same patterns as most workplace novels, which are to promote the superiority complex of the foreign-owned companies (*chuandi waiqi youyuegan* 传递外企优越感), to voluntarily exaggerate the descriptions of workplace conspiracies (*kuazhang songrentingwen de zhichang yinmou* 夸张耸人听闻的职场阴谋), and to invent complicated love quarrels (*bianzao zishuozihua de qinggan jiuge* 编造自说自话的情感纠葛). What follows is a brief summary of the plot, describing the heroine as a joyful and clever young girl who is hired at a Fortune 500 company after graduating from the most prestigious university in the country:

The only thing that doesn't change is Mia's conviction that, at work, investments should match results, and that to smartly "drift along" is the best plan. Mia and her two girlfriends have different professional attitudes and aspirations. Mia, who knows how to drift along, and Xiao Han, who has the least professional ambition, end up being the ones who are promoted the fastest, while the intelligent, diligent and ambitious Su doesn't do so well.

The summary then ends as follows:

Warm-hearted and without pretentions, sincere but not naive, Mia, the "little drifter" has friends, love and a sense of responsibility. She is a brand-new workplace icon, and we wish you to have a professional path like hers.
As we have already mentioned, the inside cover at the end of the book provides a few biographic elements about the author.

The fact that the subtitle classifies the story among workplace novels allows us to think that this term was already of common use in 2009 and that readers did not need any further explanation to understand which kind of story they were about to be offered. This qualification establishes a form of implicit "contract" between the producers and the consumers of the work, namely, that the novel will conform to the rules of the genre, progressively fixed by the earlier examples of the category. However, as we have seen, the paratext also emphasizes that Run, Mia strongly differs from most workplace novels. The reader is told that the present novel, though belonging to the zhichang category, will be different from its predecessors because it focuses on the relatable experiences of ordinary employees. Moreover, the paratext also emphasizes the fact that the narrative is heart-warming and allows identification and the emergence of a sense of community between readers and the main character. Mia is also described in a very unique way, in comparison to other workplace novels' heroines, as she is not valorized for her hard work and her grand ideals but, to the contrary, for her ability to spare her strengths and remain relaxed and happy at work. As we can see, there is no mention of a didactic function in the case of this novel, even if the readers are invited to long for the career and happiness of the heroine.

5.3 Characters

5.3.1 The Heroine

As we have mentioned, Run, Mia is written using the first person. At the beginning of the story, the narrator and heroine explains that most people call her Mia but that it is not her real name. She chose this pseudonym because her birth name was too masculine. She goes on by bringing up her studies in the department of Chinese literature of the most famous university in the country, and asserts that she does not know how she managed to enroll in such a prestigious institution, as she has no particular talent, except her luck. She also admits that she was never a very diligent student and always managed to do the bare minimum. Here is how Mia describes herself:

In this university, I felt like a potato, I had nothing remarkable, nothing particular.395

Mia also asserts that she does not have any particular purpose in life, and compares herself, on that matter, with her friend Xiao Han:

I think all women can be divided into two categories: the ones who always knew what they want in life, and the ones who discover it slowly, through a long and painful process. Xiao

Han belongs to the first category, me to the second. Of course, there are women who will go through their entire life without knowing what they want, but I set them apart, I think that they do not qualify as women, they belong to a third gender: the slackers.\footnote{QIN 2009, 3.}

The self-description of the heroine as being devoid of extraordinary talents is common in workplace novels, but Mia's lack of clear purpose and ambition is, instead, highly original because it contradicts the general underlying truth of the genre, namely, that one succeeds only through ambition, determination and hard work.

After graduating, Mia has no clear idea of what she would like to do and applies for a job in a very selective foreign company, QT. She does not believe in her chances to be considered but is nonetheless selected for an interview during which she lies abundantly. Through her lies, Mia manages to have QT's hirers believe that she was an outstanding student, and she is hired. Even if her ability to understand people and their expectations will be described as a talent in itself in the rest of the story, the fact that she is hired for a very desirable position without really deserving it, according to her own description of the events, differs greatly from other workplace novels where the opportunities and praises the heroines receive are always pictured as well-deserved. We can observe that the first chapter of the book, describing Mia's hiring, makes her appear like a smart but lazy drifter whose success in life is mainly due to luck. To illustrate this concept, we would like to emphasize that the title of the chapter is "Drifting into QT" (Hunjin QT 混进QT). In the rest of the story, Mia keeps advancing in her career despite her lack of zeal because she always manages to know and do what people expect from her and to get along with everyone. Her strong people skills are depicted as compensating for her lack of hard work and talent.

Despite Mia's careless attitude, it seems that her new job transforms her:

During the training, we, the new employees, had to learn about the glorious history of the company, and, more importantly, about its glorious present and the rapid development of the Chinese market, which was making the American headquarters see the country as a land of ceaseless miracles. My sense of pride, which had been inhibited, was reappearing. This training was like a religious ritual, it managed to rapidly brainwash all the participants, including me.\footnote{QIN 2009, 17.}

And later:

After receiving this inspiring training, I was determined to pour my heart and soul into work, but a second of inattention led to another disaster. The transition from Beijing University to QT was making me feel like a monkey going out of the forest to break in an elegant
Even if Mia doubts of her ability to ever get used to the pressure and the competitiveness of the company, she decides to work harder because she could not stand to be fired. Through Mia's discussion with her friends, the reader is introduced to their different attitudes towards work: Su is very ambitious and pours all of her energy into work in order to succeed; Xiao Han only wants to live a peaceful life and chooses a pressure-free employment; finally, Mia does not seem ambitious but is strongly attached to her agency and to her freedom of choice in her employment. Mia and Xiao Han agree on the fact that work should not take up someone's entire life, while Su holds the opposite opinion.

Through the story, Mia manages to get along with her various superiors. She is entrusted with more important tasks, which encourages her to work harder. She keeps questioning her life choices because she does not enjoy a life focused on work. As she learns to navigate through professional relationships, she feels like she is becoming manipulative. She also realizes that she is becoming more mature:

[...] for me, Peter's departure marked the end of an era. I was clearly saying goodbye to the old ignorant, impulsive, insecure and naive me.

Her diplomatic approach to office politics also helps her obtain a good evaluation. We understand that she has feelings for her direct superior, Leon, who soon quits the company, and that she flirts with her colleague Derek. The story keeps emphasizing how Mia's ability to get along with her superiors gives her an advantage over Su, even though the later is described as smarter, more talented and more hard-working than Mia, who seems to still be a drifter. Even if, as the story unfolds, Mia shows signs of adaptation to the corporate world - her style and appearance improve significantly, for example - through a psychological evaluation of QT's employees, we learn that she remains an outsider in the company and that her lifestyle does not make her happy. On a few occasions, Xiao Han asks Mia to write articles about white-collar life for her newspaper. Mia seems to enjoy writing more than her actual job and admits that she originally wanted to become a journalist. In the last chapter, we learn that Mia is taking French classes every weekend because she wants to leave QT and go to France to do an MBA. In the epilogue, we understand that she went through with that project.

We can observe that, contrarily to most workplace novels' heroines, Mia is characterized by her lack of career goals and hard work. She wants to enjoy a life without pressure and to do the bare minimum to get around. She apparently feels obliged to join the corporate world even if it does not fit her personality and ideals. Her performance there turns out to be pretty good because of her

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399. QIN 2009, 62.
strong people skills and intelligence, but she feels constrained and unhappy and fails to adapt to this environment. Ultimately, she chooses another path and goes abroad. As we will see, most workplace novels heroines, at least in our corpus, realize that they are not made for the employment they originally chose at the beginning of the narrative and go through an important career change at the end of the story. However, Mia's particularity is that she does not seem to have ever wanted the kind of life she chose and to have never thought that it was actually made for her. This differentiates her from other heroines who usually start their careers full of hope and genuinely believing that this is the right path for them.

5.3.2 Positive Characters, or Helpers

Run, Mia does not really depict the clear-cut division between positive and negative characters often observed in workplace novels. Most of the characters are not described as fundamentally good nor bad, despite the different quality of their relationships with the heroine. Professionally, Mia learns from all her superiors, even those with whom she has difficulties getting along. She seems to greatly admire her first direct superior, Leon, described as competent and hard-working, and she will eventually fall in love with him. However, Leon actually fails to mentor Mia properly because he is too busy. Before quitting QT, he helps Mia secure her position, threatened by her tense relationship with Leon's boss, Peter, but it seems like Leon aims at angering Peter as much as helping Mia. It is only after he quits that Leon will really provide guidance to Mia, and the two characters meet every month to discuss work and life matters. Later, Mia will be inspired by Leon's second successor, Helen, who is a strong, authoritative and excessively hard-working boss. The relationship with Helen will push Mia to work harder and will be very enriching for her. As we will see, the fact that Helen ruins her health by working too hard will also be a motivation for Mia to quit QT. When Mia is promoted by Helen, she works directly under the supervision of Jeff, an Australian man she gets along with very well because he seems to share her relaxed approach to life. Jeff will help Mia gain confidence and encourage her to take more initiative and responsibilities. Through her writing activities, Mia also wins the respect and friendship of Alice, the president's secretary. This relationship is mentioned as the reason why Mia is chosen to give a speech for the fifteenth anniversary of the company. Finally, Mia has a good relationship with her first subordinate, Kate, whom she manages to mentor in an efficient way.

On the personal front, Mia can count on the long-lasting support of her college friend Xiao Han, who gives her opportunities to write for the newspaper she works for. She also develops a solid friendship with Su, one of her colleagues at QT, despite their divergent personalities and occasional rivalries. Throughout the story, we understand that Mia has feelings for Leon, but he does not seem to reciprocate, just like Mia does not reciprocate Derek's affection for her. Through Xiao Han, she eventually meets a psychologist entrusted with the evaluation of QT's employees, Wu Han, who
happened to go to Beijing University at the same time as they did. Despite their affinities, Mia does not want to get involved with Wu Han because he is divorced. The discussion they have after Mia's psychological evaluation is one of the elements that will motivate her to quit QT. In the epilogue, we understand that Mia finally accepted her feelings for Wu Han and that he often visits her in France, as he has been sent to Germany for work.

We can observe that the positive characters of this novel are not described with such high praises as was the case in the Du Lala saga and in *Ups and Downs*. The characters of *Run, Mia* are more complex and thus more life-like than in numerous other workplace novels. In this narrative, some characters provide help and guidance to the heroine but none of them really embody the role of her mentor or have a determining influence on her career, giving the impression that the heroine has more agency than in other novels. Mia seems to learn from her superiors actively, by observing them and their habits, rather than passively, by letting herself be helped and guided by them.

5.3.3 Negative Characters, or Villains

We have mentioned that no character from *Run, Mia* is excessively praised. Following the same logic, the most negative among them do not seem fundamentally bad either, despite their tumultuous relationships with the heroine. The most negative character of the book is probably Fion, one of QT's secretaries who seems jealous of Mia and constantly criticizes her and tries to undermine her in front of their superiors. Fion does not manage to cause any real harm to Mia's career and Mia actually has her fired by revealing that she steals ink cartridges from the company to resell them. Despite this unflattering portrayal, Fion is excused, to some extent, by Mia's empathy and guilt when she is forced to leave the company, because she was pushed towards illegal means to earn money by her strained familial situation. Mia also faces the jealousy and sabotaging attempts of Kevin when she is entrusted with a project he was expecting to be in charge of. However, Mia manages to go through with the project and Kevin then apologizes and asks for her help, as he is encountering professional difficulties, which she agrees to provide despite her disdain for him. In turn, Mia will be jealous of Steven who is promoted instead of her at some point in the story.

As we have seen, Mia's relationship with Leon's superior, Peter, is difficult and tense, putting her job at risk at the beginning of the book. However, their problems seem to mostly be of Mia's doing as she unwittingly offends him two times during her debut at QT. She also shows coldness and hostility toward David, who takes Leon's position when the latter resigns, because of her affection and loyalty to her first superior. David is described as less competent than Leon, but he does not attempt anything to hinder Mia's career and their poor relationship is mainly of her own doing.

We can observe that, in the case of the negative characters as well, the depictions proposed in *Run, Mia* are more nuanced and life-like than in other workplace novels. With, eventually, the exception
of Fion, none of the characters are attempting to harm the heroine and Mia's poorer relationships are the consequences of episodical jealousies and rivalries, or of incompatibilities in personalities, rather than of the inherently negative nature of one of the characters. This brings us back to the statements of the author in the postface, when she asserts that her goal is to propose a workplace novel which is not "exaggerated".

5.4 Narrative Structure

In Run, Mia, the initial situation presents the narrator and heroine arriving at the end of her literature studies at Beijing University. She does not seem to know what kind of job to look for but wishes to be hired in a foreign company in Beijing. She then applies to a very selective foreign-owned company named QT, without believing in her chances to pass the first round of exams. However, she is selected for an interview, where she lies abundantly, and manages to be hired. Mia's capacity to "advertise herself" goes as far as convincing QT that she received an offer from another firm and to motivate the company to take her on a trip to the headquarters to allow her to understand the "company's culture" (gongsi de qiye wenhua 公司的企业文化). Mia receives an attentive welcome at QT, which gives her a sense of pride:

I never realized that being a successful person everyone talks about could feel so great. I was really grateful that QT decided to employ me. 400

Surprisingly, she still hesitates on accepting the offer: on the one hand, QT is not based in Beijing, as she originally wanted, but, on the other hand, going through the interviewing process a second time seems unnecessarily tiresome to her. Finally, she decides to accept the offer because her friend Xiao Han is hired by a newspaper in the city where QT is located. We can observe that, contrarily to other workplace novels, this initial situation presents a heroine who does not seem to feel any lack and who does not have a precise goal to motivate her to work hard.

The story then describes how Mia progresses in her career despite her lack of zeal, because she is lucky and because she understands people and how to get along with everyone. The narrative is structured by the different bosses Mia has to work with and the adjustments she has to make in her behavior to get along with each of them. The book focuses on the importance of personal relations in professional success, even implying, with the example of Mia, that strong people skills can compensate a lack of great talent or hard work. From time to time, Mia seems motivated to work harder by the sense of belonging and pride she feels towards the company, but she does not display any radical change of behavior, except when she fears being fired. She soon starts questioning her

400. QIN 2009, 9.
ability to get used to the level of competitiveness and pressure of the company. Even if the heroine's skills seem to be improving throughout the novel, the evolution is generally attributed to luck rather than hard work or talent. Eventually, as she obtains some success and recognition, she stops wondering if working for QT really suits her.

In the ninth chapter, we finally learn about Mia's professional goals, through a discussion between her and her friends Xiao Han and Su:

"I have only three requirements towards my dream job: it should be honorable, relaxed, and I want to have my own office."^401

And later:

Su laughed: "Mia, your main strength is that your expectations are low, so you are easily satisfied. Actually, it would be enough for you to be promoted twice and to become chief marketing officer to see the first and third of your conditions satisfied. As for being relaxed, it's relative. You are such a drifter that, under any circumstance, you are way more relaxed than anyone else." "Being promoted? I have never thought about that, I am still far from this possibility. If someone as brilliant as you has not been promoted yet, how could it happen to me?"^402

Throughout the story, and especially through Mia's observations about her new boss, Helen, a very hardworking woman, we understand that, for the heroine, quality of life is more important than professional achievements.

The novel keeps emphasizing the heroine's ambiguous feelings towards her professional environment, which represent her lack, while her attempts to adapt to the corporate world can be seen as her struggle. While she asserts not to think about promotions and to want a relaxing job and lifestyle, she also seems attached to the material comfort and social status working for QT provides, and she seems permeated by the competitive and thriving atmosphere of the company. When she loses a promotion at the end of the thirteenth chapter, she is deeply upset and loses her motivation. Contradicting the heroine's asserted lack of ambition, the fourteenth chapter is introduced as follows:

To be promoted you need to fulfill four conditions, all of which are indispensable: first, you should be competent; then, people should acknowledge that you are, and these people need to be competent as well; finally, there needs to be an open position.^403

This introduction seems to indicate that Mia is considering the possibility of being promoted.

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However, the following chapter emphasizes once again Mia's carefree attitude towards work:

Su sighed: "Mia, if you spent the same intelligence and talent on working hard as you do on researching how to loaf on the job, you would be successful and famous by now!" I shook my head and smiled: "Why would I want to be successful and famous? It sounds very tiring. My current situation is already very good, isn't it?" Xiao Han intervened: "Right, you are the most talented drifter I know." I couldn't help but to start a lengthy advocacy: "I could write a book about the concept of drifting. In our culture this term always had a derogatory meaning and a negative image, that's what I want to speak about. Drifting does not mean doing nothing nor being worthless, otherwise there wouldn't be a special word for it. Contrarily to what most people think, it doesn't mean refusing to strive and progress nor stagnating either..." "That's only your personal opinion." Su, impatient, interrupted me. "Above all, drifting is a state of mind subverting capitalism. It questions work worship, and emphasizes the necessity to maintain a relaxed state of mind and to seek a balance between work and personal life. Drifters know when and where they should make efforts, and they work hard only when absolutely necessary. This is very ingenious, actually."  

In the same chapter, Helen dies of cancer, which is associated with her excessive focus on work, as was her miscarriage, a few chapters earlier. Mia is more convinced than ever that killing oneself for work is useless. In the seventeenth chapter, we learn that, when Mia was in college, her dream was to become a journalist. She also asserts to not aim at a very high position in the company:

I would not be competent for any position higher than marketing manager. To be honest, it would be the highest position where I would be competent but still relaxed. That wouldn't work if I was marketing director.  

These are only a few of the hints provided by the book to show the reader that Mia is not made to work in a competitive company like QT.

Chapter eighteen is introduced by an explanation of how big companies brainwash and normalize their employees. It then narrates Mia's encounter with Wu Huan, the psychologist who is entrusted with the evaluation of QT's employees. The results of the tests run by Wu Han reveal that all the employees, except Mia, are workaholics who lost their individuality and developed a superiority complex. When Wu Han asks Mia about her professional plans, she confesses her doubts:

"I still don't know what I will do. I adapted to my current situation, but I feel like, psychologically, the price to pay is getting higher and higher. I am not a newbie anymore, I can handle many things without too much effort, but I still feel like something is missing. I already told Su many times, I will work here one more year and then resign and do something else, but I don't really know what else I can do? Why I would do it? I had so

404. QIN 2009, 178.
405. QIN 2009, 201.
exciting and fantasist dreams, but are they completely meaningless after all? Were they only wishful thinking coming with lack of experience? Also, if I say goodbye to this salary, will my quality of life decrease? Who will support me?\textsuperscript{406}

This illustrates the lack felt by Mia in her current employment, a lack of meaning, motivation and ideals. Moreover, from a psychological and personal point of view, she has never adapted to QT's environment.

The next chapter marks Mia's beginning counteraction as she is taking French classes in order to go study an MBA in France. She tries to explain to Su, who is very ambitious and career-driven, why she wants to leave QT:

"Why don't you understand? I don't want the kind of life where you work like a dog all day. What are we doing all this time? The necessity to reach higher sales number is like a sword hanging over our heads, forcing us to labor restlessly. Promotions and salary raises are supposed to display the company's approval of your work, but with time, they become the measure we use to evaluate ourselves, this is very scary."\textsuperscript{407}

The novel does not describe Mia's struggle to reach her goal of having a different life. Indeed, in the epilogue, we learn that she is studying in France and in a relationship with Wu Han, marking her victory.

\textit{Run, Mia}, as the title indicates, is based on the idea that a career can be like an endless race towards better results and higher salaries and positions. Companies are described as promulgating a spirit of ceaseless quest for self-betterment and high achievements, and as inculcating a sense of pride and belonging to their employees in order to brainwash them. Because of her independent spirit and distaste for hard work, the heroine fails to completely adapt to this model and realizes that the objectives the company wants the employees to embrace are unreachable and will ultimately fail to make them happy, when they don't harm their health, as is the case for Helen. At the beginning of the story, the heroine feels compelled to put her dream of becoming a journalist aside to enter a big company, implying that this choice is probably perceived as the only one worth making for college graduates who want to have a good life. Even if the process is not described, this seems to indicate that the normalizing process the heroine denounces at QT actually permeates society as a whole. Eventually, Mia will understand that she cannot change herself and deny her taste and aspirations to adapt fully to the company, and she resigns. However, she does not choose to pursue journalism but to study an MBA abroad. This event seems to resolve the lack of motivation and aspiration the heroine feels at work, and thus marks a form of victory, but the story does not tell if Mia will ultimately be able to obtain the relaxed and honorable lifestyle she longs for.

\textsuperscript{406} QIN 2009, 212.
\textsuperscript{407} QIN 2009, 215-216.
Chapter 6: Zhengfeng 《争锋》, Ling Yuyan 凌语嫣

6.1 General Information

The Art of Winning was published in 2009 by the People's Literature Publishing House (Renmin wenxue chubanshe 人民文学出版社). At the end of the novel, a second volume continuing the story of the heroine is announced but has apparently not been published to this day. The novel is said to have originated online, where it attracted the attention of readers and editors. The 288 page narrative describes how a beautiful, kind and righteous young woman, Yi Yun, is hired at "the world's top company" (shijie dingji waiqi 世界顶级外企), where she is rapidly assigned to the important clients department and entrusted with the biggest current contract, even if she lacks experience. Despite the heroine's professional success, the novel mainly focuses on the threats posed by the corporate world to her safety, well-being and morality. By the end of the novel, she has become an experienced and valuable employee, but she chooses to leave the company to work in a smaller firm where she hopes to stay away from excessive competitiveness.

6.2 Paratext

6.2.1 Author's Presentation

The presentation of Ling Yuyan proposed on the inside cover at the end of The Art of Winning describes her with high praises. She is said to have graduated from a famous, high-level university (dingji mingxiao 顶级名校), to be a high-ranked gold collar (dingji jinling 顶级金领) - a variation of the term white collar designating employees of higher professional and socio-economic status - to be as beautiful as a movie star (meimao ru dianying mingxing 美貌如电影明星), and as elegant as a noble lady (juzhi ruo mingmen shunü 举止若名门淑女). Moreover, she is said to have experienced a fast and impressive career rise and to thus hold precious workplace wisdom (you yi lu kuaisu shangyang de aoren shengzhi jingli he gaochao de zhichang zhihui 有一路快速上扬的傲人升职经历和高超的职场智慧). Apparently, she loves Chinese culture (re'ai Zhongguo wenhua 热爱中国文化), and some of her writing were published in English. Ling Yuyan's presentation also implies that the present novel might be the first volume of a saga, and the reader is given a summary of the second opus at the end of the novel. However, to our knowledge at least, Ling Yuyan did not publish any other book. Finally, the author is said to have participated in a "business novel competition" (shang xiaoshuo dasai 商小说大赛), organized by the People's Literature Publishing House, which resulted in the publication of six novels. All of these works are said to describe the
workplace in the world's top companies (shijie dingji qiye 世界顶级企业), and are listed under Ling Yuyan's presentation.

6.2.2 Preface and Postface
In the preface of The Art of Winning, Ling Yuyan asserts that, if people who know her read the book, they would be surprised to discover all the negative aspects of working in a big company, as she usually speaks only about the advantages. She explains that she has been working in advertisement for a long time, which taught her how to find the most flattering side of things without lying. She then evokes the quality of the people who coexist and compete in the realm of big companies, who all belong to the elite and are among the smartest people one will ever encounter.

Ling Yuyan describes her heroine as having no background and no social connections in the city. When she enters the workplace, she has no choice but to survive or to be eliminated. By holding on to her professional ideal, her determination and hard work, she is able to become a manager in three years. Ling Yuyan asserts that, to overcome the difficulties, the schemes and competitiveness of big companies, one should keep one's dreams in mind and remain righteous and honest. She also describes her character as an exemplar case (jiyou biaoben yiyi 具有标本意义), and her story as realistic. She then continues:

In this book, readers might find a solution to a professional crisis, the wisdom to manage their personal development, an experience or a lesson. They might get a taste of the usefulness of The Art of Winning as a professional guide. Those who went through hardships and struggles might feel how The Art of Winning can help and encourage white collars. Some might just want to read about the fascinating and endless fights occurring in foreign companies, about the ever-changing hidden rules governing this world, and appreciate The Art of Winning for the insider's revelations it contains. There are countless possibilities, each reader will end up with what he or she needs. Those who know me will understand, by reading this, the loneliness one feels in all this mess.408

This preface implies that the novel might contain a few autobiographical elements, for example when the author evokes what people who know her might think when reading the novel and comparing it to what she usually says about her work. The description of the main character, as an ordinary and typical girl without background and relying on her own efforts to succeed seems very similar to the description of Du Lala in the preface of the first volume of the saga. Ling Yuyan's preface follows other common elements of workplace novels' descriptions by asserting the realistic and useful nature of her story and by evoking the help it might provide to readers. However, it also

408. LING 2009, preface.
contains its own specificities, which will be noticeable in the novel itself, for example the emphasis on the elite status of big companies' white collars, or on the hardships, struggles, hidden rules and schemes one might encounter in one's career. While compiling the workplace novels inventory mentioned in chapter one, we have noticed that the revealing of inside stories is most commonly used in warfare workplace novels' advertisement, making its use here another particularity of The Art of Winning.

6.2.3 Cover, Band and Layout

The cover of The Art of Winning is white with inscriptions in black, grey and pink, and the overall layout is simple and serious. The upper part of the cover is decorated with a small drawing constituted of four pink, vertical lines evoking a graph, with one of the lines topped with an arrow pointing up, and one actually being an open tube of lipstick, suggesting that the story is one of professional climbing and success, probably targeting a female readership. The title and subtitle are printed both in Chinese and English and the subtitle reads: "Those unknown stories inside the world's top company" (shijie dingji waiqi chenfu lu 世界顶级外企沉浮录). On the front cover we can also read "The techniques of the art of winning can be found everywhere, but the wisdom of hiding one's brilliance is even more precious" (zhengfeng de jiqiao bibijieshi, cangfeng de zhihui gengsheng yichou 争锋技巧比比皆是 藏锋的智慧更胜一筹).

On the back cover, the novel is said to have appeared online and to have attracted the attention of readers as well as editors who saw it as a novel "more powerful than Du Lala Go!" (zui ju shili chaoyue "Du Lala shengzhi ji" 最具实力超越《杜拉拉升职记》). What follows is a summary of the story describing how the heroine transforms from an innocent university student into the best salesperson of the best company in the world (quanqiu zui dingji gongsi de top sales 全球最顶级公司的top sales). Her evolution is said to be difficult but enriching and the world's top companies are depicted as the arena where the elite work and compete and thus where one can really admire "the art of winning". Under the book's presentation, we find the recommendations of two renowned authors, Hai Yan 海岩 (1954) and Su Tong 苏童 (1963), who emphasize the relevance of writing about the workplace, because of its importance in most young people's lives. The inside cover at the beginning of the book is dedicated to the novel's presentation, repeating some of the elements to be read on the back cover and asserting that the author plans on writing a series of books and thus to create a "big workplace encyclopedia" (zhichang de da baikequanshu 职场的大百科全书). Even if the second novel is said to be "about to be published" (jijiang wenshi 即将问世), as we have mentioned, we did not find any trace of it online. The inside cover at the end of the book is dedicated to the author's presentation.

The book is also wrapped in a pink advertising band where we can read "A thousand entreaties for 'business novels'" ("shang xiaoshuo" qianhu wanhuan "商小说“千呼万唤”), that many editors
competed to publish the novel, that the story is realistic and reveals the cruelty of the workplace and the wisdom necessary to survive it, and that the novel is recommended by Hai Yan and Su Tong. The novel is also concluded by a presentation of the second volume which is supposed to focus on hidden stories from luxury companies and to describe the new challenges of the beautiful heroine.

As we have seen, the professional experience of the author as a source of knowledge and material for the novel is emphasized throughout the paratext and gives an impression of authenticity to its content. Moreover, the heroine and the author are described in similar terms, as beautiful women making their ways into big foreign-owned companies after graduating from renown universities. The paratext evokes all the uses generally mentioned about workplace novel, namely, as a professional guidebook, as a source of identification, empathy and hope for struggling white collars, and as a way to discover the hidden mysteries of the corporate world. The way this novel distinguishes itself from others is in its emphasis on the importance of the company where the heroine works, constantly referred to as being "top-level" (dingji 顶级), on the elite status of all the people who work there and on their inherent qualities, as well as on the particularly fierce level of competitiveness to be found in that kind of environment. As in Ups and Downs, this novel seems to blend coming of age workplace novels elements (it stresses the leaning process and professional development of the heroine), and warfare workplace novels elements (it emphasizes the competition and struggles the character has to face, as well as the revelations the novel contains about the secrets of the world's biggest companies).

6.3 Characters

6.3.1 The Heroine

The title of the first chapter of The Art of Winning, "Ni mei you beijing, jiu zhi neng ziji fendou" “没有背景，就只能自己奋斗”, "If you don't have any background, your only choice is to fight on your own", provides the first information that is proposed to the reader about the heroine: she does not have useful social connections and will have to make it on her own. Through the reflections of a secondary character, we are then introduced to Yi Yun, the beautiful management trainee hired by the Shanghai branch of the company Ruide. We learn that, despite her lack of experience, Yi Yun, who works in sales, has been entrusted with a very important client. She seems to have already made herself famous in the company because of her beauty and talent:

In merely a year, Yi Yun had unexpectedly managed to take three big leaps in the world's top company: first, she had the chance to be hired by Ruide as a management trainee, then she was appointed to the most promising department of the company, the important clients department (KAC), and, finally, she managed to be entrusted with the biggest retailer
Yi Yun is described as kind and soft as well as benevolent - she gives food to homeless children and cats, for example. She apparently lives alone in Shanghai but keeps a close relationship with her mother. We learn that she studied in Wuxi and was recruited by Ruide in 1999, through a highly competitive process. While Ruide usually only recruits employees from the country's top four universities, where Yi Yun did not study, she manages to be hired because she obtains the highest scores for the company's examination and because of her beauty and fluency in English. Through the narration of her interviews and hiring, we understand that she is determined and ambitious, and that she also displays great filial piety. The story often emphasizes Yi Yun's beauty as well as men's desire and women's jealousy towards her. She also displays great persistance and resilience despite professional difficulties. Towards the end of the novel, we learn that Yi Yun is twenty-three year old and that she dresses very simply and conservatively and does not wear a lot of makeup, contrarily to her colleagues who seem to give more importance to their physical appearance.

*The Art of Winning* does not contain a lot of information about the heroine. Her main characteristic, and the one most emphasized throughout the story, is her extraordinary beauty, which seems to be a curse rather than a blessing for her, because she is often considered as a mere figurehead, as illustrated by one of her male colleagues' considerations:

"Ah," he sighed, "sometimes being beautiful can be a very sorrowful thing for a woman. When you are labeled as beautiful, people don't pay attention to anything else than your appearance and neglect your actual capacities. Actually, if a beautiful woman wants to rely on her abilities to succeed, she will be attacked and denigrated."^410

Yi Yun is also said to be very talented, as her fast rise in the company and the trust of her superiors attest to, but the novel does not provide any details on her proficiency. We also understand that she is hard-working, determined and that she displays a great ability to endure hardships. She is often said to be innocent and pure, which, in the eyes of some of her colleagues and superiors, makes her unfit for the competitiveness of the company.

**6.3.2 Positive Characters, or Helpers**

One of the particularities of *The Art of Winning* is that none of the characters is described in a detailed way. However, through their actions, notably towards the heroine, they are easily separated between positive and negative figures. The first character to help Yi Yun in the story is William Tomas, the president of Ruide China, who decides to hire her even though she does not fulfill the company's usual requirements. He decides to support her and to give her a chance to realize her

dream of working in sales because he is impressed by her determination and ambition, which contrast with her beautiful and youthful looks. Tomas then leaves the company in the fourth chapter and Yi Yun loses her main source of support. At the time of her hiring, Yi Yun also receives the help of David, the highest ranked Chinese employee in the company. When she applies for the company's examination, she is originally denied the possibility to participate because she is not a student in any of the four universities where Ruide usually recruits its employees. However, David decides to let her take the examination because he believes that refusing candidates would harm the image of the company. As soon as they meet again when Yi Yun is hired, gossip emerges about a possible affair between them, notably because David chooses the English name that Yi Yun will use at work, Rose. Even if nothing concrete happens between them, we understand that David has feelings for Yi Yun. Throughout the story, David has occasional doubts on Yi Yun's ability to handle the responsibilities she is entrusted with, because of her kindness and innocence, but he does his best to support and protect her, for example by bringing her home when she is forced to drink heavily during a business dinner. He is the one giving Yi Yun the opportunity to work on the company's most important account, and he will also recommend her to be nominated most promising employee. David grows increasingly impressed with Yi Yun's talent as the story goes on. We understand that, like Yi Yun, David has no social connections to secure his position in the company, making him insecure at times. He is as severe and demanding as supportive towards Yi Yun. When she resigns from Ruide, she breaks all contact with David and asks him to forget her.

Yi Yun also develops a good relationship with Alfred, the new director of the important clients department, recently arrived in Shanghai. Alfred is from a noble German family and described as tall, handsome and wealthy. They spend a lot of time together and rumors emerge on a possible affair between them. Even if Alfred fears that Yi Yun might not be able to handle the pressure of the important clients department, he supports her and helps her with her work. He will also come to be impressed by her determination and talent. Alfred goes back to Germany shortly after Yi Yun's resignation. Throughout the story, Yi Yun receives the help and moral support of Linda, whom she befriends shortly after being hired and who introduces her to the functioning of the company. Towards the end of the novel, Linda quits Ruide because she is bullied by her boss, Ivan. Yi Yun also has good relationships with Fanny, Tomas' secretary, and with Jimmy, the only one of her peers from the important clients department not wanting to undermine her. Jimmy will manage to have a client behaving in a vulgar way towards Yi Yun appointed to someone else and inform her that the rule that female employees are obliged to wear skirts is a fake rule invented by Robert Bai, the vice-director of sales for Ruide China. When Yi Yun resigns, Jimmy writes a praising letter about her to the office director of the company, John Lauren, to convince him to hire her back. Finally, through her hard work, dedication, righteousness and talent, the heroine manages to earn the respect of many of her superiors, including the international CEO Bernard Newman, the president of the
China branch Ian McGregor - whom Yi Yun will convince that women are able to work with important clients - and John Lauren.

As we can see, Yi Yun's beauty, talent and hard work attract the appreciation and respect of most of the important male figures of the company, who are also the highest ranked employees. These authority figures are not described in detail but seem competent, fair and benevolent in their treatment of the employees, especially of the heroine. However, none of them really embodies the role of her mentor, and the novel gives an overall impression of an isolated heroine in a hostile work environment, reminding us of the author's preface where she asserts that the book will reveal the dark sides of working in a big company, which she never talks about to her relatives and friends.

6.3.3 Negative Characters, or Villains

The overall impression in *The Art of Winning* is that the heroine is surrounded by numerous hostile characters who try to harm her. In her first assignment, Yi Yun is in competition with Sam, as only one of them will be able to join the important clients department. Apparently, the company purposely fosters competition between employees. When Yi Yun is selected instead of Sam, who has proven to be careless and lazy at work, she cannot help but to feel sorry for him, despite his hostility. In the important clients department, Yi Yun also faces the jealousy and hostility of her colleagues Judy, Sarah, Ji Xiaobing, Rachel and Jim who try to undermine her work, spread gossip about her and her alleged affairs with her superiors, force her to drink during an important dinner, place bets on how long she will endure the pressure of the job, accuse her of theft, write anonymous letters of complaint against her, and spy on her work to make it fail. Throughout the story, Yi Yun endures repeated mistreatments from these characters who are jealous of her looks, her rapid rise in the company and her good relationships with male superiors. All of these characters are depicted as less hard-working and less competent than Yi Yun and as willing to use immoral and illicit means to harm her and reach their own goals.

From the beginning of the story, we understand that the important clients manager Qiao Zhi wants to find compromising stories about the rising star Yi Yun because, for some reason, he believes that it would undermine McGregor's intention to get rid of his protector, Robert Bai. Qiao Zhi is described as incompetent, and we rapidly learn that he is having an affair with Rachel, not out of love but because they both use each other to reach their professional goals. Robert Bai and Qiao Zhi are both from Taiwan and were already working together before joining Ruide, supporting the stereotype that Taiwanese people always privilege their friends at work, to the detriment of more proficient Chinese employees, a recurrent trope in workplace novels. Bai supports Qiao Zhi despite his lack of competence and, as we have seen, forces female employees to wear skirts at work in order to lure some clients to do business with them.
In the third chapter of the book, Yi Yun also has to work with Yin Feiyang, a poorly educated man from the countryside. As they visit different clients by bike, Yin, who is strongly attracted to Yi Yun, looks for excuses to establish physical contact, ultimately causing her to fall from her bicycle. Injured, Yi Yun goes to her apartment and Yin insists on accompanying her. He follows her up even when she tells him to wait for her in the street. He tries to rape her but, luckily, a neighbor is alerted by the noise and causes Yin to escape. Yi Yun, shocked and ashamed, decides to not say anything to anyone because she has no proof of her allegations and knows that Yin will deny everything. His presence at her apartment will also be difficult to explain, and she is worried about the possible rumors that would emerge and possibly harm her career. In chapter seven, Yi Yun has to work with Yin Feiyang again, this time as his superior, and discovers that he steals money from the company to bribe clients. She gives him a warning, according to the company's rules, and Yin Feiyang resigns quickly after.

We can observe that Yi Yun is described as isolated and constantly under attack throughout the novel. She is surrounded by a majority of negative and potentially harmful characters and rarely receives significant help or support from anyone. Female character's hostility is generally triggered by their jealousy of Yi Yun's beauty and her good relationships with male superiors. Male characters' harmful actions towards the heroine can be due to their attraction to her, the rivalries emerging between them and her because of her rapid rise in the company, or because she happens to be in the way of their schemes against other employees. The novel emphasizes Yi Yun's kindness, softness and innocence to such an extent that, despite her alleged competences and the recognition she obtains for it, she still seems to be lacking agency and to mainly embody the role of a victim throughout the novel.

6.4 Narrative Structure

In *The Art of Winning*, the initial situation implies that there are multiple tensions and schemes at work in the company Ruide. The reader is then introduced to the heroine, Yi Yun, who works as a management trainee in the Shanghai branch of the company. Yi Yun's beauty and kindness are emphasized and contrasted with the harshness of her superior, Judy, who seems to bully her and to entrust her only with trivial tasks. In a flashback taking place at the end of Yi Yun's studies in college, we understand that she lacks the social connections and prestigious educational background that would help her find a position in a good company, which seems to be her goal. Her beginning counteraction is to pretend to be studying at Fudan University to take part in Ruide's examination. When she is offered a secretary position in the company, we learn more about her professional objectives:
"Thank you for your kindness, but I want my first job to be professional work, I don't want to be a figurehead. Oh, I'm sorry, maybe it's not appropriate to describe foreign-owned companies' secretaries as figureheads, it's a very technical job, there are a lot of great secretaries and they are indispensable to the functioning of the company. I said 'figurehead' only speaking about myself, because I don't plan on being a secretary for life. I want to be a manager in sales or marketing and I don't want to have to start all over again in ten years in order to achieve my professional goal."\[411\]

And later:

"I heard that seventy to eighty percent of CEOs come from the sales or marketing departments. Of course, there are outstanding employees in finance, human resources and technical departments as well, but most of the CEOs have a professional work background. Sales is the core profit making department of the company, that's where I will receive the best training and the best opportunities to rise." [...] Tomas couldn't help but ask: "So your professional goal is to become CEO?" "I know that, worldwide, the percentage of women reaching high management positions is low. But everyone who has that dream should be allowed to try, no?" "You are very careerist." Tomas was actually praising her, but he had used the wrong Chinese word to express himself, he meant "ambitious". "Haha, I am not so much careerist as I have filial piety. My mother's family came from Zhejiang to Shanghai long ago and they had a flourishing business. But my grandpa was convinced that his daughter could not become his successor so he pushed my mother to marry a businessman. For different reasons, my mom never had the chance to take over the business, but she told me that she never believed what my grandpa was saying."\[412\]

We can observe that, like Qiao Li in *Ups and Downs*, Yi Yun has great professional ambitions. These ambitions are given a moral justification as she seems to be willing to make up for her mother's failed potential. Her statement about secretaries also introduces the fact that, despite her extraordinary beauty, she does not want to be appreciated for that characteristic alone.

Yi Yun is then hired in the sales department and starts her struggle to climb the corporate ladder and succeed professionally. The following chapters emphasize the elite status of Ruide's employees and the material advantages that working for that company provides them, but also the jealousies and competitiveness ruling the workplace. Yi Yun's hard work, dedication and talent rapidly raise the recognition and trust of her superiors, even if they sometimes doubt her strength and persistence. The heroine is rapidly appointed to the team handling the company's most important case and seems to be on the right track to reach her objectives. Her professional and personal goals are reiterated at the end of the year 1999, when she writes a letter to herself to be read ten years later:

\[411\] LING 2009, 27.

\[412\] LING 2009, 28.
What should she write? She laid her cheek against the sofa, raised her pen and thought: "What will I be doing in 2010?" Will I have become a strong woman of the professional world and a gold collar? This seems like a good purpose. Then, what would my mom wish for me? To be in a happy and perfect relationship, to have beautiful children with the man I love and form a happy family... Yi Yun blushed. Is that it? Let's add something else. Am I too greedy?  

Here we can observe that Yi Yun's goal is to strive professionally and to reach the high social status and comfortable lifestyle of gold collars. She also evokes the wish of getting married and having children, but as her mother's will rather than as her own.

In the seventh chapter, taking place at the end of the year 2000, we understand that Ruide obtained the important contract Yi Yun was working for and that she contributed greatly to this success. However, as her professional objectives are grand and abstract, this success does not seem to constitute a victory for her. At the beginning of the ninth chapter, we also learn that the heroine, who has now been working at Ruide for three years, is kept away from all the important cases because of the rumors asserting that she is having an affair with her superior, David. She is frustrated and dispirited and decides to resign. She seems happy to have more time to herself again but also has to go through the lengthy and difficult process of finding another employment which would offer her a salary and work conditions matching those of Ruide. Yi Yun apparently receives numerous job offers and realizes that Ruide would like her to come back. She finally decides to accept the offer from a luxury company where competitiveness seems less fierce than at Ruide. When she runs into David, she asserts her decision to lead a different life and reminisces about her first professional experience:

Exactly three years ago, innocent and ignorant, just out of the university, she was hired by Ruide China with a group of management trainees. They were immensely proud of their success and had great expectations towards their future. Three years later, the majority of them had already left the company and had been replaced by a new batch. In the world's top companies, the fierce workplace battle was continuing day after day.  

The narrative structure of The Art of Winning reveals how a young college graduate with ambitious goals manages, against all odds, to be hired in "the world's top company". For the heroine, this first step towards professional success represents a victory in itself, as does the obtaining of the important contract she spent months working for. However, her rapid and outstanding professional achievements do not prevent her from suffering from workplace jealousies, rivalries and scheming, which ultimately lead her to quit, thus showing that her whole work experience at Ruide is a struggle. When she looks for a new job, the process is also described as a form of struggle. Later, Yi

413. LING 2009, 113.
Yun realizes that her profile has become highly attractive on the job market, which can be considered as another victory, or at least as another step towards her objective of becoming an outstanding professional, a strong woman, a gold collar or a CEO. The same can be said of her hiring in the luxury company. The difficulty of decomposing this narrative according to Propp's functions illustrates a form of ambiguity frequently encountered in workplace novels and summarized, in the Du Lala saga, by the sentence "It never ends." Indeed, we can observe that, when a specific goal - finding a good job, handling an assignment successfully, obtaining a promotion, earning more money, etc. - is achieved, it is replaced by another one. As the ultimate objectives of most of the characters are abstract, indefinite and, at times, extremely ambitious, they will probably never be reached, leaving the protagonists in an endless race for more, or pushing them to switch to another lifestyle and career path. The characters' professional and personal development, full of disillusionment, endless dissatisfactions and, at times, threats of losing one's innocence and morality, contrasts with the books' paratext, which asserts that the reader is being offered a success story.
Chapter 7: Kuaile XiaoV de shuijing touzi 《快乐小V的水晶骰子》, Xiao V 小V

7.1 General Information

Happy Little V’s Crystal Dice was published in 2011 by the New Star Press (Xin xing chubanshe 新星出版社). The text has apparently been adapted from the author's blog posts and the narrator, heroine and author are thus identified as the same person. The 272 pages of the novels are divided into three parts. The first part describes the career of a young woman who is hired in one of the biggest accounting companies in the world. This environment apparently entails heavy pressure and workload for the employees. When the company is dismantled after a financial scandal, the heroine is transferred to another one, which she then quits to join the company of a friend. This part focuses on the heroine's attempt to balance career and personal life and on her quest for happiness between serious work and leisure. The second part evokes the heroine's childhood, and the third part is dedicated to her hedonist lifestyle and her relationships with her husband and friends, described as the real source of her happiness.

7.2 Paratext

7.2.1 Author's Presentation

According to the inside cover at the beginning of the book, the author is a famous blogger whose online pseudonym is Xiaojingzi 小精子. She is said to work for one of the four biggest accounting offices in the world (jiuzhi yu "si da" (zhi quanqiu si da huijishi shiwusuo) 就职于“四大”（指全球四大会计师事务所）), to be a professional (zhuanye renshi 专业人士) and a gold collar (jinling 金领). The author's description is accompanied by the picture of an elegant woman with a porcelain cup in hand and the addresses of her blog and microblog. From the personal description available on Xiao V's microblog, we learn that she is born in 1977, and that she is the author of another novel: Zhichang bu taopao 《职场不逃跑》, Do Not Escape the Workplace, published in 2014.

7.2.2 Preface and Postface

The prologue (kai changbai 开场白) of Xiao V's novel starts as follows:

Hello everyone, I am Xiao V. Sometimes my friends also call me Xiao Jingzi (the same jing as in jingling guguai 精灵古怪!! [jingling guguai can be translated by "weird creature", xiao jingzi can also mean "little spermatozoon"]). In general, those who feel embarrassed to call me Xiao Jingzi call me Xiao V. No one calls me by my real name anymore, and when,
occasionally, someone does, it makes me feel really strange. Even if I am an insignificant person, I am usually very busy with work. People like me are often called "professional" [in English in the Chinese text] and the place where I used to work was one of the "Four Big", which are the four biggest accounting offices in the world.415

Xiao V then explains that the novel is an adaptation of what she wrote on her blog and that she voluntarily chose to include passages about the hobbies and leisure activities she uses to compensate for the difficulties and pressure she encounters at work. She also emphasizes that she has more than ten years of work experience and the fact that her familial and educational background was of little help in her career:

Actually, we all experience difficult moments in life. As insignificant people, we have no choice but to stay calm, find out what we can learn from these difficulties, and to do our best to work harder.416

The author then asserts that the book's characters are her friends and colleagues, as well as her husband, Dandan, and concludes by addressing the reader:

Ok, I think that's all. Now you should go make yourself a cup of tea and spend some time reading about my work and my life!417

The preface illustrates that Happy Little V's Crystal Dice is another example of our corpus holding a strong autobiographical dimension. Here, the author, the narrator and the main character share the same name and the same professional background. Moreover, the author explains that the book has been inspired by her blog posts, thus strongly reducing the importance of the fictional pact, which is not asserted by any element in the preface. Xiao V also mentions that all the characters of the novel are people from her actual family and circle of friends. The preface also introduces some of the novel's specificities, namely, the unusual importance it gives to the heroine's life outside of work, its focus on happiness, and the goofy personality of the main character. As we can see, even if the preface evokes the importance of hard work, the novel is not described as useful or as a teaching manual in the preface. It also emphasizes the ordinariness and, even, insignificance of the narrator, another characteristic of workplace novels, usually advertised as ordinary people's success stories, making them reliable and, supposedly, replicable.

7.2.3 Cover, Band and Layout

The cover of Xiao V's novel is bright yellow with a white drawing of two dice over the colorful title. The subtitle states: "A foreign company gold collar's tricks for happiness" (yi ge waiqi nü

416. XIAO V 2011, 2.
417. XIAO V 2011, 3.
jinling de kuaile mofa 一个外企女金领的快乐魔法), indicating the high social and professional status of the author and the focus of the book on happiness and well-being at work. The concept of tricks (mofa 魔法), implies that the author's techniques can probably be learned and imitated. On the back cover, we can read:

Xiao V is an eccentric woman, at work she looks tough and firm, and she has a great personal life. She likes to cry, to laugh and to party [in English in the original text], she is good at depicting everyday life and always manages to find joy in the difficult moments. The important thing is that reading her book will make you happy.

This presentation is followed by "Xiao V's quotes" (Xiao V yulu 小V语录), which are four short extracts from the novel. The first one explains that Xiao V uses fashion magazines as self-help books. When she is having a difficult day at work, she goes to Starbucks and reads one and she realizes that working is the only way she can afford to buy the beautiful clothes and shoes advertised in the magazine, and it is also the only way she gets to show her acquisitions to other people. The second quote asserts that one's aura is a powerful weapon at work. The third one explains that life is merciless and that the only good excuse for missing a deadline is to have died before. Finally, the fourth quote warns readers against blindly trusting someone's CV. As we have seen, the inside cover at the beginning of the book gives a presentation and a picture of the author. The last noteworthy element of the paratext is that the novel is punctuated by a few comics, drawn in a childish way, probably by the author as there is no mention of another contributor to the story. These drawings illustrate, with humor, some specific scenes of the novel.

The observation of the paratext of this novel allows us to make the following observations. First of all, we can see that the author, the narrator and the main character have the same name, allowing us to think that we are reading an autobiographical novel. This idea is supported by the fact that the profession of the author - working in a big accounting office - is the same as the main character's, and by the prologue where the author asserts that the content of the novel has been adapted from her blog and that the characters are her actual acquaintances. This aspect gives an impression of authenticity and veracity to the novel and validates its didactic function. Indeed, as we have seen, the book, as most workplace novels, proposes to teach something to the readers - here, how to be happy at work - which is illustrated by quotes printed on the back cover, giving the narrator's statements the appearance of advice or maxims. This novel illustrates very clearly the ambiguity often perceivable in the category, namely a double emphasis on the high professional status and rich experience of the author, legitimizing his or her position as a model or a teacher for the readers, supposedly younger and less experienced, and his or her identity as an ordinary individual whose success can be attributed only to hard work, making him or her a relatable and accessible figure for the readers. The particularity of Happy Little V's Crystal Dice resides in its emphasis on the importance of well-being and happiness in the workplace, which it proposes to teach instead of
practical professional tips. This dimension is accentuated by the bright colors used for the book cover and by the humoral comics to be found in the novel, which give a light and youthful appearance to the book.

7.3 Characters

7.3.1 The Heroine
At the beginning of her novel, Xiao V describes herself as someone who always wanted to work in order to earn money and be able to buy luxury goods. We then learn that she was a good student in college but that her university was not famous. When she starts working for a major accounting firm, she seems to have a high opinion of the status her employment is supposed to provide her:

Heavens, I imagined that being an accountant would impress people and make them respect me, so how come clients are so often insulting me to my face?²⁴¹⁸

At only twenty-two year old, Xiao V gets accustomed to a heavy workload and pressure and to the disappearance of her private life, which she describes as negative and dangerous. She often emphasizes the fact that humans need pleasure and leisure in their lives. We understand that Xiao V still lives with her parents and that her father is from a poor region of Sichuan province. During the evaluation concluding her second year of work, we learn that she is appreciated by her employers for her competence and cheerful spirit. Xiao V's optimism and joyful attitude are regularly emphasized in the story.

When she changes companies, Xiao V is not tied up by a strict working schedule anymore and asserts that she becomes lazier and lazier. When she has to go back to regular office hours, she is constantly late and angers her superiors. She soon realizes that she has been too self-confident at work and that she has to put in more effort, which also makes her very anxious. When she fails to be promoted and is blamed by her superiors for her lack of seriousness and dedication, she decides to change her attitude towards work but still seems to commit numerous blunders and to lack knowledge. Xiao V seems torn between a wish to become more competent and a fear of losing herself and her individuality if she neglects her personal life in favor of work. The novel emphasizes the fact that Xiao V is not an outstanding employee. When she has to take a weekend class to obtain a Master's degree, we understand that she is not an outstanding student either. For her, earning money is important, but she seems to also want to feel comfortable at a job that suits her personality.

In the second part of the book, dedicated to Xiao V's childhood, we learn that her parents were both

²⁴¹⁸. XIAO V 2011, 22.
university professors and that she grew up on a campus in Beijing. She apparently received a strict education and grew up in a relatively poor household. Xiao V has an older sister and describes herself as an ugly and taciturn child. When she starts school, she develops a combative spirit and a taste for reading, but she is not a hard worker and thus not a good student. Xiao V continues her unflattering self-description through middle school, when she starts suffering from severe acne and is laughed at by other students because of her ugliness. Surprisingly, this does not shatter her self-confidence. In the third part of the book, Xiao V evokes her husband, Dandan, whose healthy and dynamic lifestyle is a good influence on a lazy person like her. In this part, Xiao V mentions her blogging activities and her numerous friends. We understand that, for her, the most important thing is to enjoy life and that she is interested in good food and music. Xiao V also appears to be an animal rights advocate and a very emotional person.

Like Mia, Xiao V does not seem to be a hard worker or to have grand ambitions. Her main motivation to work is that receiving a salary is the only way to support a consumerist lifestyle, which she apparently longs for. At the beginning of the story, she seems to manage to adapt to long work hours and heavy pressure, but she eventually gets tired of it and develops lazier habits as soon as she has the chance to do so. This novel is the only one that gives importance to the heroine's childhood, family background and personal life, illustrating that, according to the narrator, work should be a means to reach security and comfort in life, but not a goal in itself.

7.3.2 Positive Characters, or Helpers
The first part of Xiao V's novel, dedicated to her first job experiences at a big accounting company, and then in a smaller consulting company, do not describe many characters in detail. However, Xiao V emphasizes the importance of her relationships with friends and colleagues as a source of comfort and support to deal with long work hours, pressure and anxiety:

At that point I realized that the salary was not the only factor determining one's happiness at work: harmonious relationships, friendly collaborations as well as mutual trust and support are the key elements to motivate someone to go forward.\footnote{419}

Two characters stand out in this part. The first one is Simon, an old friend of Xiao V's who offers her a job in the company he is founding and motivates her to quit her former employment. When he leaves the company, Simon scolds Xiao V for her lack of seriousness and hard work, which pushes her to put more effort into developing her career. After that, he still provides her with advice and support.

The second character playing an important role in Xiao V's career is Susan, her direct superior in

\footnote{419. XIAO V 2011, 56.}
Simon's company and his successor when he quits. Susan is a great source of inspiration for Xiao V, because she is deeply interested in her work and does not think about financial gains. She is also a strict and demanding superior who does not seem to appreciate Xiao V's laziness and slacking. When Susan's evaluation costs Xiao V a promotion, the heroine is motivated to work harder, rather than being angry or resentful. With Susan as a model, Xiao V starts doing better at work. When Susan leaves the company, Xiao V is thankful for everything she taught her but loses all professional motivation and questions her life choices. In the last part of the book, dedicated to Xiao V's personal life, the narrator emphasizes the importance of her relationships with her husband and friends to keep a proper balance between work and personal life and to be happy. The novel proposes various anecdotes illustrating Xiao V's leisurely lifestyle but does not really develop characters in detail.

As we can see, this novel, which focuses on personal life as much as on work and which stresses the importance of happiness, does not depict clear helpers but shows the importance of having a role model or an inspiration at work, and healthy relationships with partners, friends and colleagues to have a balanced and joyful life. This particularity is probably due to the fact that the novel proposes to help readers find happiness despite the obnubilating and pressuring careers they embrace to maintain a consumerist and comfortable lifestyle.

7.3.3 Negative Characters, or Villains

We have mentioned that Xiao V's novel emphasizes the possibility and importance of happiness at work. Thus, it does not contain any depiction of villains, and the heroine stresses that she has never experienced fierce competition or scheming between colleagues. Her first boss, Lao Cai, is said to often vent his anger on her, and she is also frequently scolded by Susan, who does not have a very high opinion of her, but these characters are not depicted negatively. Overall, Xiao V's relationships with colleagues are depicted as friendly and mutually supportive. At times, they represent her main motivation to go to work.

7.4 Narrative Structure

As we have briefly mentioned above, Xiao V's novel is divided into three parts, *Wo ai shangban* 我爱上班, *Kuaile de tongnian* 快乐的童年, Happy childhood, and *Shenghuo zong you huankuai de yi mian* 生活总有欢快的一面, Life has always a happy side. The part that will be of most use to apprehend the direction of the story and its narrative structure is the first one, dedicated to the narrator and heroine's professional life. The other two parts are respectively dedicated to memories and to everyday life anecdotes, less suitable for the type of textual analysis.
used here. The first chapter of the first part, *Di yi ci dagong de jingli 第一次打工的经历*, First professional experience, starts as follows:

Since I was a child I always wanted to work, because I read too many self-help books. As early as my first year of junior high, I started thinking that it would be great to earn some money that I could spend on myself.\(^{420}\)

As we can see, the first lack felt by Xiao V is a lack of material goods. Acquiring them becomes her goal and finding a job the way she chooses to reach her objective. Her first beginning counteraction is thus to lie about her age - she is fourteen year old at the time - to be hired as a maid in a hotel. When her boss discovers her lie, he fires her, but this first experience strengthens her taste for elegance and luxury.

The second chapter, *Zhiye mengxiang 职业梦想*, Dream job, further illustrates the narrator's aspirations:

I remember that, one day, when I was in high-school, my mom asked me what I wanted to do later, and that I answered without hesitation: "Secretary!" [...] Even when I think about it now, I don't think that it was such a ridiculous idea, because, at the time, I thought that all white collars were secretaries. I didn't know that some of these professional women working in office buildings had other jobs. As for the reason why I wanted to be a white collar so badly, I don't remember, but I think it had something to do with the way my mom raised me, emphasizing the importance of being independent. When I graduated from university, I chose to work for Arthur Andersen & co (one of the five biggest accounting offices in the world at the time), which was my dream during my third year of studies. The reason for this choice was extremely simple. It was because one of my teachers told me: "Among the five biggest accounting offices in the world, Andersen & co has the highest salaries." What else can you wish for as a recently graduated student?\(^{421}\)

In this chapter, we can observe that the heroine's goal is to earn enough money to be able to buy whatever she likes, which she cannot do as a student, thus creating a lack:

Back then my dream was clear: I absolutely wanted to enter one of the Five Big, and wait to have enough money to buy a red Golf.\(^{422}\)

Here, like in Tan Yiping's second novel, we can observe that the status of white collars is associated with financial independence.

The story goes on by describing Xiao V's struggle to realize her dream and enter the company she aims for. She explains, for example, that even if she had good grades in college, the fact that her

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420. XIAO V 2011, 5.
421. XIAO V 2011, 11.
422. XIAO V 2011, 14.
university was not famous was a weakness that she had to compensate for when writing her CV and during job interviews. The third chapter describes how she prepares for her interviews and how she is ultimately hired, marking her first victory. However, she soon realizes that the company lacks labor force, forcing all the employees, including the least experienced ones, to work day and night. She also discovers rapidly that there is an important gap between what she perceives as her socio-professional status and the way clients treat her. Thus, Xiao V's first victory creates new lacks, namely, a lack of personal life and a dissatisfaction when she notices the differences between the status she was dreaming of and the realities of her employment. The novel then describes how Xiao V progressively gets used to her work conditions, and what she learns from her job and her colleagues. We understand that she is becoming a competent and valued employee:

My original promise of working for Andersen & co only for two years was long forgotten. I started to like the honest relationships between colleagues and the extremist work style of the company. I worked there for three years, like a robot. Then, after having taken part in the project manager training organized in Malaysia by the Kinabulu organization, I became project manager. Everything was going smoothly until the outburst of the Enron-Andersen affair. 423

The narrator then explains how the company was dismantled and annexed by another firm, in the aftermath of a financial scandal.

We understand that the lack of leisure and personal time is becoming more and more difficult to endure for the heroine. Around the middle of the first part, two events trigger a new counteraction, the suicide of one of Xiao V's colleagues and a job proposal from her old friend Simon, who just started his own consulting company, motivating her to quit her job. With that new employment, she obtains the freedom and pressure decrease that she longed for - she works from home and chooses her own schedule - but she also feels very lonely and without motivation, replacing a lack with another one. This situation changes soon as the company grows and creates a Beijing office where Xiao V works with a very demanding new superior, Susan. Forced to get re-acquainted to a strict work schedule and hierarchy, Xiao V evokes her will to retire by the time she is thirty-five year old. At first, she does not do very well because she has become lazy and suffers from the lack of recognition from Susan and from her lack of results. When she fails a professional exam, her counteraction is to start studying and working hard again:

While listening to Simon, I engaged in intense self-examination. I was thinking that my lazy days had to end and that I couldn't continue like this, because I was just making a joke of my own career. My reflection process was very fast, when I went out of Simon's office, I had

423. XIAO V 2011, 49.
already decided to change drastically and to become a real professional.424

With her new work ethic, Xiao V accumulates extra hours but does not see her life as dull anymore:

For professionals, many things in life have to be set aside to make room for work. I can renounce to a dinner, postpone a trip, or cancel a vacation for my career. But I firmly believe that all of this is temporary. It's a case-by-case question but I think that, after ten years of career, even the busiest people can find time to do their own things, like spend time with family and friends or watch movies. Those who claim that they are so busy that they don't even have time to listen to music or to have a glass of water are talking nonsense.425

However, she evokes the difficulty to not lose herself and her individuality while giving so much time and energy to a job which has a strong brainwashing effect on employees. When Susan quits the company, the narrator loses all work motivation again. She feels like she has nothing more to learn at that position without Susan and questions her professional choices:

I started to really wonder if I was made for this profession. From a personality point of view, not at all.426

The following chapter is the last one of the first part. The conclusion of this last chapter is revealing of the style and attitude displayed by the narrator throughout the book:

After working for a few years, everyone is likely to take a lot of resolutions and to come to a lot of understandings about their careers. Here, I am just sharing mine with you. Of course, I am not certain that they are all correct, because I often change or update my own understanding of things. I am just sharing, not teaching. I am still working hard at my ordinary job, and I guess that most of you do the same, so let us continue to work hard, and maybe one day we will not be ordinary anymore.427

This conclusion illustrates the difficulty of establishing the narrative structure of the novel. Indeed, as we have seen, the narrator never seems perfectly happy with her job, something always seems to be missing, and the novel does not depict any definite victory that would put an end to her struggle. As the passage quoted above explains, by the end of the first part, the narrator is still working hard towards an abstract and probably unreachable purpose, namely, to not be ordinary anymore.

This conclusion gives meaning to the other parts of the book: as it is probably not possible to reach perfect happiness and a sense of achievement at work, one should instead turn to personal life to feel fulfilled. In the third part, Xiao V indeed realizes that she is satisfied with her life:

I like to think about life when I'm in the subway because there is nothing else to do. One day,

424. XIAO V 2011, 112.
426. XIAO V 2011, 144.
427. XIAO V 2011, 151.
I was thinking about the question a friend had asked me the day before, what would be my ideal life like, and about my surprising answer: "To have a good job." [...] During that subway ride, I analyzed my deepest thoughts and realized something terrifying: I was an inherently self-reliant and unimportant person.428

The same evening, when a friend asks her what job she would choose if she could do anything, she answers that she would not change her current job:

I was very surprised too, I didn't want to be an actor, a famous singer or a millionaire, I wanted to keep my actual life! But why? Really, why? Is it because I have no ambition or because I genuinely enjoy the freedom and joy of my unimportant person role?429

And later:

I thought that my dream was to be an idle housewife who didn't work and just spent money, I didn't imagine that I would ultimately choose to keep being a professional [in English in the Chinese text]. [...] Life is full of sorrows, but if you have a clear purpose, a few setbacks are only little curves on a long road, you might have to walk a little bit more, but the view along the road is also beautiful.430

This last quote seems to reveal that the narrator ultimately comes to the conclusion that, in a career as in life, the process is more important than the place one intends to go. The novel also reveals that, while the white-collar status is associated with financial independence, it is also associated with ordinariness, allowing us to think that its members do not consider themselves to be part of an elite, in the case of the present novel at least. Here, the narrator seems to be facing a dilemma between accepting her ordinary person identity and enjoying the benefits it provides, and wanting something more, probably because of the prestige she originally associated with the white-collar status.

428. XIAO V 2011, 211.
429. XIAO V 2011, 211.
430. XIAO V 2011, 211.
Chapter 8: Li Bingbing fendou ji 《厉冰冰奋斗记》, Liujing Bingbing 六井冰冰

8.1 General Information

Account of Li Bingbing’s Struggle was published in 2011 by the Chinese Overseas Publishing House (Zhongguo huaqiao chubanshe 中国华侨出版社). The author wrote three other novels whose heroines all have the same name as in this first narrative, but there is apparently no connection between them from a content point of view. The present novel was first published on Tianya Club. The narrator and the heroine are the same person, and different hints seem to indicate that the author is as well. The 233 pages of the story describe how a young girl from the countryside overcomes the limitations that her familial and educational background were expected to impose on her and becomes a respected and acclaimed lawyer. The story also describes the psychological and emotional coming of age of the heroine, notably through her relationships with men, and is concluded by a happy ending, as Li Bingbing gets married to the man she loves and buys a house with him.

8.2 Paratext

8.2.1 Author's Presentation

On the inside cover at the beginning of the book, Liujing Bingbing is described as a famous Tianya Club writer (Tianya Shequ zhuming xieshou 天涯社区著名写手). Apparently, her main professional activity is being a novelist (zhengzhi gao wenzi 正职搞文字), and she is also a story teller (qianzhi jiang gushi 兼职讲故事). The presentation proposes a non-exhaustive list of her novels and mentions that she likes to read and to daydream, and that she believes that every woman is like her heroine, Li Bingbing (renwei meige nüren de xin shang, dou zuo yi ge Li Bingbing; mei ge nüren de shen shang, dou you Li Bingbing de yingzi 认为每个女人的心上，都住着一个厉冰冰：每个女人的身上，都有厉冰冰的影子). In the preface (xu 序), written by the author, Liujing Bingbing says she is thirty-five year old at the time of the publication - making her a member of the post-1970 generation. Under the name Liujing Bingbing, she published three other novels, which apparently all appeared in 2012, and which all use the same heroine's name, Li Bingbing, without being narratively linked with the first novel addressed here. The titles of these works are Nü jizhe Li Bingbing 《女记者厉冰冰》, Li Bingbing Journalist, Pijiu nü Li Bingbing 《啤酒女厉冰冰》, Beer Girl Li Bingbing, and Li Bingbing lihun ji 《厉冰冰离婚记》, Account of Li Bingbing's Divorce. All these books seem to conform to a similar narrative structure, describing the
peregrinations of ordinary girls in the professional realm, or in their personal lives in the case of the last one. Apparently, the author has also written other narratives under the pseudonym Xinhui Yinji 新会印记, which was her online writer name, but these do not seem to have been published in paper versions.

8.2.2 Preface and Postface
Liujing Bingbing's preface starts as follows:

This is a story of work and love, it is also my story. [...] I am thirty-five year old, my name is Li Bingbing and I am a partner in a law firm in a prefecture-level city. Before being a lawyer, I was a worker [dagongmei 打工妹] in a hotel, and before that, I was a peasant in a small village. As both my parents are peasants, my identity, defined by my residence permit [hukou 户口], is also one of a peasant.431

The author then evokes her long-lasting desire to escape the limitations imposed on her by her rural origins and the difficulties she encountered in the process.

We can observe that this preface emphasizes the autobiographical dimension of the novel. As we will see, the professional path described by the author is exactly the same as the one of the novel's heroine. The autobiographical dimension is further supported by the fact that the story is narrated using the first person and that the author's name combines the heroine and narrator's given name, Bingbing, and the name of her village of origin, Liujing. The particularity of this preface resides in its emphasis on the modest social status of the author and in the absence of references to the elite, like in The Art of Winning, to the middle class, like in Du Lala Go!, or to big companies, like in numerous workplace novels. We can also observe that the preface contradicts the author's presentation evoked above, where writing was described as the main occupation of Liujing Bingbing.

8.2.3 Cover, Band and Layout
The overall layout of Liujing Bingbing's book is very plain, the cover is the color of old paper with inscriptions in grey and orange. The subtitle reads:

At twenty year old, she starts her journey to success! From temporary jobs to lawyer, Li Bingbing teaches you how to seize opportunities!

In the middle of the front cover stands a red stamp with a star in the middle, a mimic of the Communist Party stamp, with the inscription "You can succeed too!" (ni ye keyi chenggong 也可以成功). On the back cover, we can read:

431. LIUJING 2011, 1.
To succeed you don't only need hard work and opportunities, you also need to understand how to seize these opportunities.

Following that is a brief summary of the story. As we have seen, the inside cover at the beginning of the book provides a brief presentation of the author.

We can observe that the paratext of this novel contains few elements but that they strongly emphasize the autobiographical nature of the novel, as well as its utility to teach readers how to succeed. Here, contrarily to many other workplace novels, the assertions that the heroine starts from nothing, with no educational background nor social connections, seems accurate because of her rural origins, limited school curriculum, and first professional experience as a maid in a hotel. The fact that the reader is told, already on the book cover, that the story will be one of success, probably influences the reading experience in the sense that it gives to every element of the story the appearance of a necessary step towards the achievement of a goal. As the readers are told that they can succeed too, they are probably invited to take the heroine of the novel as a model.

8.3 Characters

8.3.1 The Heroine

The beginning of Account of Li Bingbing's Struggle repeats part of the preface, as the narrator explains that, contrarily to most lawyers, she is not highly educated and only graduated highschool. She also evokes her rural origins and her first employment as a hotel maid, which made her parents very proud:

As I did not do well in sciences, my gaokao grades were pretty bad and my family was planning on sending me to work. My mom wanted to ask Ahong to help me get a job in the shoe factory located in the provincial capital. In a word, I felt like I was offered a brand-new start. Even if, according to today's standards, this start was ridiculous, at the time, for me and my parents, it counted as "having prospects" [qiantu 前途]. Anyway, any job has way more prospects than working in the fields.\(^\text{432}\)

Li Bingbing also describes herself as not beautiful, emphasizing that she never received any work favors because of her looks. After having worked in the hotel for three years, with the urging of her friend Na, Bingbing manages to enroll in a university to study law. During the second year of her studies, when she is nineteen year old, she meets her first boyfriend, Lin. After a third year of studies, she graduates but emphasizes that she has no idea of what to do with her diploma and that she enrolled only because of Na. She seems to lack self-confidence.

\(^{432}\) LIUJING 2011, 7.
We understand that the heroine sends part of her salary to her family every month to help her parents afford her two brothers' schooling. Despite her lack of confidence, she seems talented, as she obtains the best grades at a hiring exam from the town's judicature bureau. We also learn that Bingbing has a real talent for writing. When she is hired at the bureau, she sends presents to her family who are extremely proud of her career development. She seems to be the only employee to have such a modest background and low educational level. Two of her colleagues are related to high-ranked officials, and two benefit from high education and long work experience. Bingbing's position in the bureau thus seems to be precarious:

Even if I was recruited through examinations, everyone knew that I used to work in a hotel. People with good intentions would say that I was a girl who strove for her self-improvement but, in the mouth of someone hostile, the sentence "she used to be a maid in a hotel" held a very derogatory meaning.433

A year after being hired, Bingbing starts having an affair with Li Li, a married colleague older than she is. Lin sees them together and, when he confronts Bingbing, she decides to break up with him. Thanks to her hard work and people skills, Bingbing continues to progress at work and obtains the trust and support of the bureau chief. She succeeds at the lawyer's exam and later becomes director of the legal aid center, which puts an end to her relationship with Li Li, who also applied for the position. At this new job, Bingbing does her best to defend the interests of subaltern groups. She develops an intimate but platonic relationship with the vice director of the city's police department, Wu Ming, a married man she encountered while working on her first case as a lawyer. Bingbing sincerely likes Wu Ming but also wants to use his help to find a good job for her brother. However, Wu Ming soon decides to stop seeing her to avoid a scandal that could harm his career.

Later, with the help of her friends Na and Hua, Bingbing is hired in a private law firm and moves to a new city. As her salary depends on commissions, she focuses all her energy on work and lives a lonely life. Saddened by Wu Ming's rejection, she also stops caring about her physical appearance:

I completely forgot that I was a woman, I even neglected to use cosmetics. Only women who lost their love can let themselves go like that.434

We understand that Bingbing and her boss, Fang Yuan, a divorced, older man, develop feelings for each other. During a meal they share together, we also learn that she dislikes Western food and enjoys the simple lifestyle she grew up with in the countryside. In the words of Fang Yuan, Li Bingbing is compared to a female knight (nüxia 女侠), for her commitment and aspirations. She seems to care deeply about the people she defends and to try to help them with emotion and conviction. At the end of the novel, Bingbing and Fang Yuan get married and settle down in the

433. LIUJING 2011, 48.
434. LIUJING 2011, 182.
outskirts of the city, near the countryside.

We can observe that Li Bingbing is a hard-working and dedicated heroine, even if she does not have great expectations towards the future, which is linked to her rural roots. Her modest origins and educational background are described as the cause of her lack of self-confidence but also of her desire to help others. She shows great filial piety by ceaselessly caring about her parents well-being - she considers buying them a house in the city where they could live comfortably after retiring - and about her brothers' education and employment. Throughout the novel, she loses the innocent vision of love she held when she was with Lin and comes to see relationships in an utilitarian way, notably because of the influence of Na. When she meets Fang Yuan, she seems to change her mind again and to embrace a sincere, realistic and mature vision of love and partnership. Li Bingbing often emphasizes that she succeeded through hard work as she could not rely on looks, background or social connections to obtain help. However, she also depicts her biggest career leaps as being motivated by her friends' support, as she would otherwise have lacked the self-confidence necessary to apply for the positions. Finally, despite her will to have a better life than her parents, and thus to go work in the city, the heroine seems attached to the quiet and simple life of the countryside. Contrarily to most workplace novels' heroines, Li Bingbing seems to really have started from nothing and to have escaped the limitations imposed on people from rural origins through hard work and friends' support. This novel is the only one of the corpus to address social issues linked to the underprivileged status of the countryside, and especially of rural women.

8.3.2 Positive Characters, or Helpers

In *Account of Li Bingbing's Struggle*, the heroine is encouraged and supported by her friend Na since the very beginning of her professional life. Na is a beautiful, smart and ambitious young woman who uses her relationships with men to obtain material benefits and positions. This particularity of Na's character does not shed a negative light on her in the eyes of the heroine, who even seems envious of her ability to take advantage of her relationships. At the end of the novel, Na has become the president of the Women's Foundation's local branch. She always encourages Bingbing to apply for better positions, even when the heroine does not feel competent or qualified enough to be considered. Na will also use her own position in the government to help Bingbing with her work, as will Hua, another of Bingbing's friends who is a journalist. As long as their relationship lasts, Lin, described as a kind and caring young man, also provides encouragements and support to Bingbing and tries to make her more self-confident. When she joins the judicature bureau, Bingbing is supported by Li Li, who is described as selfish and slightly brutal in their intimate encounters. Through mild manipulations, the heroine will also manage to obtain the help of Abao, a rude and ill-tempered colleague who will teach her everything she knows about informatics. Finally, her hard work and dedication will gain her the support of the bureau chief, who encourages her to apply to
the legal aid center and helps her secure her position in the bureau until he is fired because of an adultery and divorce scandal. Despite the scandal, the bureau chief is depicted as a benevolent authority figure. Later, Bingbing obtains the affection and support of Wu Ming and Fang Yuan, who are both described as discreet and hard-working men.

We can observe that the heroine's friends and her first boyfriend play important roles in motivating her to live up to her potential. Na and Hua also seem to provide her with emotional support and comfort, even if that does not prevent the heroine from feeling lonely and helpless when her relationships with men fail. Bingbing seems to have a penchant for older men and is helped by them on many occasions in the novel. She helps her family financially and reaches out to her parents when she needs to escape from the chaos of her new urban life. Most of the characters in this novel are depicted in a balanced way, neither completely negative nor completely positive, giving the reader the impression that the author aims at illustrating how life's hardships can push people towards morally questionable deeds without making them immoral people. Most of the relationships depicted in the novel are, to some extent at least, utilitarian and based on manipulation, even when they link otherwise positive characters.

8.3.3 Negative Characters, or Villains
As we have seen, most of the characters in this novel are not fundamentally negative, even when their relationship with the heroine is hostile. When Bingbing is hired at the judicature bureau, most of her colleagues dislike her because she sets too high working standards, but they do not seem to act on their resentment towards her. After breaking up with Bingbing, Lin tries to undermine her relationships with other men, first by outing her affair with Li Li to his wife, then by pouring red paint on Wu Ming's doorstep, pushing him to stop seeing Bingbing. However, Lin seems to act this way because of his persistent feelings for Bingbing and not because he is depicted as a negative character. We have also mentioned that, when Bingbing is chosen to become the director of the legal aid center over Li Li, he cannot handle it and accuses her of being excessively ambitious and manipulative before putting an end to their relationship. Despite the narrator's attraction and affection for Li Li, he is generally unflatteringly described compared to the kinder and more caring Lin. The only character depicted in an unambiguously negative way is the man who replaces the bureau chief when he is forced to resign. He does not trust Bingbing because of her good relationship with his predecessor. He also harasses her sexually and, when she refuses to become his mistress, he manages to keep her away from all the important and interesting cases.

We can observe that Li Bingbing encounters complicated and painful relationships, at work and in her private life, but that they do not seem to hinder her career in the long term. This aspect emphasizes Bingbing's ability to face and endure hardships and to keep going forward despite difficulties, which is associated with her modest origins in the story. The novel also gives a sense of
solitude and helplessness when describing the narrator's life in the city, emphasizing the difficulties for rural migrants to reach the happy life they dream of and work hard for. This novel is the only one of the corpus that seems to depict negative relationships as a way to illustrate that life is hard and unfair for people from low social backgrounds, especially for women, rather than to illustrate the workplace quarrels or hardships of the privileged urban youth.

8.4 Narrative Structure

In *Account of Li Bingbing's Struggle*, the narrator begins by implying her will to escape her rural origins and to not work in the countryside like her parents. While this is not explicitly stated, we understand that her origins give her a sense of lacking social status and opportunities. Her beginning counteraction is to start working in a hotel which, in the eyes of her family, already constitutes an achievement. At that point of the narrator's life, her wish and goal is to be permanently hired in the hotel, which does not require any real struggle on her part. Indeed, she witnesses the drunken misbehavior of a woman accompanying a high ranked official and is thus offered a position in the hotel in exchange for her silence. Three years later, Bingbing's change of profession is not linked to a lack felt by herself but by her best friend, Na, who works as a receptionist and realizes that, without a college education, they will have no development prospects and will probably be fired as soon as they get older. The narrator admits that enrolling in a university was a determining step in her life, but she does not describe it as a goal or as a dream of hers:

> Actually, I never thought about the benefits this diploma could bring me. I only went to university because Na told me to go with her. If someone as smart as her wanted to study, then I might as well study too.\(^\text{435}\)

Bingbing explains her lack of ambition and ideals as a result of her social background and upbringing:

> Poor people have poor people's joys, we don't have grand ideals, so we don't have high expectations. People without expectations are generally happy. If you are not happy, it's because you are thinking too much.\(^\text{436}\)

Three years later, after she graduates, Bingbing applies for a position at the judicature bureau. Again, this career move is not described as her own will but as Lin's suggestion:

> To tell you the truth, I didn't have the slightest confidence in succeeding but I didn't want to

\(^{435}\) LIUJING 2011, 28.

\(^{436}\) LIUJING 2011, 15.
disappoint Lin. He wanted me to progress, so I had to progress.\textsuperscript{437}

We learn that Bingbing obtained the highest grades at the hiring exam and that her interview went better than the one's of the two other candidates. However, she is not hired because her educational background is judged insufficient. At that point, the narrator seems to feel a lack of fairness in the process and her beginning counteraction is to write a letter to the bureau chief to obtain explanations:

In the letter, I wrote: "I am just a destitute girl from the countryside, I never had unrealistic dreams about my future. However, when I applied, you said that I fulfilled the job requirements and, after my interview, you told me that I performed well. So why, when the time to hire me has come, are you suddenly telling me that my educational background is insufficient?\textsuperscript{438}

A few days later, Bingbing learns that she is hired, which she perceives as a victory. She seems very proud of her new status:

Working at the hotel reception, like working at the judicature bureau gave me the status of "permanently employed institutional functionary" but, for me, to work in the judicature bureau was very different from working in the hotel. When I was mentioning the bureau, I was filled with pride, while working in a hotel was not impressive enough.\textsuperscript{439}

Bingbing moves to a new dorm and can afford to buy some presents for her family, who are very impressed by her professional development. This is apparently enough for her to be happy:

When I think about it now, I realize that, at the time, I loved my life and that I was very optimistic towards the future.\textsuperscript{440}

Despite the fact that being hired in the bureau represents a victory in itself, Bingbing realizes that she lacks the educational background and the social connections to secure her position. Her beginning counteraction is to learn informatics from the only employee able to use computers in the bureau, Abao, who is disliked by everyone because of her rude behavior. The narrator describes the long process necessary to befriend Abao and to convince her to share her knowledge, but this does not seem to represent a struggle per se. Bingbing then succeeds at mastering Abao's knowledge and wins the respect and trust of the bureau chief, thus securing her position. In the third chapter, Bingbing, who has been working at the bureau for three years, sleeps with Li Li, an older, married colleague. She seems to be attracted by him because of the maturity and power differentiating him from Lin. We can infer that this event illustrates the heroine unconscious will for a higher social

\textsuperscript{437} LIUJING 2011, 30.
\textsuperscript{438} LIUJING 2011, 41.
\textsuperscript{439} LIUJING 2011, 43.
\textsuperscript{440} LIUJING 2011, 45.
status.

About a year later, the bureau chief announces that the position of director of the legal aid center is vacant and encourages Bingbing to apply:

Even if I usually stand aloof from worldly affairs and if I don't have high ideals of social climbing, when my leader gives me the opportunity to progress, who am I to say no? Everyone likes to progress, everyone likes power. 441

Again, we can observe that Bingbing's decision has been triggered by someone else's suggestion but, as soon as she applies, she seems determined to obtain the position. She refuses to withdraw her application when Li Li asks her to do so:

"[...] I would not give up this opportunity for anyone, [...]." 442

When she obtains the position, Bingbing attributes her success to the support of the bureau chief:

I believe that he [Li Li] probably had much more support among the masses than I did, but sometimes the leader's will is more powerful. In general, the person whom the leader wants to be promoted will be the one promoted. 443

We can thus see that Bingbing obtains a new victory which is not described as the result of a struggle but as a conjunction of luck and external help.

In the fifth chapter, Bingbing seems to be doing well at her new position. However, the bureau chief is fired because of a scandal involving his personal life, and she thus loses her main support. Her new superior does not trust her because of her bond with his predecessor. He keeps her away from all interesting cases and attempts to make her his mistress. Through a discussion about career prospects between Bingbing, Na and Hua, we learn more about Bingbing's goals:

I looked at these two crazy women, astonished beyond words. The way they were dealing with their lives was very different from mine. The stability and protection I was pursuing with so much efforts and difficulties was not worth a thing for them. 444

Here, we understand that Bingbing values stability and security above all, explaining her lack of clear ambitions. However, as her professional situation deteriorates, she starts considering a change of profession and feels lost and helpless:

For the first time, I lost my sense of direction. I didn't know which kind of path was ahead of me, nor where I should go. 445

441. LIUJING 2011, 86.
442. LIUJING 2011, 90.
443. LIUJING 2011, 91.
444. LIUJING 2011, 139.
Bingbing decides to spend a few days in the countryside to gather her thoughts. Once again, it is her friends, Na and Hua, who find her a job offer and encourage her to apply. She manages to be hired and moves to a new city. However, this new step is described as a consequence of her new boss' mistreatment rather than as her genuine will or ambition and is put in motion by her friends rather than by herself.

The heroine then has to get used to a new city and working in the private sector. She seems to be doing well but soon feels that her salary is not high enough. Her beginning counteraction is to work harder and accept numerous cases to earn more commissions. She seems to be pouring her heart and soul into work. When the narrator's mother pressures her to get married, she answers:

"For now I just want to do my job well to be able to buy a house where you and dad can come live and enjoy yourself."^446

This statement reminds the reader that taking care of her family was one of the narrator's implicit goals all through the narrative. In the seventh chapter, Bingbing's life goals are reiterated:

I know that the elites are impressive, and that their world seems far above us but, the higher you are, the more people there are who want to climb to you and push you back down. Instead of struggling against everyone every day, I would rather find a comfortable place where I can rest and live well. I am not the young girl working in a hotel anymore, I have the power to choose a life and work environment which make me happy.^447

This shows that Li Bingbing considers her career to be a success: she escaped her rural origins and found a position high enough to give her a sense of pride and agency, but not so high that the competitiveness threatens her well-being. It also illustrates that she has kept her modest ambitions and expectations throughout the story. While the narrator's career seems to be going well, we understand that she feels a lack in her emotional life, which is soon filled by her superior, Fang Yuan, with whom she has developed an intimate relationship. In the last chapter, they get married and buy a house together. The book is concluded by a reflection on the importance of all the people who crossed the narrator's path and on what they brought to her and her life.

We can observe that, in this novel, the narrator and heroine's goals are more pragmatic and modest than in other workplace novels, though not necessarily easier to achieve: she does not want to live in the countryside, she wants to be able to help her family, and she longs for security and stability in her employment as well as in her personal life. At the beginning of the novel, she seems to believe that she would have been satisfied working in the hotel for most of her life if her friend Na did not warn her against the precariousness of the poorly educated staff's situation. Throughout the novel, the fragility of Bingbing's status, linked with her rural origins and low educational background, is

^446. LIUJING 2011, 193.
^447. LIUJING 2011, 205.
often reiterated. With the guidance and support of her friends and lovers, Li Bingbing seems to have
managed to reach her goal towards the end of the story, as she has a stable job and gets married.
However, the narrative does not depict her progression as a series of victories resulting from long
struggles and clear ambitions. Instead, her career seems to be the outcome of a sense of necessity to
survive and support relatives, as well as an ability to endure hardship linked with the heroine's
modest background. The fact that the motivation and impulse to take the necessary steps towards
the heroine's goals originate in her friends and lovers is a particularity of this novel and illustrates
the narrator's lack of awareness of her own potential, but also the fact that, being from a poor
background, she is easily satisfied with her current situation.
Chapter 9: Zhichang xiaoxia bianshen ji 《职场小虾变身记》, Chen Yi 陈一

9.1 General Information

Account of a Workplace Little Shrimp's Transformation was published in 2014 by the China Machine Press (Jixie gongye chubanshe 机械工业出版社). The 229 pages of the novel describe how a young woman, disappointed by her professional experience in a small, private firm manages to be hired in the HR department of the Fortune 500 company PB. The story goes on with an account of the heroine's professional development over approximately three years. She seems to become very experienced and competent, attested to by the fact that she is asked to solve HR-related problems in a friend's company. The novel also evokes the threat represented by the corporate world and its competitiveness to people's sense of benevolence and kindness. Ultimately, in order to maintain her moral integrity, and because she does not feel fully valued at work, the heroine will quit PB and follow a friend in his new business venture.

9.2 Paratext

9.2.1 Author's Presentation

According to the author's presentation printed on the inside cover at the end of the book, Chen Yi is a human resources manager (renli ziyuan guanlizhe 人力资源管理者), a high-ranked expert in human resources management (gaoji renli ziyuan guanlishi 高级人力资源管理师), and an experienced training instructor (zishen peixun jiangshi 资深培训讲师). She is said to have had a ten year career in human resources, from manager (jingli 经理), to director (zongjian 总监). The presentation mentions different tasks and domains she encountered during this decade. At the time of the book's publication, she was working for a company ranked among the "Top 100 Chinese companies" ("Zhongguo shangshi gongsi 100 qiang” “中国上市公司100强”), according to the American magazine Fortune, chosen many times as "Most admired company in China" ("Zui shou zanshang de Zhongguo gongsi" “最受赞赏的中国公司”) and "Best employer for university students" ("Daxuesheng zuijia guzhu" “大学生最佳雇主”). Apparently, in 2009, she became a trainer and consultant in human resources performance managing (renli ziyuan jixiao guanli peixun he zixun 人力资源绩效管理培训和咨询).
9.2.2 Preface and Postface
The preface of Account of a Workplace Little Shrimp's Transformation is the only one of the corpus
which was not written by the author of the rest of the novel. It starts by explaining that the heroine
of the novel, Cai Xiaoxia, is an archetypal workplace newbie (zhongduo zhichang xinren de suoying
众 多 职 场 新 ⼈人 的 缩 影 ). The company where she works, PB, is also described as representing a
specific type of firm, where everything is standardized and beautiful on the surface, but governed
by complex unspoken rules that the new employees have to learn to master on the inside. The text
then states:
Chen Yi has ten years of professional experience and, here, she created a workplace
microcosm for all of you. Cai Xiaoxia encounters all the weird characters and all the thorny
problems you can imagine. She is able to handle problems, is good at reversing bad
situations, she dares to use reverse psychology to achieve her goals, and, at the end, she
creates her own opportunities and obtains recognition. Art finds its origin and its highest
form in practice. All the characters have been inspired by real models from the business
world, and we hope that all the readers can also recognize themselves in the novel.448

The preface then ends as follows:
Reading is like looking into a mirror, it always reflects ourselves. We hope that, by reading
this novel, the readers will mature with Cai Xiaoxia. Go after your dreams, realize who you
are.449

As we can see, in this instance the mention of the author's professional background is strongly
emphasized to establish a referential pact. Her thorough knowledge of the workplace gives
authenticity and legitimacy to her narrative, but she is not described in a way allowing a comparison
with the heroine's career, even though Cai Xiaoxia also works in HR. We can also observe that this
preface emphasizes the novel's resemblance with the real workplace, as well as the archetypal, and
thus exemplary, nature of its characters and settings. This characteristic is supposed to allow for
readers' identification. This preface also evokes the difficulties of learning how to deal with the
hidden rules of the workplace but does not stress that point as heavily as the preface of The Art of
Winning.

9.2.3 Cover, Band and Layout
Account of a Workplace Little Shrimp's Transformation shows a plain cover, white with a few color
straps, three of which are marked with inscriptions: "A post Du Lala era workplace story", "A HR
veteran tells you what you don't know about human resources management!" and "Promotions,

448.
449.

CHEN 2014, III.
CHEN 2014, IV.
228


salary raises, why did it never happen to you? Read this book, and you will understand!" On the back cover are printed the recommendations of five important business people who praise the book's realism, utility, and its relatable and humorous elements, making it a great read for young professionals. The inside cover at the beginning of the book summarizes the main plot of the novel (yitiáo zhuxián 一条主线): after a first work experience in the private sector, Cai Xiaoxia manages to be hired in a Fortune 500 company where she has to learn the hidden rules of big firms in order to transform from a newbie (cainiáo 菜鸟) to an elite (jingyíng 精英). It also presents a side narrative related to the workplace (yitiáo zhìchāng zhixián 一条职场支线) mentioning two characters of the story, Yi Na and Mi Bo, who will make bad career choices and end up in worse companies than where they started, as well as a side story specific to the HR field (yitiáo zhuányé zhixián 一条专业支线) evoking how, after having become an elite, Xiaoxia, as a consultant, helps a private company from her hometown to overcome some difficulties.

As already mentioned, the inside cover at the end of the book offers a presentation of the author. Before the author's preface, the reader is offered another summary of the story, emphasizing Cai Xiaoxia's hard work and intelligence. The book also contains a descriptive list of the main characters. The characters are introduced by their professional functions, sometimes their age, and for some of them, by the fact that they are not good examples to follow. The last page of the book is a feedback card (fankuí ka 反馈卡), provided by the editor. The readers are invited to fill out some basic personal information, to indicate their profession, sector of employment, and size of the company where they work. On the other side, they find questions about the book: title, ISBN, how they discovered it, how they evaluate the content, the layout and the cover, where they bought it, which types of books they are generally interested in, and if they want to receive the editor's newsletter.

As we can see, in this case, the authenticity and usefulness of the novel are strongly supported by an emphasis on the author's rich professional experience. The book cover and the preface invite and encourage readers to use the novel to learn about the professional world and realize their potential. The reference of the book as a "post-Du Lala era workplace novel" is noteworthy as it indicates that the story of Du Lala represents a reference for the genre, but also that the present novel proposes to break away from this model and to set its own rules and standards. This novel is the only one explicitly asserting the negative nature of some of the characters before the beginning of the story, to ensure that the readers will not misinterpret the narrative, which reinforces the perception of the novel as a didactic manual.
9.3 Characters

9.3.1 The Heroine
At the beginning of Chen Yi's novel, we learn that the heroine, Cai Xiaoxia, graduated from the human resources department of a professional school before being hired in a small-scale, family style company. She is described as a hard worker and as being very grateful to her employer for hiring her but, when the novel begins, she is considering changing jobs, after having worked for more than three years in the same company. Cai Xiaoxia is described in laconic terms:

Xiaoxia has a diploma from a good university, she is polite and of high quality.\textsuperscript{450}

Apparently, she is considered pretty by her male colleagues. We also learn that she owns an apartment, which is highly desirable even if she lives far from the center of Shanghai, where the story takes place. After graduating from university, she first moved in with her boyfriend, Jia Qiaochong, in an apartment bought by their parents. However, they broke up after six months, forcing Xiaoxia's parents to buy another apartment and causing her to not believe in pure love anymore. Xiaoxia's mother would like her to get married and have children and often uses one of Xiaoxia's friends, Xiaoli, who did not study but married a rich Chinese man living in Japan, as an example for Xiaoxia to follow.

When Xiaoxia applies for a job in a bigger company, we learn that she is always eager to learn and to progress. The description of her hiring provides more information about her:

The work conditions offered by PB obviously attracted a large number of smart and motivated young professionals. Xiaoxia's appearance was not outstanding, her background had nothing special, she was an ordinary person. But the CV she prepared so carefully caught PB's attention and she rapidly received an invitation for an interview.\textsuperscript{451}

When she is hired, Xiaoxia decides to work even harder than before to not waste this chance. She seems motivated to learn about the company and to do her work well, she takes notes about what she learns and about her progression everyday. Throughout the story, the author insists on the fact that Xiaoxia got her diploma from a professional school, which made her pragmatic and resourceful, and the fact that she now works in a city where she does not know anybody. Apparently, Xiaoxia sets clear and demanding objectives for herself. The heroine is never discouraged by difficulties and pleases her superiors with her hard work and good ideas. She also shows great dedication for self-improvement and learning, and she manages to obtain the support of most of the company's employees.

\textsuperscript{450} CHEN 2014, 2.
\textsuperscript{451} CHEN 2014, 10.
During an outing, the heroine and her friend Moli discuss relationships and marriage, leading Moli to comment on the appearance of the heroine:

"[...] Xiaoxia, you are not stunningly beautiful, but it's not as bad as for you to risk to be leftover!"\textsuperscript{452}

When she encounters difficulties at work, Xiaoxia encourages herself by writing in her journal:

In the career arena, everyone has his or her own survival rules. Some people rely on their beauty, some on their social connections, some on their family background. I don't have any of this, I can only count on my hard work to integrate into this world. I am constantly looking for my own worth, hoping to finally find what my potential is.\textsuperscript{453}

Although the heroine is depicted as having strong people skills and as earning the respect and collaboration of all the company's departments in her projects, she does not seem very concerned with other people's well-being. When the company decides to lay off twenty percent of its employees, Xiaoxia, who has to find a way to do it with minimal costs, explains that if the lay-offs are attributed to low performances, the compensation to be paid is much lower. She thus proposes installing a monthly performance appraisal system. Apparently, to do so goes against the company's rules, but Xiaoxia has already thought of a way to get around the problem. Her system aims at creating employees' dissatisfaction towards their salaries and bonuses, thus pushing them to quit. Cai Xiaoxia apparently feels slightly guilty to be involved in the lay-off of so many employees but still goes through with her plan.

During an alumni meeting, Xiaoxia realizes that she changed a lot since she graduated and that she is not happy at work anymore. Peng Sheng, a man introduced to her by her mother and with whom she enjoys speaking about work, joins her in her hotel room one evening and asks her to officialize their relationship. When they get back to Shanghai, they move in together in an apartment bought by Peng Sheng as a pre-wedding gift to Xiaoxia. Shortly after, she is offered a good job opportunity away from Shanghai. When she reveals this to Peng Sheng, we understand that, contrarily to her superior, Yi Na, who is sacrificing her personal life for her career, Xiaoxia would choose love over work:

After finishing her story, Xiaoxia stayed silent. At this crucial moment, Peng Sheng should take her in his arms, cry and ask her to stay. Then, with feminine reserve, she would ponder over giving up her career for love or sacrificing her love for her job. Ultimately, she would be subjugated by the man's domineering manner and stay with him.\textsuperscript{454}

On a few occasions, the novel emphasizes Xiaoxia's loyalty towards her superiors. However, she

\textsuperscript{452} CHEN 2014, 113.
\textsuperscript{453} CHEN 2014, 117.
\textsuperscript{454} CHEN 2014, 182.
grows disillusioned with Yi Na, her model, who seems to have lost her kindness and honesty in her obsession for professional advancement. Xiaoxia thus accepts a job offer in a company recently created by an old friend, after having made sure that Peng Sheng would follow her to the city she has to move to. This choice is justified by the heroine's need of self-actualization.

We can observe that Cai Xiao Xia, like most of the heroines, is a young, college educated urbanite who has to compensate for her lack of social connections with hard work. Full of ideals regarding her "self-actualization" and the "realization of her potential", she focuses all her energy on work and the novel seldom provides information about her personal life. Her relationship with Peng Sheng is described mostly in terms of what he can teach her about work, even if she displays sudden peaks of romanticism and self-sacrifice when her work threatens her love life. The heroine seems to adapt well to her professional environment and her efforts and talent seem to be recognized in the company. However, when she realizes that her moral values might be threatened by the importance she gives to her career, she decides to change paths.

9.3.2 Positive Characters, or Helpers

The characters of *Account of a Workplace Little Shrimp’s Transformation* are clearly separated into positive and negative sides. The character described most positively is Yi Na, the chief of the HR department who hires Xiao Xia and is her direct superior at PB. Yi Na seems to be a competent and inspiring boss whom Xiao Xia admires deeply:

Yi Na's image was often appearing in Xiao Xia's thoughts: kind and calm, elegant but approachable. Xiao Xia was using Yi Na's image to encourage herself, she was attempting to imitate her behavior and the way she dressed.\(^\text{455}\)

Despite her lack of time to mentor Xiao Xia properly, Yi Na supports her and is usually pleased with her work. Yi Na also arranges for Xiao Xia to take part in a HR summit in Sanya and tells her that she sees a lot of herself in her. In the middle of the story, Yi Na is transferred to another company belonging to the same group as PB and Xiao Xia loses her strongest supporter in the company. At PB, Xiao Xia is also helped by Li Wenfeng, who played an important role in her hiring and will support her until he leaves the company, after being wrongly accused of having written an anonymous letter denouncing an affair between two employees.

On the personal front, Xiao Xia is supported by her friend and colleague Moli. Apparently, Moli is not very hard-working because she comes from a rich family and will eventually leave the company to take over her father's firm. She also introduces Xiao Xia to her former boss, Li Guxing, an eminent former business woman now managing a bar who, according to the novel, inspired the

\(^{455}\) CHEN 2014, 22.
story of *The Devil Wears Prada* when she was working on Wallstreet, and who will make Xiaoxia question her own career and life goals. Throughout the story, Peng Sheng, described as a hard-working and competent professional, provides useful advice and emotional support to Xiaoxia. At the end of the novel, Xiaoxia will be offered a job opportunity by her college friend Ayu and director Zhang, who decide to create a company together. These characters are not depicted in detail but seem to be positive figures, explaining Xiaoxia's decision to follow them in their business venture.

Xiaoxia's hard work and competence gains her the support and help of most of her colleagues and superiors. The novel also emphasizes that her relationships to her role model and friends are important for her to have a sense of belonging and purpose at work. However, none of these relationships are really depicted as a mentor-mentee one, and Xiaoxia's progress and successes are ultimately described as the consequence of her constant will to improve herself and her professional knowledge and abilities. Her relationship with Peng Sheng emphasizes the importance of sharing mutual interests and support in a couple, even if it is solely described as a help for Xiaoxia's career. Moreover, the fact that Xiaoxia first makes sure that Peng Sheng will move with her to another city before accepting a job offer emphasizes the importance of personal relationships in life.

9.3.3 Negative Characters, or Villains

In Chen Yi's novel, all the characters belonging to Xiaoxia's first company are depicted negatively. Her direct superior, Wang Lei, is uneducated, lazy and takes credit for Xiaoxia's work. He also tries to use her for her looks to facilitate business transactions with clients and forces her to drink heavily during a gathering. Ding Guagua and his wife, Li Huahua, who direct the company together, are not described in detail but they fail to give Xiaoxia's opportunities to grow and to recognize and reward her efforts and hard work. In the characters' descriptions provided at the beginning of the book, these two protagonists are mentioned as representative of the lack of standards of small companies' employees.

When she is hired at PB, Xiaoxia is directly in competition with Su Xi, who is recruited at the same time as her. Su Xi is described as very competent but as lacking team spirit and as having a difficult personality. Su Xi's temperament will cause her to fail to obtain the other employees' support in a project. She will then be classified among the worst employees during Xiaoxia's performance appraisal, motivating her to quit the company. Xiaoxia also meets the hostility of Cherry, who manages the salaries, and who apparently scorns her and refuses to help her. Cherry's animosity for Xiaoxia pushes her to promote Vivian instead of the heroine, despite the former's lack of competence:

In all fairness, Cherry obviously knew that Xiaoxia was more resourceful and imaginative.
than Vivian, but Cherry preferred to hire someone who was blindly devoted to her, sometimes promotions work that way. Xiaoxia was competent and determined, but more importantly she was Yi Na's supporter, Vivian's qualifications were average, but she was Cherry's supporter.\textsuperscript{456}

Cherry is depicted as manipulative, incompetent and as using her charms on men to obtain promotions and advantages. Towards the end of the novel, her dislike of Xiaoxia will decrease, which will raise Vivian's jealousy and resentment. However, she remains untrustworthy and shallow. We have mentioned that, at the end of the story, Xiaoxia realizes that Yi Na has changed, and she thus ceases to admire her. Indeed, Xiaoxia discovers that Yi Na purposely promoted Cherry instead of the more competent Li Wenfeng because she represented a weaker competitor for herself. Yi Na illustrates how ambition and careerism can lead people to lose their morality and benevolence.

Without emphasizing workplace competition and scheming as much as \textit{The Art of Winning}, we can observe that Chen Yi's novel gives significant importance to negative and potentially harmful work relationships. The negative characters of the novel manage to delay Xiaoxia's development and to make her lose her motivation to work, even if she ultimately overcomes those feelings. The story also emphasizes the dangers of an excessive focus on work through Yi Na's character. As mentioned above, the small company Xiaoxia starts her career in does not seem to have any competent or inspiring characters. Despite the competition and the rivalries, PB offers a strong positive contrast to this environment, at least at first, because of its professionalism and high-quality standards. The fact that the heroine will discover that she was wrong to idealize the company and to be willing to identify with it illustrates the shallowness of the glamorous image of big companies.

9.4 Narrative Structure

\textit{Account of a Workplace Little Shrimp's Transformation} is divided into five main chapters titled \textit{Tante 忐忑, Apprehension}, \textit{Chulu toujiao 初露头角, First signs of talent}, \textit{Mo bu tou de mi ju 摸不透的迷局, Impenetrable mystery}, \textit{Chengzhang de daijia 成长的代价, The price of growing up}, and \textit{Bokai miwu 拨开迷雾, Pushing the fog away}. We consider these titles to illustrate the evolution of the main character from inexperience to being well-versed in all the secrets and practices of the company. This evolution recalls the fact that the title of the novel indicates that the story will narrate a deep transformation (\textit{bian shen 变身}). At the beginning of the story, we learn that the heroine, Cai Xiaoxia, is not satisfied with her current job in the small company where she has been working for

\textsuperscript{456} CHEN 2014, 91.
three years but fears the difficulties of having to find a new position. Her dissatisfaction constitutes the first lack depicted in the story. Her decision to resign, and her beginning counteraction, is made when she realizes that the raise she receives at the end of her third year of hard work is not sufficient to match the increase in market prices and when her mother tells her about Xiaoli, a childhood friend who did not study but married a wealthy man:

Xiaoli’s current situation helped Cai Xiaoxia understand two things: first, Xiaoli was very rich, second, seeing that she was the only HR employee of her company, thus cumulating the functions of manager, specialist, assistant and secretary, her salary was really ridiculous. Pondering over this painful truth, Xiaoxia decided to get serious about changing jobs. She started to look carefully for an opportunity to show her worth. Of course, Xiaoxia had a very strong sense of responsibility and, before changing jobs, she kept working as much and as well as before.457

On the same day, she finds a job offer in the company PB and decides to apply. The application process is described as very competitive, and Xiaoxia has to upgrade her CV and prepare herself for the interviews.

Despite the difficulties of the process, the heroine manages to be hired, which represents her first victory, and is put in charge of the creation of a performance appraisal system under the guidance of Yi Na, who will become her model. This victory also marks the beginning of a new struggle, as she had already tried to implement a performance appraisal system in her former company but had failed. We understand that Xiaoxia works hard and establishes clear and demanding objectives for her career:

Xiaoxia was envious of the top managers' 8000 yuan monthly salaries, she could almost hear the coins jingle in their pockets. People need aspirations! Xiaoxia gave herself the objective of maintaining her junior manager status and striving for a position of mid-level manager in the next six months. She could count only on her hard work to achieve these purposes.458

She seems to be doing her job well but to also have the objective of transforming herself through her professional experience. With her first salary, she buys a pair of high-heels, following one of her teachers' advice to change to a more professional and serious style after university, while, at her former company, she was always wearing sneakers:

Her new environment was different, her beautiful colleagues were all wearing heels higher than seven centimeters, and their steps were always accompanied by clicking noises. Xiaoxia was too embarrassed to keep on with her natural style and her sneakers. But she was still a newbie, going through her commute between buses and trains with five centimeters heels

457. CHEN 2014, 8.
458. CHEN 2014, 19.
was too exhausting for her, after two days she could not take it anymore.\footnote{CHEN 2014, 23.}

She then decides to change shoes when arriving at work:

The problem might have been solved, but Xiaoxia knew in her bones that she was not a real white collar yet.\footnote{CHEN 2014, 23.}

The second part of the novel describes Xiaoxia's struggle to insure the collaboration of all the departments in her project. She seems to be succeeding, but Yi Na, Xiaoxia's model and supporter, is assigned to another branch of the company. In the third part of the novel, Xiaoxia is charged with handling all the employees' performance appraisals when the company decides to lay off twenty percent of its workforce. She also meets Peng Sheng during a date arranged by her mother. At this point of the story, the heroine seems to have become a successful professional:

Walking out of Bai Lang's office, Cai Xiaoxia suddenly realized that she was now able to walk with high-heels without feeling any pain. As it turns out, many problems solve themselves when we do not pay attention to them.\footnote{CHEN 2014, 138.}

At the beginning of the fourth part, Xiaoxia is assigned to the team handling the employees' salaries, which was what she originally wanted. However, she realizes that, after two years of working for PB, she had not reached the results she was hoping for:

Even if she loved working in HR, she didn't want to limit her progression and her temporary glory at PB. She had to work hard, actualize her value, pursue her real self. Xiaoxia established a plan, every month she would spend one fifth of her salary inviting someone greater than herself for a meal to discuss HR systems with veterans of the field and to create her own network in the domain.\footnote{CHEN 2014, 149-150.}

As we can see, Xiaoxia's ultimate objectives are abstract and unclear, explaining why her professional successes do not seem to feel like victories to her. Shortly after, Xiaoxia is promoted to a high-ranked manager and receives a salary raise but she realizes that she does not feel as useful and as happy as when she just started working for PB, even if she was earning less.

Later, Xiaoxia goes to an alumni meeting and seems impressed by the business ventures of her old friend Ayu. We understand that she will not have more opportunities of development at PB in the near future, which constitutes a lack for her. However, shortly after, her position is swapped with the one of another employee, Vivian, who had formerly been promoted instead of her regardless of her weaker competency. Despite this promotion and Yi Na's return, Xiaoxia is saddened by the resignation of two of her colleagues, Li Wenfeng and Zhang Yumo. She is also disillusioned about
Yi Na who turned out to be less moral and kind than she seemed:

Yi Na had become a completely different person. She had established her dominance over PB in a hegemonist way. Everyone knew that Yi Na was not as pure as she was two years ago. Xiaoxia was often wondering, with sadness, which difficulties Yi Na had encountered at B [a company belonging to the same group as PB] to build such a strong loyalty to Mi Bo, and to become so hard that she lost her original self. Xiaoxia was a bit scared: could she become like Yi Na if she kept struggling? Was changing Yi Na's only choice to succeed at PB?\(^{463}\)

We thus understand that Xiaoxia fears for her principles and even for her individuality, which she could lose in the fierce competition of the workplace. The heroine then receives an offer to work with Ayu and the novel finishes by announcing a new counteraction:

She thought about all the choices she made in the nine years that had passed since she graduated from university. Thinking about all of the crossroads, she wondered if she would have ended up exactly at the same place if she had taken opposite decisions. [...] In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the fifth need is self-actualization. She had learned this theory in school but, until that moment, she had never really wondered if self-actualization meant continuing to strengthen her position at PB, to survive, to follow Yi Na's steps, or to choose a way she would cherish more, and simply realize her dream? In the night, Xiaoxia smiled slightly: maybe the moment of the choice had arrived.\(^{464}\)

This novel states more explicitly than any other the abstract goals that most of the characters seem to share, namely, self-actualization, realization of one's full potential and discovery of one's authentic self. The blurriness of these concepts seems to render them difficult - and maybe impossible - to achieve, and to force the characters to endlessly pursue self-improvement through different secondary goals which will never satisfy them fully. Moreover, few of the characters seem to embrace the idea that self-actualization might not be possible through work alone, which gives a central position to career in people's life and identity.

\(^{463}\) CHEN 2014, 219-220.
\(^{464}\) CHEN 2014, 229.
Chapter 10: Synthetical Observations on the Novels

10.1 The Paratext

10.1.1 The Authors' Presentations

As we have seen, with the exceptions of Cui Manli and, to some extent, Li Ke, who are presented through their literary achievements, all of the authors are introduced through their professional backgrounds, sometimes mentioned and sometimes thoroughly described. These descriptions give authenticity to the novels' content - which, it is asserted, have been personally experienced by the authors - and thus legitimize their use as career guides. We can observe that the professional background of the writer is least emphasized in the cases of the two most successful and famous ones, Li Ke and Cui Manli. We can infer that the success of the books, as well as the publication of more than one volume, gives an authoritative status to the writer whose legitimacy as knowledge transmitter does not need to be supported by a strong emphasis on professional experience anymore. We consider our hypothesis to be supported by the fact that both Du Lala Go! and Ups and Downs are heavily advertised by their own success on their covers, advertising band and in the authors' presentations. It seems that the narratives' popularity participates in building their image as authentic and useful accounts of the workplace, because their success is supposed to prove that the qualities they are advertised for are recognized by readers. Regarding the authors' recognition, Philippe Lejeune describes a status shift from "someone who writes" to author - which would be equivalent to the difference between zuozhe 作者, xiezuoze 写作者 or xieshou 写手 and zuojia 作家 in Chinese:

Perhaps one is an author only with his second book, when the proper name inscribed on the cover becomes the "common factor" of at least two different texts and thus gives the idea of a person who cannot be reduced to any of his texts in particular, and who, capable of producing others, surpasses them all.\textsuperscript{465}

Workplace novels are not autobiographies and are not advertised as such. However, some of the authors' presentations hold striking similarities to the main characters' careers. It is especially the case for Run, Mia, Happy Little V's Crystal Dice and Account of Li Bingbing's Struggle, which are also the three novels of our corpus narrated using the first person. Moreover, as we have seen, the paratext of all the novels contains autobiographical elements. At times, they are limited to the mention of the author's own professional experience and first-hand knowledge of the world described in the book. In other cases, the autobiographical dimension is more explicit. However, we

consider that these elements do not aim at establishing an autobiographical pact with the readers, as the books are ultimately described as novels, but that they participate in the establishment of the referential pact, in the sense that they aim at asserting the veracity and authenticity of the descriptions and information transmitted by the novels, despite their fictional nature. It seems that having personally experienced something is perceived as the most indisputable proof of a text's realism and authenticity. In the realm of Internet writing - encompassing blogging activities as well as online literature - accounts of personal experiences, usually seen as authentic, seem to often be popular and to encourage identification, communication, and the creation of informal communities. Thus, expression of one's individual opinions, feelings, and experiences has apparently come to be perceived as proof of a text's value and trustworthiness. In the case of most workplace novels, the assertions of the personal nature of the narratives often clash with descriptions of experiences which seem stereotypical.

10.1.2 The Prefaces and Postfaces
We have observed that, with the exception of Tan Yiping's second novel, all the books of our corpus contain a preface. Moreover, all of the prefices but the one of Account of a Workplace Little Shrimp's Transformation have been written by the authors themselves. It seems that most of the prefices hold a legitimizing and valorizing purpose in the books. They apparently aim at emphasizing their relevance to everyone's life - their characters are ordinary and relatable, the situations they describe are authentic and realistic, the workplace is an important part of every adult's life, etc. - at displaying the authors' knowledge of the professional realm and thus at stressing their legitimacy as knowledge transmitters in work-related matters, or at flaunting the professional specificities of the workplaces they describe as well as the qualities and status of the characters. Most of the prefices also insist on the authors' will for their books to be helpful to readers, who are often invited, in the prefaces as in other parts of the texts and of the paratext, to use the novels as guides and as inspirations for their own careers and lives. The fact that the characters are usually described as ordinary and their paths as duplicable adds to the generally encouraging and uplifting tone of the prefices and implies that motivated readers will most likely be able to reach professional success as the characters are said to do. However, most of the prefaces also emphasize the difficulties and setbacks that the heroines usually have to face and overcome in their professional journeys, and they give the impression that professional life and career are widely perceived as containing a significant amount of struggle. The prefices generally participate in giving the impression that the novels are success stories which can, and should, be imitated by the readers, thus normalizing professional difficulties as an inherent part of the coming of age process.

We have seen that some novels - Run, Mia, Happy Little V's Crystal Dice, Account of Li Bingbing’s Struggle, and, to some extent, The Art of Winning - use the autobiographical dimension of the novel
to support the assertion of realism and authenticity of their accounts. Some of the prefaces also contain mentions of the authors' interactions with readers, or of their desire to obtain feedback from them. It is notably the case in the preface of Tan Yiping's first novel, which provides ways to contact the author, and of the preface to Cui Manli's second volume, where she mentions the online community that formed around her novels. These mentions seem to emphasize the relatable nature of the narratives, which echo in readers' lives, the accessibility of the authors, who present themselves as part of the same community as their readers, even if they occupy a privileged position in the said community, and to also flaunt the books' success, especially online. These mentions in the published books "officialize" and strengthen the existence of communities of readers formed around the narratives.

In most cases, we can see that the legitimation and valorization of the books is achieved through assertions of the authors' knowledge of the workplace. The status of the characters and of the authors, admirable as well as relatable and reachable, is also important in that context. On the other hand, the literary and artistic qualities of the works are seldom mentioned. As we have seen, Li Ke's prefaces evoke the writer's will for her saga to have a broad meaning in people's lives, rather than being limited to the professional aspect of their existence, and Cui Manli's prefaces are centered on the author's literary activities, emphasizing the author's love for writing, despite the difficulties that it entails. However, these two novels represent exceptions to the general trend. The only two authors to mention the importance of literature in their lives and its mission in society are the two most famous and most successful ones in the corpus, allowing us to think that most workplace novels' authors do not benefit from a powerful enough reputation in the literary field to use it as a legitimizing and valorizing factor for their books.

_Run, Mia_ is the only novel of our corpus to contain a postface, or postscript, which, as we have seen, emphasizes the specificity of the novel in the _zhichang_ category and states the author's purposes when writing the book. It also mentions the positive comments of the online community when she first posted the text on Tianya Club. We can thus see that, from a content point of view, this postface seems to serve the same purpose as most of the novels' prefaces. We consider the absence of postfaces in almost all of the narratives to be congruent with the open endings of most of the novels. As most of the narratives fail to illustrate in a definite manner that the heroines can really be perceived as having reached professional success, which contradicts what is said in the the paratext, this absence of synthesis and concluding remarks from the authors is understandable and seems to reveal the existence of doubts regarding the actual meaning and legitimate interpretation of the texts.

We consider these prefaces to also illustrate a discomfort with the status of the books on the authors' part, and potentially on the editors' part as well. Indeed, as we have seen, the prefaces generally aim at asserting and enhancing the value of the works in a reader's life, especially when the lack of
status and recognition of the authors as authors probably prevents them from claiming legitimacy in the literary field. This recalls the ambiguity surrounding the status of white collars, who are sometimes described as an elite, and sometimes as representative of the average population. Workplace novels' prefaces allow us to think that, despite the obvious elements associating them with popular culture in widely accepted conceptions - belonging to a precise and, at times, archetypal genre, proximity to Internet literature, mass production, etc. - the category aims at distinguishing itself from the realm of entertainment by asserting its seriousness and its usefulness. This might be interpreted as a continuation of the advertising strategy displayed in the rest of the novels' paratext, but it could also be seen as a symptom of a quest for recognition and status from the authors, in a context where the social position of white collars seems unstable, threatened, and in constant evolution.

10.1.3 The Design

From a design point of view, the novels can be divided into two groups. The first group, encompassing the two novels of Tan Yiping, the 2013 reedition of the Du Lala saga, Run, Mia and Xiao V's novel, adopts a type of layout commonly seen in the realm of youth literature, as well as in genres targeting a female readership. It uses bright colors and feminine or, at times, childish decorations. The covers of these books are not overloaded with text and information. Out of these six novels, four are written using the first person and thus give a more personal feeling to the readers, even if the diary format of the two novels of Tan Yiping is artificial. Despite their fun and youthful look, four of these novels - the two volumes of the Du Lala saga and the two novels of Tan Yiping - can actually be considered serious in their content.

The second group, encompassing the first edition of the Du Lala saga, the two volumes of Ups and Downs, The Art of Winning, Account of Li Bingbing's Struggle and Account of a Workplace Little Shrimp's Transformation, has a more serious and dull design. As we have seen, they only use the colors white, black and red, and their titles are usually printed in aggressive fonts. The covers also show a significant amount of text and comments. The overall appearance of these novels, though common among warfare workplace novels and officialdom novels, also recalls the layout of teaching manuals, professional books or official documents. They seem to emphasize the seriousness and legitimacy of the narratives' arguments. It seems risky to draw conclusions about the narratives from the design of the books notably because, as we have seen, the Du Lala saga exists in both styles. However, we can observe that, expect for Li Ke's work, the novels using the serious design tend to emphasize in a stronger way the characters' struggles and difficulties than the ones using the more youthful design.

The existence of these two different types of the design in the feminine branch of the category reveals that it can be - and is - advertised in two ways. The first one appeals to the feminine nature
of the target readership, supposing that women will be attracted by a representation of white collars emphasizing their beauty, as well as their hedonist and consumerist lifestyle. The second one is gender neutral and emphasizes the seriousness, authenticity, and usefulness of the context. The existence of these two trends of design illustrates that workplace novels can be affiliated to youth literature as well as to the realm of self-help and professional books. While the first type of design seems to be specific to the coming of age subcategory of the zhichang genre, as we have mentioned, it is also reminiscent to other literary categories dedicated to young women, and can thus not be considered as targeting a more niche readership. An analysis of the influence of design on book sales, as well as a comparison of the commercial success of novels advertised differently would be valuable but exceeds the scope of the present research.

10.1.4 General Observations on the Paratext
We have observed that most of the novels' paratext displays an ambiguity between describing the heroines and their professional universe in an impressive and desirable way and also insisting on their modest background and ordinariness. This seems to indicate that the characters, as well as the narratives, are both aspirational and relatable, and can depict the reader's present as well as their future. It also allows the creation, or the strengthening, of a coherent community between authors, characters and readers, who are all supposed to belong to the same hard-working, intelligent, righteous and struggling group. Moreover, as most of the novels are advertised as success stories, we can assume that the narratives are usually read in a positive and hopeful way, and that all the heroines' actions and everything that happens to them is understood as necessary steps towards success. The way towards success is described as difficult and painful, especially since the heroines can rely only on themselves to thrive. This characteristic seems to indicate that wealth and status can be legitimate goals if they are pursued with hard work and integrity.

We have also seen that the paratext of all the books tend to assert their authenticity and realism, which, in turn, makes them useful. To reach this goal, they use different methods aimed at stating the writers' authority as knowledge dispensers. At times, they emphasize the author's literary achievements, like in the cases of Li Ke and Cui Manli. They can also rely on a detailed and flattering description of the writers' professional experience and workplace wisdom, or on the autobiographical nature of the text. In any case, the novels of our corpus propose to teach workplace-related knowledge to readers, and the legitimacy of this knowledge is guaranteed by the author's identity and experience. We can observe that five of the novels of our corpus contain the character ji 记, record, in their titles. This character tends to be associated with historical texts and is thus surrounded by an aura of authenticity, logically implying that useful knowledge will be imparted to the reader as a consequence of the realistic nature of the text. This reminds us of the theories developed by Philippe Hamon about literary realism in France, when he asserts:
This implies that:

[...] l'auteur "réaliste" (comme le pédagogue) est en possession d'un certain savoir (ses "fiches", sa connaissance d'un "objet", d'un "milieu", d'un "décor", d'une portion quelconque du référent), qu'il juge exhaustif et qu'il distribuera (par exemple) sous la forme de descriptions.

For Philippe Hamon, one of the characteristics of realist texts is that they attempt to transmit a form of knowledge while also trying to give it authority, explaining why these texts contain numerous descriptions displaying the authors' knowledge. This is what we observe in workplace novels, which contain lengthy descriptions of professional matters, and what explains the numerous attempts displayed in the texts and in the paratext to assert the writers' authority.

10.2 The Characters

As a general rule, workplace novels characters are defined by their actions and by their roles - narrative, in the story, and professional, in the company - rather than by descriptions of their appearance or psychology. When the story is told by an external narrator, the reader is provided with indications of the characters' feelings, but it is usually limited to basic information explaining that a character is sad, jealous, happy, and so on. As a result, the characters often seem simple and superficial, despite the paratext's affirmations of them being relatable to the readers. Moreover, the heroines are often described as typical examples or representative of a social class or a profession, subordinating their individuality to their social and professional status - which has been introduced as dingwei when discussing the preface of the second volume of Li Ke's novel. From the narrative point of view, it seems that the creation of rich and personalized characters is subordinated to their role as knowledge transmitters both inside the story - the helpers teach the heroines and the heroines teach their subordinates, or any character less knowledgeable than themselves - and outside the story - the characters and the narrators teach the readers. This is what Philippe Hamon describes when discussing the characters of realist novels:

C'est donc un savoir, la "fiche" d'information, qui bien souvent préexiste dans les ébauches du romancier à tout montage narratif (et cette habitude de composition, d'écriture, est aussi une marque du discours réaliste), qui crée le personnage romanesque; ce dernier n'est donc

467. HAMON 1982, 139-140.
468. HAMON 1982, 145.
plus que la justification, le truchement a posteriori de ce savoir, le garant vraisemblable d'une tranche lexicale technique à "placer". Il n'est plus fonction romanesque, fiction, mais fonctionnaire délégué de l'énonciation réaliste, entièrement déductible des contraintes et du cahier des charges de cette posture. Il est là pour justifier et supporter une phraséologie (...) ou pour authentifier une dénomination, délégué idéal du fichier de l'auteur sur la scène d'un texte.469

This observation contradicts the widespread description of the novel as a genre giving more importance to the characters' individualization and to the depiction of their environment than earlier types of fiction writing.470 The fact that the novels' characters are usually endowed with a name and surname is supposed to indicate that they should be perceived as individuals rather than as archetypes.471 This does not seem to be the case in workplace novels, in which most of the characters have names but lack individuation. Considering our corpus, we can mention the exceptions of Run, Mia and Happy Little V's Crystal Dice, where the heroines are referred to by their nicknames, and Account of a Workplace Little Shrimp's Transformation, where the name of the main character, Cai Xiaoxia - Cai Little Shrimp - could not be the name of a real person and seems to symbolize the fact that Xiaoxia is an archetype of workplace newbie. In all the novels, numerous characters working for foreign owned companies are known only by their English given name, but that is generally not the case of the heroines.

10.2.1 The Heroines

We have seen that, while some heroines are more hard-working and ambitious than others, all of them display great abilities to face hardships and rely on their sole efforts to succeed. Contrarily to other female characters in the novels, they are also honest, upright, and generally innocent and naive, at the beginning of the narratives at least. Most of the novels emphasize the necessity of adapting to the competitive workplace while remaining morally pure. The workplace heroines of our corpus are mostly described as being different from girls and women their age, both among their friends and in their professions, even though they are also said to be ordinary. They are usually inexperienced in matters related to love and emotions but seem to believe in their chances to find a perfect match and refuse to settle for anything less. In many ways, they still fit the standards set by early romance authors in China:

[...] the heroine in Qiong Yao's works was extolled for her sexual innocence, spirit of self-sacrifice, capacity for suffering, and faith in the ultimate triumph of romantic love. While

469. HAMON 1982, 140-141.
this image harkens back to gender code in premodern China, for it promotes women's self-effacement and chastity, the idea of love reigning paramount signals the influence of western notions of romantic love.  

Workplace novels' heroines might acquire professional skills and adapt to the norms of behavior and appearance of their workplaces, but they usually conserve their original mindsets and values, which seem to be similar to those listed by Feng Jin. Female characters should remain kind and caring, despite the ruthlessness of the workplace, they tend to avoid threatening or questioning men's authority, they are responsible for their sexual purity, and they display great filial piety. For example, in Tan Yiping's first novel, Yu Lei emphasizes the necessity for women to remain close to their motherly nature; Du Lala, Mia, Xiao V, Li Bingbing and Cai Xiaoxia are said to be helped and guided by their boyfriends and husbands, with no mention of the support they might provide in return; none of the characters facing sexual harassment denounce these actions; Yi Yun has high ambitions to make up for her mother's failed potential, Cai Xiaoxia gets involved with a man introduced to her by her mother, and many heroines seek advice from their fathers. Moreover, in The Art of Winning, Yi Yun is compared to a "noble lady" (shunü 淑女), and, in the eponymous novel, Li Bingbing is described as a female knight (niüxia 女侠), two terms which link workplace novels heroines with traditional female figures of Chinese literary history. In general, workplace novels' heroines are not as "westernized" as their involvement in foreign companies and some of their consumption patterns could allow us to expect. Despite their asserted independence, they often seem to remain close to "traditional" ideals of femininity - displaying modesty, restrain, hard work, and self-sacrifice - in contrast to other female characters, who are more individualistic and shallow.

10.2.2 Positive Characters, or Helpers

We can observe that, in numerous workplace novels, the most important and helpful relationships that the heroines develop are with older and more experienced male characters. The heroines' superiors are generally depicted as wise and benevolent father figures. Usually, their lovers also belong to this category of older and more experienced men, and fit Feng Jin's description of the typical Internet romance hero:

He must be successful in the traditional sense, in possession of vast wealth and power and enjoying public prominence. He must also unconditionally love the heroine to the exclusion of (and sometimes to the detriment of) all other people, including his parents, relatives, friends, and especially his former lover(s). [...] Although never garrulous or weepy, unlike Jia Baoyu or a scholar-lover, he may sometimes appear cold and forbidding at first sight, in the mode of a Mr. Rochester or Mr. Darcy (both heroes of numerous Chinese Web fanfic

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The fact that the men who attract the heroines' attention are often serious, cold and even rude and harsh to them is a recurrent trope in workplace novels. In male characters, these traits are associated with being professionally competent, ambitious and powerful.

In some narratives, the heroines develop strong friendships with other characters, met in school or at work. These bonds are generally homosocial and bring some balance in a feminine world otherwise depicted as full of jealousy, gossip and rivalries for men's attention. Friendship is generally depicted as an important source of moral support or of perspective on one's situation, but they are usually not the source of consistent help in the professional realm, contrarily to relationships with older superiors or with romantic partners. The female friend characters are usually more mature and outspoken than the heroines and sometimes try to motivate them to act on the lacks they feel in their personal as well as professional lives. However, they generally do not offer consistent guidance, as male characters do.

10.2.3 Negative Characters, or Villains

We have observed that, in most of the novels, the characters who play a negative role in the heroines' lives and careers also display unprofessional and inappropriate behaviors, at work and in their personal lives. Negative characters usually fail to conform to the companies' standards of behavior and to what has been described as civilized manners in the public discourse of contemporary China. In most cases, we have seen that the heroines' fiercest rivals and competitors - and thus the novels' "worst villains" - are female characters. Moreover, their rivalries with the heroines are generally linked to jealousy and resentment that exceeds and, at times, does not concern the professional realm. We consider these typically negative female relationships depicted in the novels to indicate that the corporate world is still predominantly homosocial in contemporary China, and that women are often perceived as inherently jealous and emotional beings who do not focus very strongly on their professional lives. By comparison, the few rivalries depicted between men and women in the novels are purely professional, even if male characters also judge and sometimes try to harm the heroines for reasons linked to their personality or behavior. While some male characters despise the heroines and try to hinder their advancement, the main adversaries in the novels are always other women.

The novels of our corpus do not all give the same importance to negative characters. Narratives like *Ups and Downs, The Art of Winning* and, to some extent, the Du Lala saga and *Account of a

473. FENG 2013, 145.
Workplace Little Shrimp's Transformation depict numerous villains who display mean behavior and ill intentions towards the heroines. In these cases, the heroines seem isolated and helpless, and the competitiveness and ruthlessness of the corporate world is emphasized. Moreover, the characters who try to hinder the heroines' careers or who criticize them also display bad behaviors and a lack of civility. On the other hand, Tan Yiping's novels depict characters who can be considered as negative because they fail to conform to their companies' standards of work ethic and behavior, but who never try to harm the heroines. Other novels, like Run, Mia, Happy Little V's Crystal Dice and Account of Li Bingbing's Struggle, do not really depict inherently negative characters even if the relationships between some of them and the heroines are strained at times. In general, the novels which dissociate complicated relationships from fundamentally negative characters seem more realistic and less archetypal in their depictions of individuals and relationships.

10.3 The Narrative Structures

We have observed that, with the exception of Run, Mia, Happy Little V's Crystal Dice and Account of Li Bingbing's Struggle, all of the narratives are structured by the heroines' pursuit of abstract and unreachable goals of living a better life, becoming more proficient, or realizing their full potential. This particularity explains why the successes and victories of the characters never really fulfill the lacks that they feel at the beginning of the stories. Despite their hard work, they seem to be stuck in an endless race towards an indistinct and undefined finish line. The stories thus always picture secondary victories - finding a job, completing a task, getting a promotion - while they also seem to be void of any real victory and success. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that most of the narratives finish on an open ending, leaving the reader unaware of the next career and life steps of the heroine. While some of the heroines feel emotional lacks because of the prolonged single status imposed on them by their focus on career, pursuing personal fulfillment through meaningful relationships is never of great importance in the novels.

We have mentioned that three of the novels offer slightly different perspectives on the concept of career. Run, Mia emphasizes the impossibility for some people to adapt to big companies' standards and requirements and the psychological suffering this situation can induce. However, at the end of the story, the reader is left doubting the heroine's ability to ever obtain the relaxed life she longs for. Indeed, her wish for a peaceful life seems to conflict with her hope for social status and dignity. Happy Little V's Crystal Dice is the only novel of our corpus evoking the need for people to look for happiness and self-fulfillment outside of work. This explains why the end of the first part of the novel mentions the endless continuation of the narrator's professional struggle while, in the other parts, she asserts to be satisfied with her current life. Finally, Account of Li Bingbing's Struggle
illustrates how members of subaltern groups lack the sense of self-worth and potential that pushes the heroines of the other novels to pursue high goals. Li Bingbing asserts that her modest background gives her modest expectations - finding security and stability in the urban world - which she is ultimately able to reach. However, her attraction to powerful men, as well as her jealousy of Na's professional success, suggest that she might have higher aspirations than she realizes.

*Account of Li Bingbing's Struggle* is the only novel to finish with a definite happy ending, namely, the heroine's wedding to the man she loves and the mention of her professional and economic success. Most of the other narratives leave the readers unaware of how the heroines' careers will evolve and of their possibility of reaching satisfaction and happiness, with the exception of *Happy Little V's Crystal Dice*, which seems to give up on the idea of achieving those goals through work. In the next part, we will explore how idealization of the workplace as the path for young people to grow into proficient and civilized adults, as well as idealization of the white-collar status and lifestyle, coexist with descriptions of harsh and painful realities in the novels. These contradictions illustrate that most novels do not offer clear answers for what success and happiness mean and how to reach them.
PART 3 - DISCUSSING AND INTERPRETING THE CORPUS IN ITS CONTEXT OF PRODUCTION

Introduction

In this part, we will explore the content of the novels of our corpus in detail and observe how they are integrated in the wider discursive context of contemporary China. We have seen, when discussing the paratext and the narrative structure of our texts, that most of them are presented as the coming of age stories of young women who become independent individuals through professional experience and acquisition of the foreign companies' standards of work and behavior. Moreover, most of the novels are said to be the success stories of ordinary people and thus encourage readers to imagine that, by following the heroines' example, they can succeed as well. We consider these paratextual elements to exert an influence on the reading experience. By asserting that the characters are ordinary and that their experiences are common, the novels normalize the events and behaviors they describe. Furthermore, by describing the narratives as success stories and by enjoining the readers to follow the path of the heroines, workplace novels also idealize the careers and self-development journeys of the characters and promote them as goals everyone should aspire to. In the first chapter of this part, we will thus examine how careers are idealized in the novels, as a way to acquire status and wealth, but also to build one's identity. We will then apprehend the process of self-betterment the heroines are said to go through, which is presented as necessary for them to reach success and happiness.

The idealization of the corporate world and of the white-collar lifestyle discernible in most workplace novels sharply contrasts with the numerous depictions of the difficulties encountered by the heroines, which will be the focus of the second chapter of this part. The novels' characters usually have to deal with demanding schedules and heavy work pressure, to a point that affects their health. They also have to face the hostility of some of their colleagues and superiors, as well as the jealousies, rivalries and schemes depicted as inherent to an increasingly competitive professional environment. Though the issue is generally not addressed in explicit terms, we can also observe that the heroine's rise is hindered by a glass-ceiling difficult to overcome, as the highest ranked employees of the companies described in the novels are all men. Moreover, many novels narrate how the heroines experience sexual harassment - which they usually do not denounce and which they have to handle on their own to protect their reputation.

Some novels also evoke the process of brainwashing and standardization that the characters have to go through to adapt to their new work environment. Many narratives mention the loss of individuality and of moral values that threatens the heroines if they completely adapt to the
corporate world and its norms. This contradicts the representation of this coming of age process as positive and as allowing the heroines to become independent and to enjoy a more comfortable lifestyle. We consider the implicit necessity for the heroines "to change while staying the same" to be an illustration of the persistent representation of money and status as corrupting - especially for women - and of the emergence of mild forms of questioning of the homogenization and loss of identity processes accompanying globalization and the spread of multinational companies around the world.

As we will see, most of the workplace-related problems described in the novels are congruent with contemporary issues observed and studied by sociologists, allowing us to think that the novels might be realistic in their depiction of young female white collars' struggles rather than in their description of the so-called professional success of the heroines. In the second chapter of this part, we will thus aim at apprehending the descriptions of the heroines' difficulties and struggles in parallel with sociological research. We consider these depictions of the negative aspects of the workplace as symptoms of the anxieties resulting from the transition to a market economy, which led to the disappearance of the socialist workers' homogeneous and egalitarian status, and created new "winners" and "losers", as well as new conceptions of class division and stratification. Sociologist James Farrer has described how these changes were accompanied by a strong sense of anxiety for young people who had to face new responsibilities regarding their success or failure.

One of the hypotheses of the present research is that the hard realities described in the novels could potentially raise awareness of issues related to the workplace and to the structure of society as a whole. However, the subversive power of these depictions is weakened by the fact that the novels are described as positive, relatable and duplicable coming of age stories. Some elements of the narratives, and especially their paratext, have the tendency to estheticize daily struggle, making it the only legitimate path to self-betterment and lifestyle improvement, which, in turn, seem to be perceived as the only life goals worth pursuing. In that sense, readers are invited to understand the heroines' difficulties as common, normal, and even necessary. This is what we can observe, for example, in this quote from the narrator of Ups and Downs:

If you stay in such an emotional state for a year or more, doctors will diagnose you as having depression; but if someone never encounters this kind of pain in his or her life, we can only say that this person did not grow up.

And here again in the words of Li Bingbing:

Difficulties are a good medicine, if you are not progressing, it is because you didn't go

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474. FARRER 2002, 12.
476. CUI 2012b, 300.
through enough hardship.477

This characteristic of the novels discourages questioning the paths they describe and searching for alternative lifestyles, despite the openness and lack of conviction regarding the meaning of success and happiness displayed in most of the endings.

In the third chapter of this part, we will establish a link between public discourses concerning the improvement of the population's quality and the building of a harmonious society, and workplace novels' advertisement and probable evaluation. The congruence we observed between the way public discourses describe people of quality and the type of individuals the characters from the novels attempt to become lead us to think that the former has possibly influenced the later. These concepts, and, later the one of the Chinese Dream as well, are generally associated with the idea that every individual's efforts towards realizing him or herself participates in the national project of building a strong and influential Chinese nation. We consider the strong incentive, perceptible in workplace novels, for young people to be ambitious and hard-working and to have clear life goals - generally understood as professional goals - to belong to a rhetoric similar to the one of official discourses asserting that China's rise necessitates the hard work and self-betterment of the population as a whole, and especially of the middle class. These similarities will lead us to consider the possibility of a governmental influence on the production and promotion of workplace novels.

477. LIUJING 2011, 111.
Chapter 1 - Idealization of Work Experience

In this section, we will observe how workplace novels describe employment and career as a privileged path to address the lacks felt by the heroines at the beginning of the narratives. These lacks generally concern material comfort, financial independence, social status, and opportunities to actualize oneself, realize one's potential, and build one's identity. As we will see, foreign owned companies, because of the rules regulating their functioning, their conformity to international standards - professional as well as behavioral - and because of the prestige associated with them and their employees, are described, in the main narrative lines at least, as ideal formative institutions for young white collars. Most of the novels imply that, by acquiring the companies' culture - their habits, their practices and their norms - the new employees will not only increase their chances of being professionally successful, but will also "increase their quality", become better versions of themselves and realize their full potential.

In general, the elite status of white collars working for foreign owned companies and the desirable consumerist lifestyle their salaries allow them to afford is an important motivation for the heroines to engage in such a competitive professional environment. As we will see, status and money might seem to be goals in themselves for the characters, but they are generally associated with means to gain independence from one's family and thus to become an adult. They also seem to be important to ease the anxieties brought about by economic precariousness and to gain the independence that the characters long for. As the heroines are often isolated from family and friends - because they left their hometowns to work in big metropolises and thus lack social connections to mobilize in case of emergency - their employments represent their only source of financial security and stability. In general, work is also supposed to allow characters to get a sense of control over their destiny, of agency in their life, and of respect from themselves and others. Workplace novels propose a vision of contemporary life where security and dignity are mainly - or solely - obtained through professional success and wealth accumulation.

We will observe that the narratives apprehended in this research tend to present professional success as a likely - almost necessary - consequence of hard work and self-betterment. By overcoming their initial flaws - lack of experience, immaturity, ignorance about appearance and behavior codes, difficult temper, etc. - through hard work, study and self-doubt, the heroines manage to accumulate professional achievements and to reach a certain level of success in the workplace. In the novels, working, especially in a setting described as efficient, professional, and respectful of laws and regulations, is presented as an apprenticeship going beyond the acquirement of knowledge and abilities related to a specific field, and as an important way to learn about oneself, one's goals and aspirations, and about society, and thus to become a more aware and responsible individual.
The heroines' journeys to self-betterment are articulated along two distinct, though intricate, lines. Firstly, the characters have to acquire the norms of civility and cosmopolitanism indispensable to work in a culturally heterogenous environment and to give a good image of the company outside of its realm - each employee is described as holding the responsibility of the firm's reputation and encouraged to identify him or herself with it, as well as to develop a sense of pride from belonging to it. We will observe that these norms are congruent with the ones mentioned in public discourses regarding the increase of the population's quality and the building of a harmonious society. Secondly, as young females building their identities as women, the heroines are also encouraged to ponder over and develop their femininity. We will observe that, to some extent, the norms they are supposed to acquire in order to be professionally successful are depicted as increasing their attractiveness as women - they are encouraged to take good care of their appearance, and to be soft and restrained in their interactions with colleagues and clients. As the heroines are generally single and pressured by relatives to get married, being perceived as an eligible partner by the men who surround them is of great importance for them. However, as we will see, professional abilities, success and acquisition of power and wealth are not always depicted as compatible with feminine qualities and thus with the promise of a successful emotional and familial life.

We will also observe that most novels actually fail to distinguish the heroines' goals from their ways of reaching these goals. For example, they wish to work in order to be able to afford luxury brands or to eat in foreign restaurants but being knowledgeable on these matters is often presented as a requirement to become a real white collar and to integrate and thrive in their professional environment. In the same way, becoming a more civil, cosmopolitan and feminine version of oneself - namely, the process of self-betterment - is presented both as an objective to pursue and as a way to be professionally successful. This ambiguity recalls the one surrounding the status of white collars - embodied by the novels' authors, characters and readers - in the way the works are described and advertised. As we have mentioned, the novels display an ambiguity between being relatable and exemplar, and thus between the already actualized and the still aspirational nature of the qualities that the characters are supposed to have acquired, or to acquire to succeed. As white collars working for foreign companies in major metropolises, the characters are expected to be more professional, cosmopolitan and worldly than most, thus representing models to emulate, as we can see here:

We, white collars, are definitely the elite of society. As such, we have to know society better than ordinary people, and evaluate ourselves using higher moral standards.478

At the same time, as young, inexperienced college graduates, they still have much to learn to reach the professional success and lifestyle they long for, which makes them reliable to the readers who

478. TAN 2005, 106.
can learn from them and with them.

1.1 Career as a Way to Address Feelings of Lack or Dissatisfaction

We have observed that most of the novels of our corpus start with the mention of a lack felt by the heroine. In most cases, the origins of this dissatisfaction are not addressed in much detail and it is sometimes difficult to understand if they are the consequence of social pressure, of the character's psychology, or of a mix of different factors. For example, we have seen that Du Lala seems to feel pressured by her parents to become financially independent and by her first boyfriend to find a job worthy of her abilities, that Yi Yun wants to make up for her mother's failed destiny, but that Xiao V's desire for consumption is described as her own. In general, professional advancement is the way chosen to address and correct this lack. This particularity of the narratives gives the impression that, to an important extent, the characters have the agency to make their lives better and to redress their dissatisfaction through dedication and hard work. The fact that working in a specific environment is described as the preferred way to correct the lack felt by the heroines illustrates how these young women starting their careers perceive their workplace and what they expect from it. In general, they seem to associate foreign companies with good work conditions and prestige - this is easily discernible in this extract from Tan Yiping's first novel, when a young employee is greeted by a more experienced one:

"For girls like you, our company's building must look luxurious and impressive, the offices seem clean and exquisite, and all the employees look refined, cultivated and courteous, so when you were hired here as a secretary you must have felt relieved and honored, right?" 479

In this particular novel, the only lack felt by Yu Lei at the beginning of the story is one of professional experience and expertise. She asserts that her only goal is to become a better secretary, which could be perceived as a quest for self-betterment devoid of material ambitions if the heroine did not also explain that ceaseless self-improvement in the professional realm is the only way to secure one's position in an increasingly competitive and fast-evolving job market. Thus, we can assume that the lack felt by Yu Lei is ultimately a lack of security and stability at work and in life. Her way of addressing it is to become an outstanding and irreplaceable employee for her company.

In Tan Yiping's second novel, we have seen that, at the beginning of the story, the heroine lacks a sense of independence and professional mastery that would make her an accomplished adult and individual, as we can see here:

"Think by yourself and decide." This is very easy to say, but very hard to do! From

479. TAN 2004, 27.
As independence seems to be mainly - if not exclusively - understood in economic terms, it is not surprising that Yu Lei chooses professional development as a way to address her lack. However, in that novel, being professionally competent and financially independent are not represented as individual choices and as particularities of the heroine's life views, but as a necessity and responsibility that all white collars have to take on:

In our lives, we all have to ceaselessly renew ourselves, this is how we mature.  

The novel constantly emphasizes the necessity of having clear objectives in mind to succeed, while the heroine does not seem to have a definite career plan other than constantly striving to get better, which, here again, is depicted as a necessity to not be left behind in the rapid changes of the economic world.

We have seen that, at the beginning of the Du Lala saga, the heroine is mainly motivated to start working by her desire and need to become financially independent, which is linked to her sense of filial piety. However, she also rapidly realizes that working in any kind of situation is not satisfactory for her. When facing abuse and sexual harassment, she understands that she needs to be respected and valued at work in order to have a fulfilling career, which pushes her towards foreign companies, supposed to provide their employees with better work conditions and protection against different forms of mistreatment:

DB was the best company Lala ever worked for. It was good because of salary, environment and future perspectives. A lot of these advantages are not related to money. For example, if all your colleagues are professional people of high quality, it will give you more sense of happiness and achievement at work. This is one of the intangible benefits offered by the company.

When she successfully joins one of those companies, she feels that her social status and her sense of self-worth are raised:

Lala saw a group picture hanging on the wall, a foreign man who looked like a president was smiling and shaking the hand of an official from the central government. Helen saw Lala

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481. TAN 2005, 70.
482. LI 2013, 24.
looking at the picture and took the initiative to explain: "This is our CEO, Georges Gates." Lala was very satisfied by the style of the CEO, she had the feeling that her own dignity was heightened.483

Later, despite her original satisfaction, she discovers that, being at the bottom of the hierarchy, she does not benefit from the consumption opportunities, advantages and social standing of higher ranked employees. Climbing the corporate ladder and reaching what she perceives as a more comfortable and more honorable lifestyle thus becomes her new goal. As the saga continues, we understand that Du Lala gains access to a middle-class level of comfort and consumption, and we can thus assume that she reached the social status she was longing for, despite the fact that the lack of recognition and valorization she still encounters at work prevents her from being really satisfied with her situation.

In Ups and Downs, Qiao Li takes the initiative to quit her job as a receptionist because she feels that she is not given opportunities to learn, progress and develop. Moreover, as we discover in the second volume, she wants to work in sales to contribute more directly to the functioning of the company. It thus seems that what she lacks - and what she is longing for - is the possibility to display her talents and capacities, to realize her full potential, and to actively take part in something that exceeds her as an individual. Qiao Li does not seem interested in consumption, contrarily to most of the other characters of the novel, especially the female ones. The pride and prestige that she gets by feeling like she is an important and valued member of Saisi is emphasized on a few occasions, but it seems that she mainly yearns for an opportunity to learn and grow as an individual, and to be granted recognition and agency. As we have seen, as far as can be asserted through the analysis of the incomplete saga, despite her efforts and progress, she fails to become a legitimately active agent in the company - as she is constantly used by her superiors and cast away from important information and decisions - and does not feel valued or like she is part of the success she worked hard for the company to reach.

Run, Mia represents an exception in the corpus, in the sense that the heroine does not seem to feel a lack at the beginning of the story and that she does not have any specific professional goal in mind. The novel does not really explain why a young literature student, described as not inclined to work hard, decides to apply to a very competitive company. For her, it seems to be a default choice, the goal she is somehow obliged to try to reach, at least once, even if she does not believe in her chances. However, as soon as she first visits the company, Mia gets a sense of the prestige and elite status apparently associated with this professional environment, and we can assume that it is the standing she feels that she acquires by working for a foreign firm that pushes her to stay at her job despite the fact that it does not fit her personality or the relaxed lifestyle she seems to aim for:

483. LI 2013, 11.
On the plane back to Beijing, my heart was filled with pride, I amicably smiled to the stewardess and chatted with my neighbors, putting effort in fitting the cordial and solemn tone that I imagined was supposed to be mine. I never realized that the feeling of being a successful person was so great. QT had been so kind to hire me.\footnote{QIN 2009, 9.}

We have seen that, later in the book, Mia describes her dream job as honorable and links the possibility of having her own office to a protection of privacy and a sense of respect and pride. Contrarily to most heroines and characters, Mia seems to be aware of the superiority complex foreign companies try to inoculate into their employees:

People working in foreign companies definitely have a superiority complex. This superiority complex does not come from them having high salaries, because there are a lot of types of foreign companies, and the salary gaps between companies and positions are very important. In some cases, incomes are not higher than in other companies, and the grey incomes are always much lower.\footnote{Grey income is the term used to designate income that is outside the scope of state supervision and control.} We can say that this superiority complex comes from the impression of representing an advanced culture. It is of course the case for European and American companies, but the Chinese employees of Korean and Japanese companies also worship Korea and Japan. Most of them feel like they are sitting in the first row of the world's theater, or that they are helping China advance towards its future.\footnote{QIN 2009, 192.}

It is only after the psychological evaluation revealing her failure to adapt to the corporate world that Mia will renounce the professional path she seems to have been complied to choose.

The heroine of \emph{The Art of Winning}, Yi Yun, though not explicitly and personally feeling a lack at the beginning of the story, seems to have grand professional ambitions. Already at the end of her studies, she knows that she wants to enter a big company and to work in sales, because that is where she will receive the best training and the best opportunities to rise. She also seems to associate working in a foreign company with a sense of pride and self-respect:

\begin{quote}
Who wouldn't want to work for a powerful, world's top company like Ruide? This is such an honor!\footnote{LING 2009, 24.}
\end{quote}

She does not exclude the possibility of becoming the CEO of a company one day, even if she knows that the probability for this dream to come true is low, especially for a woman. In Yi Yun's case, the wish and need to be offered the possibility to progress and realize her full potential is intimately linked to the fact that her mother was denied that chance when she was young. Thus, it seems that the choices the heroine makes and the ambitions she holds are not fully her own but represent,
instead, an attempt to make up for a familial legacy and a sense of filial duty towards her mother. We have seen that, regardless of the kindness and innocence making her seemingly unfit to work in sales, Yi Yun is quite successful at her new job. However, despite her achievements, she will end up being alienated in the company because of rumors concerning her love life, which will ultimately drive her to quit. This event recalls the beginning of the novel, when the heroine refuses a position of secretary at Ruide because she does not want to be a "figurehead". The idea that Yi Yun, described as very beautiful, wishes to be recognized for her professional abilities rather than because of her physical appearance, and that her good looks are actually hindering rather than facilitating her career, is recurrent in the novel. We can thus observe that Yi Yun's individual goal is to transcend her identity as a woman, and to be valued and appreciated for her talents and competency, which she fails to achieve at her first job.

In her novel, Xiao V asserts that, since a very young age, she has been wanting to work in order to be able to spend money on herself:

> When I entered secondary school, I started thinking that earning one's own money to spend it for oneself was a wonderful thing.\(^\text{488}\)

Apparently, she had always felt attracted to the atmosphere of elegance and prestige surrounding the white collars working in office buildings. She also seems to associate the status of white collar with the concept of independence, which she learns to value through different life experiences, for example through the advice of a beautiful woman who she meets in the hotel where she works, and who is apparently mistreated by her rich, foreign boyfriend:

> "You absolutely have to remember what I'm telling you now, no matter how rich your future husband is, it is very important for you to have your own money, if you can, you should find your own job. Having to beg for money does not feel good."\(^\text{489}\)

In the part of the novel dedicated to Xiao V's childhood, we understand that she was born in a relatively poor household. Being her parents' second - and unplanned - child, she apparently felt neglected and humiliated to have to wear her sister's old clothes at school. We can assume that her family's financial difficulties played an important role in building her desire for financial independence and to enjoy life, as well as her quest for an enviable status and her need to display her individuality through her tastes and consumption patterns. Indeed, she also asserts the impossibility for people to express their individuality through work and thus the necessity to develop one's personality through other channels:

> At work, I can dress immaculately and act reserved, but when I go out of the office, I absolutely want to go back to being myself. What I mean by being myself is wearing all the

\(^{488}\) XIAO V 2011, 5.
\(^{489}\) XIAO V 2011, 10.
clothes I cannot wear at work, buying the shoes I like, watching the movies I want, meet my friends, write what I want. You cannot lose yourself because of your work.\textsuperscript{490}

In that sense, for Xiao V, work seems to be the way through which she will obtain the means to express her individuality in other realms of life, and which will allow her to compensate for the material lacks she felt as a child and teenager.

In \textit{Account of Li Bingbing's Struggle}, we understand that, early in life, the heroine engages in a quest for a better social status and for opportunities to escape from the countryside where she grew up. We have seen that, for her as for her family, being a permanent state employee in a hotel is already perceived as a success. When discussing with her friends, she asserts that she is pursuing stability and security more than fame, money, or status. We have observed that Li Bingbing's friends are generally the ones warning her against the fragility of her own status at work, and thus of the security and stability she longs for: in the hotel, she risks being fired as soon as she is considered too old to work in the service industry; in the judicature bureau, she will not be offered opportunities to rise anymore when she loses the support and protection of the bureau chief. The fact that, towards the end of the story, Bingbing refuses a position in an elite law firm because she knows that, with her background, her status would be very precarious there and that she would be entrusted only with trivial tasks, shows that she is conscious of, and accepts the limitations that her social background keeps imposing on her. She then chooses to work for a smaller firm, where she will be given more responsibilities, be more valued and feel less threatened. As we have mentioned, Bingbing is the only heroine of our corpus to actually reach her goals by the end of the story: she becomes well established in the city, earns enough money to help her family, becomes a recognized lawyer, gets married and seems to have reached the financial security and the status she was aspiring to. Li Bingbing, like Xiao V, seems to use her career to compensate for the dissatisfactions linked to her poor background, both materially and in terms of social status and prestige.

Finally, in \textit{Account of a Workplace Little Shrimp's Transformation}, the heroine shows dissatisfaction with her work at the beginning of the story because she realizes that her salary does not match her responsibilities and dedication, and because she does not feel valued or recognized. For her, going to work in a foreign company represents an opportunity to show her worth and to earn the money that she deserves, which seems to be linked to her perception of self-respect and dignity:

PB had successfully implanted its positive image in Cai Xiaoxia's brain. She had the 20 years of history of the company at her fingertips, and she worshipped the wisdom and brilliance of its leaders; she was extremely grateful for the opportunity PB was giving her, she was even smiling in her sleep, thanking god to have allowed her to enter in such a

\textsuperscript{490} XIAO V 2011, 124-125.
Apparently, she also wants to transform herself in order to fit what she perceives as the standards of appearance of the company, notably by learning how to walk with high heels. Later in the novel, Cai Xiaoxia's goal of actualizing her value and pursuing her real self are reiterated. However, despite her professional achievements, she does not seem to feel that she is getting any closer to those objectives. By the end of the novel, the heroine joins a friend in his business venture because she feels that her actual job will never allow her to reach self-realization. The novel does not mention any attempt to reach that goal through any other channels than work, and does not tell the reader if changing jobs will allow Xiaoxia to realize herself.

As we can see, in one way or another, all the heroines are turning to work and career to gain money, status, independence, and a sense of recognition and self-worth - all these concepts are closely related to each other. Sometimes, money is seen as a way to consume, and thus to enjoy life and assert one's taste and individuality, as illustrated by the advice Yu Lei receives from her older cousin in Tan Yiping's second novel:

"So Xiaolei, when you are at work you have to think about how to make money, do not think about your personality or other things like that. Instead, when you go out of the office, as a modern person, you have to spend as much money as you want, to display your individuality and express your self-respect."

In other cases, financial resources are mainly seen as a way to feel more secure in an increasingly unstable and unpredictable environment, especially since most of the heroines live alone in metropolises far away from their families. Wealth accumulation is generally associated with a path towards adulthood and independence. Thus, looking for economic rewards cannot only be perceived as a way to reach a hedonist and consumerist lifestyle, but also as a means to ease the anxieties of people who cannot rely on family or the state to provide for them in case of need.

We have also observed that, though the heroines could seem like they are pursuing a purely materialistic quest for comfort and consumption at first sight, their material desires are actually accompanied by deep concerns about being offered opportunities to grow, to prove themselves, to show their worth, as well as to be recognized, valued and respected for their efforts, dedication and capabilities. Through their quest for financial independence, the characters seem to also aim at becoming self-reliant adults and active members of society, which they usually see as a duty towards their families and society as a whole, rather than as an individual choice that could be questioned. Becoming white collars, obtaining promotions or salary raises are thus generally discovered to be insufficient for the heroines to feel successful because, as we will see in the

491. CHEN 2014, 16.
492. TAN 2005, 208.
following chapter, the corporate world is also described as treating individuals ungratefully and disdainfully, and as suffocating their individualities through processes of standardization and brainwashing, thus preventing the characters from really gaining agency, independence and a sense of self.

1.2 Career as the Path to Identity Building and Coming of Age

As we have mentioned, workplace novels are often described as coming of age stories. We do not pretend to liken them to the clearly defined genre of Bildungsroman, which would be inappropriate for reasons of context as well as content. However, we can observe similarities between these two realms of fiction. In both cases, the novels center on the apprenticeship of a young character who has to leave childhood, relatives, and provincial life behind to become an independent and realized adult.\(^{493}\) As we have seen, most of the heroines of our corpus depart from their families and their hometowns at the beginning of the stories to go seize the opportunities offered by the big metropolises. Moreover, like early English Bildungsromans, workplace novels are deeply concerned with upward mobility, associate self-development with social climbing, and can be perceived as "guides to the good life", explaining why the narrative structure of these novels is generally driven by a vertical movement.\(^{494}\) These similarities explain why, in her 2017 article, Grace Wu uses the German concept to describe workplace novels.\(^{495}\)

Apprehending workplace novels through a loose comparison with the Bildungsroman genre allows us to observe that, in the texts of our corpus, the concept of career, central to the zhichang category, is presented as a means for the heroines to build their identities as mature adults whose potential is fully realized and who are thoroughly integrated in a specific realm of society, the two being inextricably linked together. With various levels of explicitness, the heroines of our corpus seem to perceive the mastering of professional abilities and of the standards of appearance, behavior and consumption associated with big foreign companies as goals equivalent to self-realization and success, at the beginning of the texts at least. We consider the term "career", the way it is used and perceived in workplace novels, to be intimately linked to the acceptance and valorization of individuality, which has apparently reappeared in the reform-era after having been repressed during the Maoist period.


\(^{495}\) Wu 2017.
We find the concept of "rise of the individual" analyzed by sociologist Yan Yunxiang to be of great help to understand this phenomenon. Yan describes how, with the introduction of new values associated with the market economy, it gradually became acceptable to claim individual rights to autonomy, privacy, emotionality and self-development and fulfillment, which came with the necessity to learn how to develop one's individuality and independence. According to Yan, the bettering of life conditions initiated at the end of the 1970s, as well as the relaxation of state control over the private life of individuals, allowed people to discover their rights to express emotions, opinions and desires. Moreover, in the 1990s, the state started to promote consumerism as a new cultural ideology, giving a new legitimacy to personal desires, and thus a growing importance to consumption as a way to define individuality. Workplace novels often emphasize the necessity for young characters to develop their individuality because their careers generally require them to work independently and to take initiative. Moreover, the texts insist on individuals' responsibility to seize the numerous opportunities to grow and prosper offered to them by the market economy. However, as we will see in the next chapter of this part, these encouragements to develop individually conflict with the strict rules and norms the characters have to conform to in order to succeed, imposed by the corporate world, and with the description of the heroines as non-individualized archetypes of the white-collar group.

Hui Faye Xiao, a Chinese literature specialist, also describes a revitalization of the individual in novels published since the 1980s, when debates on individualism, which had been common among May Fourth intellectuals, reappeared. In the same period, in official discourses, individual quests to reach a global middle-class lifestyle were replacing the socialist revolution as a way to build a better tomorrow. According to Xiao, the adoption of a market economy created a new perception of what the rediscovered individuals should be:

On the one hand, radical marketization and privatization dis-embed people from the network of political and social collectivities. These social pressures catalyze the breeding of homo economicus — the new species of cosmopolitan modern being who is attuned to the demands of a global market economy and is regulated by the conduct code of neoliberal (self-)governance.

By making career the main locus of identity building, the texts of our corpus seem to fit the requirements addressed at the rediscovered individuals described by Xiao. We consider the

499. XIAO 2014, 17.
500. XIAO 2014, 19.
reappearance and re-valorization of the concepts of individuality, self-development and personal desires in the reform era to be necessary conditions to the appearance of novels describing coming of age through work, even if the "individuation" processes depicted in the novels lead to the creation of stereotypical individuals shaped by their work and the requirements of their companies.

1.3 Acquisition of Professional Experience Equated to Self-betterment

As workplace novels are described as coming of age stories, we can infer that they will be concerned with "notions of linear progress and coherent identity" and describe "a purposeful youth advancing toward some clarity and stability of being". Workplace novels seem to be based on the idea of human perfectibility and thus depict optimistic journeys towards the building of a mature and coherent identity. In the novels of our corpus, coherent identity and success are mainly reached through the self-betterment processes linked to professional apprenticeship. At the beginning of the narratives, the heroines have to find a path towards what will be their rightful place in the world, namely, to find a job that will fit their personality and abilities and allow them to develop their full potential. In this context, the concept of dingwei, position, as described in the second volume of the Du Lala saga, seems important and is frequently used:

You could say that your position is: who you are, where you are standing now, where you want to go, who is important to you on the way, which are the things that you have to do. If you don't know what's your position since the beginning, it will be very difficult to do things right afterwards.

Here, "doing things right" means learning and developing oneself towards professional achievements and success - a concept that is generally not defined in the novels - which is only possible once one has found one's rightful place and direction in the world.

The beginnings of most workplace novels depict what we could call flawed heroines. They are all described as lacking professional experience and field-related knowledge, which is linked to their young age and the fact that the stories generally start with the end of their studies or the first stages of their careers. However, in most cases, the heroines also have to adjust their behavior, personality and appearance in order to fit their new environment. Our corpus counts three exceptions to that general pattern. As we have seen, in both of Tan Yiping's novels, Yu Lei's personality is described as perfectly fitting the requirements directed at secretaries and white collars respectively, already at the beginning of the stories. As she does not have any other personal obstacle or flaw to overcome, it is

502. LI 2013b, 183.
enough for her to find different ways to learn more about her job and to increase her general knowledge to improve herself and get closer to professional success. The novels describe how all her time and efforts are directed at self-betterment in the professional realm:

The times are progressing, now we can study at any time and in any place. We have to study ceaselessly to be able to progress with our era.503

Similarly, The Art of Winning proposes an almost perfect heroine in the character of Yi Yun, who has to learn how to deal with her new employment but seems to display outstanding aptitudes for it straight away. Outside of her professional competency, she also displays a good work ethic, strict moral values and meets all the requirements to be considered an accomplished and attractive woman.

The other heroines are depicted as having personality-related problems which could potentially hinder their advancement, and which they will eventually have to overcome. Du Lala is said to be emotionally immature and too harsh and combative in her way of interacting with her colleagues. In the first volume, her skin is also said to be too dark and her body too skinny. As we have seen, in the later volumes, these characteristics are associated with the fact that she developed late, both physically and psychologically, and she is eventually said to improve in behavior and appearance. However, despite her efforts and her obvious taste for consumption, all throughout the saga, she keeps lacking some of the knowledge she is apparently expected to have acquired in order to be fully integrated in the foreign workplace:

Lala couldn't help but to feel weird about herself, how come that, after all these years, she was still not able to recognize wines and foods and didn't make any progress in that matter?504

In Ups and Downs, Qiao Li is described as too serious, as overestimating her own intelligence, as lacking trust in her superiors and colleagues - and thus as having the tendency to be too individualistic for the good of the company - as too combative in her way of approaching business, and as being inapproachable, which isolates her from her coworkers. She is also said to lack femininity and knowledge in matters of grooming and consumption:

Zhan Deming was a bit surprised, he looked at her carefully one more time. She was wearing jeans and a wool coat, it was a resting day, but still, this was really too simple.505

In the other novels, Mia has to overcome her drifter attitude and her lack of inclination for hard work in order to integrate into her new professional environment; Xiao V attempts to learn about the luxury products used by her female colleagues and to adopt their demanding grooming routines

503. TAN 2005, 32.
504. LI 2010, 84.
505. CUI 2012b, 26.
to avoid being criticized for her sloppy looks; Li Bingbing's main obstacle seems to be the lack of self-confidence and lack of sense of self-worth apparently linked to her modest origins and educational background; finally, Cai Xiaoxia has to adapt to the professional and appearance-related standards of the company that hires her, the changes she has to make to her appearance - wearing high heels to work - apparently being harder to acquire than the professional ones.

Thus, we can observe that the heroines have to overcome different lacks and flaws in order to adapt to their new environments and to eventually succeed. Usually, the paratext, and some elements of the narratives, imply that they manage to improve and to succeed, as illustrated in the words of one of Yi Yun’s colleagues, shortly after she quits the company:

"Director Mai and the others have thought a lot about your typical example of success. They realized that women could handle big clients, and that they might even have advantages compared to men in that field."506

In this case, Yi Yun's experience is described as a "typical example of success" (chenggong dianxing 成功典型), even though she has left the company after having faced numerous hardships. The processes of self-improvement the heroines have to go through mainly concern the integration of the norms of behavior and appearance of the foreign companies, which are supposed to improve their "quality" as well as their femininity.

1.3.1 Acquiring "Quality": Civility, Cosmopolitanism, Respect for the Rules

As we have seen, despite the difficulties the heroines might encounter at work, and despite the fact that the workplace is, at times, described as populated with ruthless, jealous and scheming people, the big Western companies' environment seems to be surrounded by a highly attractive aura. In general, the offices are depicted as modern, beautiful and comfortable:

From the best offices of Ruide's (China) Beijing branch, you could admire the sunlight sparkling on the colored roof of the Forbidden City. Of course, only the company's top employees had the qualifications to be positioned in such a well-situated place, with such an amazing view."507

The work conditions are also said to be much better than in Chinese state-owned or private companies, and better than in firms from Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong or other Asian countries. The salaries are supposed to be higher and the "corporate culture", more open to, and respectful of individual opinions, emphasizing communication and team work rather than strict obedience to hierarchy, associated with Asian business practices, as illustrated by this explanation given to Lala

506. LING 2009, 283.
by her superior, Rose:

"Lala, I know that you use to work in a Taiwanese company, and that you developed the habit of always obeying to your superiors. But we are an American company, DB's corporate culture is very open, it encourages direct communication, if you disagree with something, you should mention it and allow everyone to discuss it, you don't have to be so careful."  

From a professional point of view, all the practices are said to be more standardized than in other types of companies, giving more importance to formal regulations and laws, thus weakening the power and influence of personal relationships and private arrangements. This is supposed to create a more professional and efficient environment for people to work in. Finally, the employees are also said to be better protected against sexual harassment, mobbing and arbitrary decisions from the hierarchy that could make their positions unstable and insecure. Many novels insist on the strict procedures to be followed in case an employee is laid-off, mentioning the compensations to be paid and the circumstances making a contract termination impossible according to the Labor Contract Law. The accuracy of these representations will be discussed in the last chapter of this part, when addressing the question of realism.

All these characteristics make the Western corporate world highly desirable for young graduates and prospective employees, because it seems to promise better chances of promotions, raises and success than other types of companies. Moreover, Western companies' employees are usually described as professional, but also as respectful of etiquette, elegant, and knowledgeable about consumption products associated both with luxury and culture, for example wine and foreign brands of clothing and cosmetics:

[...] Frank Lu (Lu Fan) was previously the sales director of the Rui'en group. Under his leadership, the company's sales quota had grown rapidly and exceeded 200%, his results were outstanding. Before working for Rui'en, he had been a sales manager for the Fukeman group, had worked for California SiliconSoft Inc. in America, received a Master's in computer engineering from Berkeley in 1994 and a Bachelor's in the same topic from Tsinghua University in 1992. He liked golf and wine and was a member of the Voves Wine Association in France.

In general, the higher a character is situated in the company's hierarchy, the more he or she is described as having integrated these standards of appearance, behavior and consumption, and the more he or she will attract the heroine's admiration and respect, despite the fact that he or she might

508.  LI 2013, 22.
509.  Law adopted in 2007 and aiming at clarifying the rights and obligations of employers and employees, as well as protecting the later against potential abuses. This law is often mentioned in workplace novels. http://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?id=6133&lib=law (last consulted on July 13th, 2018).
510.  CUI 2012, 15.
play a negative role in the story. In most cases, the heroines envy and want to emulate the dressing style, behavior and consumption patterns of the more experienced employees of the company and might suffer from a feeling of inferiority when they realize how little they know about Western products and practices, as is illustrated in this scene where Lala compares her knowledge of foreign products to Wang Wei's:

Lala felt very ashamed, she had the feeling that she was not earning enough money, she didn't even know about black beer and white beer. She regretted to not be able to knock Wang Wei out with a bottle to avoid other people learning about her ignorance. She had no choice but to keep smiling to hide her shame and anger.\(^{511}\)

We can observe that the Western - or westernized - employees' professionalism is entangled with, and impossible to dissociate from, the standards they conform to. Wearing impeccable and fashionable clothes and shoes, taking care of one's hair, skin and overall hygiene, knowing what to order in a foreign restaurant, as well as interacting in a polite and friendly way with people from all nationalities - which implies fluency in or, at least, good mastery of English - are inherent and indispensable aspects of being a proficient and potentially successful white collar in a foreign company. As a counter-example, here is how Yu Lei describes some of her colleagues, usually blamed for their sloppiness at work, in Tan Yiping's second novel:

This girl came to work twice with the same clothes, the first time I noticed that a button was about to fall from her left sleeve, and the second time it was still hanging there. Two weeks had passed but she didn't fix it, this showed that she lacked a meticulous and serious spirit, and this type of people do not make good secretaries.\(^{512}\)

And:

That morning, Mark was stuffing a scallion pancake in his mouth while running into the office. I think that this kind of attitude is really unrefined. People who eat breakfast while walking are disgusting. Actually, it's enough to drink a bit of milk for the mouth to develop a disgusting sour smell after a while, so imagine when someone eats something like an onion and egg pancake. Sometimes, when you are squeezed in the subway like tinned sardines, these people also scream in their phones, spreading their bad breath all around, and you cannot escape from it!\(^{513}\)

In that sense, it seems that professional abilities and success are intimately linked to adopting a cosmopolitan attitude and lifestyle, as well as to conforming to the standards of civility advocated in China in recent years as a way to improve the population's quality. Recent public discourses have promoted the need for Chinese people to distance themselves from behaviors and practices

\(^{511}\) LI 2013, 80.
\(^{512}\) TAN 2005, 10.
\(^{513}\) TAN 2005, 19.
associated with tradition and backwardness to embrace international norms of cleanliness, etiquette and overall attitude in order to better the national image abroad. In general, these standards of interaction and public behavior are associated with Western conceptions of politeness and appropriateness and with the modern urban setting. Different characteristics and behaviors - not knowing English, speaking loud in public, spitting on the floor, displaying imperfect hygiene, etc. - came to be associated with older, less educated or rural people, and are thus perceived as not modern and as hindering China's development and integration in the international community.

In different novels, white collars are described as the vanguard of society and thus as holding the responsibility of embodying these qualities. This particularity distances them from most of the country's population, and makes them examples to be followed by others in the hope that, in the future, the overall population reaches those standards and participates actively in the economic development of the country and in improving its image abroad:

 [...] the people of this company were obviously of high quality, Lala had the feeling that they belonged to the same category as her.514

In most cases, being of "high quality" is strongly associated with the respect of the company's regulations, but also of the country's laws:

As professional secretaries of the modern corporate world, we have to respect the country's laws and the regulation system of the company. We also have to consider the benefit of the company as the most important thing, it's our bounden duty, like soldiers who have to obey their superiors' order. You could say that it is a modern version of a martial code [jianghu guize 江湖规则].515

And:

 [...] an outstanding secretary is first of all an honest and law-abiding citizen. If someone breaks the law and is not loyal to his or her country, his or her loyalty to the company is useless, [...].516

As we have seen, at the beginning of the novels, the heroines are depicted as lacking the qualities that will allow them to survive and succeed in the workplace, because they are ordinary, young and inexperienced, which is supposed to allow the readers' identification with them. This particularity justifies the learning process the characters initiate at the beginning of the novels and the position of the author - already sanctioned by professional success - as a model to imitate or, at least, as an authority figure whose advice is worth following. We have also mentioned that the heroines' flaws are generally not limited to professional experience and knowledge but involve the norms of

514. LI 2013, 99.
515. TAN 2004, 11.
516. TAN 2004, 325.
appearance and behavior mentioned in this section. Thus, we can observe that, though generally in
an implicit manner, workplace novels present career and professional development, especially in
foreign companies, as a way for young people to learn how to conform to international standards of
professionalism, politeness, appearance and consumption, and, consequently, to improve their
quality in the way the concept is described and understood in public discourses. Young people, in
that sense, seem to be invited to use their work and what they learn in their professional
environment to become the economically productive and civilized individuals they need to be to
participate in the country's economic growth and positive image abroad. However, most of the
heroines are college graduates and already displaying a reasonable level of "quality" at the
beginning of the stories, thus allowing us to think that self-perfectibility is mainly - if not
exclusively - possible for the educated urban youth, casting doubt on the assertions that everyone
can succeed through hard work.

1.3.2 Acquiring Femininity

As the novels of our corpus are written by women, stage women main characters, and target a
mainly female readership, the question of the heroines' womanhood and femininity plays an
important role in their process of coming of age and identity building. For most of the characters,
coming of age also means becoming - or remaining - a woman who will ultimately prove to be a
good wife and mother, even if these aspects are given significantly less importance than
professional development in the novels. In most cases, acquiring the companies' standards regarding
clothing, grooming and social interactions are presented as increasing the femininity of the
heroines. However, some of the qualities associated with professional competence and, to some
extent, with what the modern and economically productive individual should embody - rationality,
composure, seriousness, strategic thinking, pragmatism, etc. - are often pictured as unfeminine and
as threatening the heroines' morality.

Though questions regarding womanhood or femininity are generally not explicitly nor centrally
treated in workplace novels, as the texts depict how young women go through the transition from a
state associated with childhood, immaturity, school and family to the establishment of themselves as
experienced, self-reliant and independent individuals, questions on the meaning and expression of
femininity necessarily arise. Firstly, in their new professional environment, the young heroines are
often confronted with ways of being women they do not seem particularly familiar with, as
illustrated by the words of a man, Zhan Deming, with whom Qiao Li collaborates in the second
volume of *Ups and Downs*:

"Women have to learn a very wide set of skills," said Zhan Deming, "You have to learn how
to be soft, stylish, beautiful, attractive, how to be liked by men, how to have them spend
their money for you... You should also be able to move someone to tears. These are all skills
This allows us to think that mothers do not represent typical models for the young white collars depicted in workplace novels - when relationships with family members are developed in any way, the father-daughter tie generally takes more importance than the mother-daughter one - which is probably linked to the fact that most of the novels' characters are the first members of their families to experience the foreign company universe and the specific codes associated with it.

In general, the heroines encounter female colleagues with whom they will develop friendships or rivalries, depending on the positive or negative nature of the said characters in the stories. Female colleagues are often depicted as more beautiful, attractive and fashionable than the heroines who, as we have seen, are supposed to be ordinary - with the exception of Yi Yun in The Art of Winning, and, to some extent, of Yu Lei in Tan Yiping's novels. They are also more knowledgeable about products aiming at the betterment of their appearance, while the heroines usually have a plain look and simple grooming routines, which they often have to alter to integrate better in the company:

Zhan Deming was used to seeing beautiful, elegant and delicate women. Facing Qiao Li who was not wearing any makeup, he couldn't maintain his interest. In the middle of their meal, Zhan Deming couldn't help but saying: "Annie, I will say something that I'm not supposed to say: you are not that young anymore, you have to take better care of your appearance."

These female colleagues also show more interest in interacting with men than the main characters and are often more seductive. Many of them hold a materialistic perception of relationships with the other sex, asserting that it is normal for women to trade their company and affection for material benefits, for example. This even seems to be perceived as a necessary skill to be considered a woman in the fullest sense, as shown in the statement of one of Qiao Li's female colleagues:

"Women buy things and men pay for them, this is a natural thing, look at me," Jessy raised her hand, a thin gold chain glittered on her wrist, "except for this, that I bought for my own birthday, I didn't pay for anything that I'm wearing."

Through the depictions of the "older" female characters of the novels - the heroines' superiors, usually in their thirties - we can observe that standards of appearance and behavior evolve with age. Indeed, mature female characters are judged severely when they dress provocatively, when they obviously display their interest in men, or when they gossip or behave in an unprofessional way, while these "mistakes" seem to be relatively easy to forgive when committed by younger women.

In many cases, the skills that the heroines have to acquire to integrate into their new professional environment and to conform to its standards - maintaining an attractive and elegant appearance at

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517. CUI 2012b, 203.
518. CUI 2012b, 77.
519. CUI 2012, 283.
all times, being patient, polite, understanding and cooperative with colleagues and clients, etc. - are also skills associated with femininity. Thus, by becoming professionally efficient and proficient, the main characters are supposed to develop their femininity and to step away from the characteristics associated with their teenage years - being unrestrained, harsh, sloppy, loud or too assertive - as we can observe in the considerations of Yi Yun's superior:

Take Yi Yun, who was sitting quietly in front of him, for example: she was dedicated to her work, she never said no to her boss, she was so admirably delicate, charming, lovely and sweet-tempered, which boss wouldn't favor her?520

As these abilities are intimately linked with professional success, it seems crucial for the heroines to acquire them. Moreover, as the young women described in the novels are usually single and under their parents' pressure to rapidly find a suitable partner, developing their femininity is also very important for them to reach the goals of marriage and motherhood. As workplace novels are centered on careers and on the life of relatively young and highly educated urban females, marriage and family life are seldom described in detail. However, the fact that studies and work are delaying these important life steps and that it is not easy to find a partner while focusing on professional development - especially since, like the job market, the love market also seems highly competitive and ruthless - are always concerns for the heroines and their friends and relatives, which is illustrated in the following statements from the Ups and Downs's narrator:

Why is marriage so unfair for men and women? Reaching the same age of twenty-seven, it seems like everyone in the world shivers about women's marriage, but for men it is not a concern at all.521

And:

Nowadays, everyone is very realistic: after twenty-five, women are leftover women, and after twenty-seven, they become unsellable goods.522

In most of the novels, we can observe that the young male employees are generally single or engaged in casual relationships, while the older, more experienced ones are married, divorced or happy to still be bachelors. However, most of the female characters are not married, even the ones who are already in their thirties, which is described as a consequence of the time and energy they spend on their careers and, at times, of the masculinizing process they go through by working in some domains or by becoming wealthy and powerful on their own. Contrarily to what can be observed for male characters, marriage is always a concern for women, regardless of their social, professional or economic status. As most novels depict love rivalries between women who compete

520. LING 2009, 212.
521. CUI 2012b, 21.
522. CUI 2012b, 105.
for the attention of men, as well as occurrences of adultery, we understand that the realm of seduction, relationships and, ultimately, marriage, is often a source of pressure, anxiety and insecurity for women, making it all the more important for them to be perceived as accomplished and feminine women.

As we have briefly mentioned, acquiring the appearance and behavior standards of big foreign company is depicted as increasing femininity. However, working in certain domains, working too hard, or being too ambitious, competitive or ruthless - which are, in general, important characteristics allowing professional success in the corporate world - are represented as negative traits for women because they threaten their femininity. Through the different narratives, we can observe that, while young women are often criticized for being too emotional, irrational, superficial, jealous or gossiping - which is not well perceived in the professional context - they come to be blamed for lacking femininity when they are too serious or down to earth, as well as when they do not mind their appearance, when they do not seem to care about men's attention, and when they do not participate in the social life of the company, which involves gossip. We can observe this in Qiao Li's evaluation by Zhan Deming:

Zhan Deming, seeing that she was speaking only about work, thought that she [Qiao Li] was boring and insipid, [...].523

Moreover, it seems to be acceptable for women to benefit from the power and financial resources of men but, when they gain power and money by themselves, they are generally described as greedy and money-obsessed, which is perceived as both a consequence and a cause of their prolonged single status. This is what we can observe in Liu Mingda's address to Qiao Li:

"I think that it was very good when you were a receptionist. Of course, this position offers no opportunities of development, but you could be a secretary, and then slowly shift for marketing. Look at Rebecca, she is doing very well in the marketing department, working in sales is not suitable for girls, there is too much pressure, people are too cunning, look at Linda, not married yet at her age."524

Indeed, the professions requiring frequent contact with male clients and a particularly ruthless, aggressive and competitive professional attitude, like sales, are described as unfit professions for women and the ones who choose to embrace them anyway thus become suspicious.

In some novels of our corpus - the Du Lala saga, Run, Mia, Happy Little V's Crystal Dice, Account of Li Bingbing's Struggle and Account of a Workplace Little Shrimp's Transformation - the heroines manage to find partners despite their focus on career and their professional dedication, generally towards the end of the narrative, though this is not the case for Happy Little V's Crystal Dice. This

523. CUI 2012b, 26.
524. CUI 2012, 86.
indicates that professional life is not depicted as mutually exclusive with couple or family life, seemingly as important as career - if not more - to feel happy and fulfilled. However, in the realm of their professional lives, women are invited to conform to certain standards and to not cross certain limits in order to be both successful professionals and eligible partners for men. To do so, they need to master a fragile equilibrium between slacking and obsessive work, lacking "direction" and excess of ambition, irrationality and coldness, caring about appearance and superficiality, promiscuity and indifference towards men, etc. Thus, while some workplace novels apparently express that it is possible for women to have successful careers and balanced emotional lives, it seems to be a difficult goal to achieve, and most of the requirements to make it a reality seem to be the responsibility of women.

1.4 Does Self-Betterment Really Lead to Success?

Despite the generally uplifting tone of the novels and, particularly, of their paratext, we have seen that the heroines do not always manage to change, and that, if they do, it is not always well perceived and does not necessarily guarantee their success. This reveals the existence of contradictions between the main narrative lines and the paratext, as well as in the texts themselves. In Tan Yiping's novels, the heroines manage to improve their skills, but their status does not change significantly throughout the narratives. Moreover, the endings suggest that their paths towards self-betterment are far from over.

After the first volume of the saga, Du Lala is said to become more feminine, beautiful and gentle, and also to improve her people skills. However, it is precisely her new-found kindness and empathy that ultimately cost her a promotion at the end of the fourth volume and pushes her to choose an alternative career path. The heroine seems happy with that turn of events, as her newest goal is to teach young adults about the workplace and the HR field, as well as to write manuals for that purpose, which she is now able to do. However, being promoted in her company seemed to be her first objective, for which she was ready to put her personal life on hold for years, making it difficult to see the end of the novel as depicting an unambiguous success.

In Ups and Downs, the heroine seems to acquire experience and knowledge throughout the volumes and even to slightly alter her personality by getting closer to her colleagues and by trusting her superiors more. The fact that the saga is incomplete explains the open ending of that particular narrative, but it is necessary to point out that, at the end of the second volume, Qiao Li still feels betrayed and alienated at work, that she has no sense of personal achievement despite the success of the project she was in charge of, and that she is also said to have lost her innocence and her
kindness.

In *Run, Mia*, as revealed by the results of the psychological evaluation conducted in the company, the heroine fails to really adapt to her professional environment, despite her efforts and her good results. She ultimately realizes that she is not made for a life of competitiveness and pressure and decides to go abroad and back to school. The novel does not indicate if she will find the job of her dreams - one where she enjoys both a high social status and a relaxed schedule.

We have mentioned that Yi Yun, the heroine of *The Art of Winning*, is described as almost perfect at the beginning of the novel. Except for acquiring professional knowledge, her personality is not altered in a significant way. She is not said to lose her purity and innocence while she gains experience but, instead, manages to work despite what other people around her perceive as a weakness. From her personal point of view, this lack of change seems to be a success, as the workplace is described as violent and corruptive in that novel. However, as we have seen, at the end of the story she decides to quit her job, despite her apparent success, because she cannot deal with the competition, the jealousies and the schemes of her employment.

In *Happy Little V’s Crystal Dice*, we observe the change of mentality and priorities of the heroine throughout the novel. At the beginning, Xiao V dedicates all her time and energy to work hard for her company. However, when she experiences a less strict work schedule and more autonomy, she asserts that she becomes lazy and never manages to go back to a stronger work ethic. As the novel emphasizes the necessity for people to feel happy at work and to have a fulfilling personal life, Xiao V can be perceived as reaching success, and she indeed explains that she is satisfied with her life on a few occasions. However, it seems necessary to emphasize that, while this novel illustrates how the heroine reaches a state of contentment and happiness, she does so outside of the professional realm, in which she seems to still be struggling, probably forever.

*Account of Li Bingbing's Struggle* seems to be the only novel of our corpus to depict an actual success story, as it is advertised to be. Indeed, the heroine manages to become a famous and recognized lawyer, against the odds of her rural origins and lack of education. She also gets married to the man she loves by the end of the story. In the process, her personality does not seem to be altered in any significant way: she keeps dedicating her time and energy to defend the rights of subaltern groups, to help her family and to be a hard worker. Her views of love and relationships might change to become slightly more utilitarian and pragmatic, but the novel does not seem to express moral judgement on this aspect. Li Bingbing is one of the only heroines who does not have grand ambitions or high expectations towards life, which she explains by her modest background, and she is also the only one to really succeed.

Finally, as the title of the novel indicates, *Account of a Workplace Little Shrimp's Transformation* emphasizes the personal transformation of its heroine as she becomes more experienced. The book
uses the example of the ability to walk all day in high heels to symbolize the protagonist's transformation, which is depicted as positive. However, by the end of the novel, Cai Xiaoxia comes to realize that it is probably impossible to really succeed in her professional environment without compromising her moral values and losing her natural kindness, as illustrated by her model, Yi Na. She thus chooses to start on another career path in order to protect her moral integrity. While the story depicts a form of success - the heroine finds another job she seems passionate about and is involved in an apparently fulfilling relationship with a man - we have to point out that, here again, like in the novel of Xiao V, success is reached despite of one's career and its potentially corruptive power, rather than through and thanks to that career.

Through these examples, we can observe that, in most cases, despite the fact that workplace novels are described as success stories, they usually do not straightforwardly depict the positive outcomes one might reach through work. In general, the characters have to find fulfillment and recognition outside of the realm they are originally engaged in, either in their personal lives or in alternative career paths. Moreover, while they have to integrate into their new work environment - through the acquisition of a wide set of knowledge and practices - in order to be proficient and successful, they also have to protect themselves against the morally corruptive power of a competitive and ruthless corporate world. Thus, the novels seem to be advertised as success stories through professional apprenticeship and achievements even though the actual outcomes of the narratives contradict this assertion.

The fact that the novels fail to provide depictions of unambiguous individual rises through career advancement seems to reveal the existence of widespread doubts about the officially acknowledged meaning of success, as well as about the possibility and desirability of a long-lasting and all-encompassing involvement in a ruthless workplace. We consider that these narratives, despite the way they are sometimes advertised, can be considered as side voices questioning the mainstream assertions of the necessity for individuals to endlessly pursue a self-betterment defined by the economic realm and to lose themselves in an endless race for more - results, promotions, raises - which ultimately fails to make them happy. Despite what they learn and how they adapt to their work, most of the characters seem to maintain their individuality and moral qualities until the end of the stories, even when it means that they have to change profession. In four novels of our corpus, the heroines quit their jobs towards the end of the narratives. In Xiao V's novel, the heroine does not quit but chooses to look for fulfillment in her personal life rather than in her career. We believe that these choices represent the heroines' attempts to gain a form of agency that was denied to them at work. In Tan Yiping's and Cui Manli's novels, the heroines do not quit and seem stuck in their quest for a feeling of self-fulfillment and success by the end of the narratives. Finally, Li Bingbing is the only heroine of our corpus who seems genuinely happy when the novel finishes, but her well-being seems to find its source in her marriage at least as much as in her career.
Chapter 2 - Representation of Negative Aspects, or "Hidden Realities" of the Workplace

As we have seen above, the main narration of workplace novels, and especially the way they are described and advertised in the paratext, generally encourage the reader to perceive them as stories of professional success, self-betterment, coming of age and identity building. However, an attentive reading of the texts questions this idealized vision of the story. We have mentioned that most of the heroines fail to succeed in the way they originally intended or, at least, come to question and revise their original goals and visions of success and happiness. Moreover, negative aspects of the corporate world and of the contemporary workplace transpire in most of the novels, despite the overall idealization of this environment and the mentions of the sense of pride and prestige that belonging to it gives the characters.

In the following sections, we will explore different forms of mindsets and external hindrances that deprive the characters of their linear rise towards success. Firstly, as the main characters of the novels of our corpus are women, it will be necessary to address the issues related to gender stereotypes, sexism and the ways in which being a woman can represent an obstacle for the heroines' careers. As we will see, assertions displaying gender biased opinions are recurrent in most of the novels, uttered both by the characters and narrators. Moreover, most novels reveal the omnipresence in the workplace of moral values - linked to the concept of quality - which are usually more restrictive and difficult to abide by for women than for men. As we will observe, working closely with men, as well as acquiring power and money, are still perceived as threatening for women's reputations and morality, and female characters are often judged severely - and, at times, punished - for not following mainstream moral prescriptions. Secondly, we will observe how the adaptation to companies' standards that the protagonists have to go through in order to integrate and succeed is sometimes perceived as threatening for their identities and personalities, suffocated by conformism to strict norms of behavior.

Finally, the narratives of our corpus also reveal difficulties inherent to contemporary life, for example the feeling of isolation and alienation of individuals in big cities and the lack of humanity and kindheartedness displayed by a corporate world obsessed with profit. Most of the novels also mention the long work hours the characters have to go through and the pressure they endure to remain competitive and secure their positions, which often affect their psychological and physical health in different ways. Moreover, despite their hard work and efforts, the characters usually discover that they will not reach the goals they originally set for themselves, or, if they actually have a chance to do so, that reaching these goals will not give them the happiness and sense of fulfillment they expected, giving many of them a feeling of void and helplessness.

In this section, we will observe how side narratives and side voices question the uplifting tone of the
novels and the visions of success and happiness they seem to promote at first glance. As we have seen, workplace novels' advertisement is strongly based on the idea that, as the characters are ordinary, their success can be duplicated by all the willing readers who will get inspired by their examples and conform to their behavior and actions. However, the narratives themselves question the possibility for everyone to succeed in the way originally intended by the characters, as well as the core meaning of this so-called success. We consider workplace novels, as well as general discourses on white collars and the middle class, to display various ambiguities regarding women's involvement in the workplace, the globalizing and standardizing processes imposed on people by transnational firms, and the relationship between China and the West, to name only a few. The narratives of our corpus also embody a contradiction between the idea of social and economic climbing being supposedly accessible to everyone who is willing to work hard enough and to conform to certain norms, and the threat represented by a wider access to success and wealth to the status of the elites and to the prestige associated with their perceived qualities and lifestyle.

2.1 Sexism and glass-ceiling

The novels of our corpus depict young females' professional development and their journey to adulthood and independence through work. As they are centered on the concept of career, which structures the main narrative lines, at first glance, they might seem like empowering stories of women's agency and self-reliance. In numerous Chinese articles focusing on the genre, the novels are indeed described as feminist. However, a closer observation of the texts reveals that they are permeated with gender stereotypes and that they display implicit but nonetheless clear limitations to women's development in the professional realm. Rachel Brownstein defines feminist novels as describing "a woman's struggle to define herself against stereotyped images". For workplace novels to be considered as feminist, they should thus depict a quest for identity questioning and opposing the moral values and norms of the heroine's surrounding, which is generally not the case in the works of our corpus.

Firstly, in the words of the characters as well as the narrators, women are often described in derogatory terms. Most of the female characters of the novels display jealousy towards the heroines or other female colleagues, and this feeling is usually said to be typically feminine and inherent to women's nature. Jealousy and bitterness are important motives for female characters' actions in the

525. We can mention the exceptions of Zhou Lina's article, and of a few contributions by Yan Hanying, who question this widespread perception.
novels. They usually push them to gossip, spread rumors and to scheme against each other, as illustrated in the words of the heroine and narrator of Tan Yiping's first novel:

There is a saying that is quite vulgar but very true: where there are a lot of chickens and ducks, there is a lot of excrements, and where there is a lot of women, there is a lot of gossip. Prattling is a common fault among women, they do it again and again, no matter if the other person is interested in listening, they just never stop. 527

In most cases, negative male characters are motivated to harm others by ambition - they need to eliminate a rival in a power struggle - but negative female characters act up against each other because of jealousies, at times linked to the professional benefits obtained by one of them but, more often, to privileged relationships with male characters or to physical appearance. The novels depicting female friendship and solidarity as widespread and important in individuals' lives are rare, while strong brotherly bonds between men are much more frequent. As friendships between men and women also seem rare, especially in the professional realm, the lack of strong bonds between women accentuate the impression that the heroines are lonely and alienated in the big cities where they live.

Another recurrent critique addressed to female characters, and women in general, concerns their supposed lack of rationality and logic. Women are usually depicted as more emotional than men, both at work and in their personal lives, which can hinder their professional development as well as their relationships. Women are regularly described as using their "natural" intuition and their emotionality to solve problems, rather than relying on analytical thinking, which is a realm apparently reserved to men, in many cases. This is what we can observe through the assertions of the heroines and narrators of Tan Yiping's first novel and of Liujing Bingbing's novel:

Apparently, women are emotional animals, naturally they are not used to be in contact with numbers and logic. 528

And:

So, here I warn all the men, if you really like a woman, do not try to fight with her with well-substantiated arguments in a moment of anger. Trying to reason with women is the stupidest thing you can do. If they understood logic, would they believe you when you say that you will love them for ten thousand years when people only live for a few decades? 529

In numerous novels, female employees stay away from the elaboration of the companies' important strategies, discussed between men almost exclusively. Moreover, many narratives depict some female characters going through violent rage episodes, in general as a consequence of relationship

527. TAN 2004, 104.
528. TAN 2004, 207.
problems. This particularity seems to be a symptom of the feeling of precariousness and insecurity many women suffer in their relationships with men, as they seem to always fear infidelity or to be left. In workplace novels, women are depicted as competing for the attention of rare eligible bachelors. When they manage to obtain the attachment of one of them, the relationship seems to always be threatened by the presence of other women. As it is depicted as problematic for female characters to be single past a certain age and to become "leftover women", and as past relationships are ill perceived for them and difficult to accept for their new partners, men seem to occupy a position of power in the realm of intimate relationships and marriage, which they are not obliged to care about. This generally creates an imbalance of power in couples, as described here in the case of Du Lala and her first boyfriend, Zhang Dongyu:

Lala had now understood why Zhang Dongyu was advising her to enter a big foreign company. She had to recognize that he was wiser than her and that he knew what was good for her better than she did.530

We have mentioned that the concept of femininity is crucial in the heroines' personal development, in their careers and in their personal lives, and that many heroines are described as lacking femininity, at the beginning of the narratives at least. In workplace novels, femininity is described as both natural - women are inclined to emotionality, kindness and care, as mothers are - and as a set of abilities and practices that can and must be learned and acquired. As we have seen, this set of skills mainly concerns the increase of women's attractiveness for men through choosing the right type of clothing and by using cosmetics and makeup, as well as patterns of behavior to conform to in their interactions with men. In this realm, women are invited to be seductive enough to attract men's attention but not so much as to look sexually available in an obvious way, which is ill perceived in the novels. In Tan Yiping's first novel, for example, one of the heroine's colleagues is criticized for wearing too much makeup, which makes her look like a karaoke hostess, a profession usually associated with prostitution. Despite their professional achievements and quests for financial independence, women in workplace novels generally avoid threatening men's authority, principally based on their control over professional power and economic resources, as illustrated in Yu Lei's words:

To summarize, secretaries have to understand psychology, they should absolutely avoid outshining their superiors, because most bosses want to protect their dignity as leaders, but also as men.531

Or:

"Do not study that much!" Kong Qin [a female friend of Yu Lei] screamed, "Don't you know

530. LI 2013, 9.
531. TAN 2004, 122.
Congruently, scholar Liu Jieyu explains how, since the 1980s, the new appropriate way of being a woman re-emphasized the importance of femininity and of womanly virtue.\textsuperscript{533} This explains a boom in consumption of cosmetics and other products aiming at improving a woman's appearance and attractiveness. According to Liu, female white collars "are considered to be at the front line of a pioneering modernity, a position to which many university women students aspire"\textsuperscript{534}. The white-collar women interviewed by Liu seem to know that companies are more likely to hire beautiful women, and they thus spend a lot of money and effort on their appearance. The research of Eileen Otis, exploring the service and hospitality industries, also emphasizes how beauty routines became crucial for women's work, with some important chains subjecting "workers to an intensive service-protocol training program, instructing them to adopt a middle-class feminine sensibility so they may effortlessly inhabit the world of wealth in which they labor".\textsuperscript{535} Otis also emphasizes the importance of improving one's appearance in order to better one's chances for professional success, in a context where resources and opportunities are more and more unequally distributed.

We have seen that some of the heroines of our corpus have high ambitions and ideals regarding work, mentioning the possibility to become CEO, for example. However, despite the fact that foreign companies are described as fairer than their Chinese counterparts in terms of raises and promotions, the novels fail to depict women occupying top leadership positions. As workplace novels are supposed to be realistic, we can assume that this particularity of the hierarchy reflects the actual situation of the workplace, at least partially. Nonetheless, the narratives are identified as fiction and, as we have seen, also depict the workplace in an idealized fashion. In that respect, the authors could choose to depict women occupying positions of power, or at least to describe the more experienced, higher ranked female characters in a positive manner, which is usually not the case. This allows us to wonder if, despite the grand ideals of some of the heroines and the uplifting tone of the novels asserting that anyone who works hard enough can succeed, holding a leadership position is perceived as an ideal or even as a possibility for women. As we have seen that female characters usually avoid challenging male characters' authority to avoid becoming undesirable romantic partners, and as it seems to still be important for women to get married and have a family, becoming a company's CEO might not belong to the realm of what is considered desirable and imaginable for authors and for readers. As we have seen when discussing the Du Lala saga's

\textsuperscript{532} TAN 2004, 143.
\textsuperscript{534} LIU 2008, 86.
paratext, her reasonable and replicable professional success is described as more valuable for readers than the story of Bill Gates. Ultimately, even in novels written by women and targeted at a female audience, the workplace is still described as a male dominated universe, as expressed by one of Qiao Li's male colleagues:

"I already told you that the workplace is a men's game, it is best for women to not get too involved. But, if you want to get involved, you have to accept the consequences."536

Regarding the influence of gender on career, the narratives also reveal, with different degrees of explicitness, that not all the positions are necessarily suited for women in a company. Notably, some novels seem to promote the idea that it is ill perceived and, at times, dangerous, for women to work in sales. This seems to be the consequence of some particularities of that field, namely, that it is usually the department where employees suffer the most pressure and competitiveness, and because it requires frequent interactions with male clients, especially during informal dinners, indispensable to strengthen relationships and to close deals, where employees are encouraged - or forced - to drink heavily and where women might be treated as commodities used to entertain the clients and facilitate the transactions. Thus, women apparently have to choose between renouncing these important opportunities to network with clients, which decreases their competitiveness, and joining the events, which implies that they risk being sexually harassed and damaging their reputation, as illustrated in the considerations of Liu Mingda, Qiao Li's colleague and suitor:

He disapproved of women working in sales from the bottom of his heart. Every IT company had its strange and scandalous stories about salespeople. For women in sales, the price to pay is too high.537

On the other hand, many novels describe some departments and positions as "feminine". In general, these imply more relaxed schedules, less pressure, and necessitate skills frequently associated with femininity, such as communication, collaboration and conflict resolution. This is what we can observe in Yu Lei's description of the secretary profession:

People often say that women are more suited to be secretaries than men. This makes sense because, by nature, most women are meticulous, soft, and good at communicating, which is appropriate to assist superiors with service-related tasks. These are women's strong points, and, in the workplace, we have to show our strengths and hide our weaknesses.538

Women are thus seen as more suited to work in human resources, public relations, marketing and other departments providing more stability and security but less opportunities for growth, raises and promotions, as we can observe here, when the narrator describes Du Lala's first position at DB:

536.  CUI 2012b, 203.
537.  CUI 2012b, 10.
538.  TAN 2004, 166.
This position could have been compared with being the housewife of the regional team, because it encompassed the responsibilities of managing the sales' numbers, of assisting the high ranked managers for monitoring expenses, and of helping the salespeople with everyday administrative work, like the organization of meetings. [...] The benefit provided by this position was stability, but what was called stability had, in fact, two meanings: on the one hand it involved only limited change, on the other hand it had no prospects.539

In her studies on the Chinese workplace, Liu Jieyu has also observed that women are often segregated in some types of work which are supposed to correspond to their natural abilities.540 Despite the fact that the Constitution is supposed to guarantee equal opportunities for men and women, men are generally advantaged for social mobility and women kept away from positions of responsibility. According to Liu, this situation was already observable during the Maoist period, but salary gaps actually widened with the economic reforms.541 Moreover, foreign-owned and private enterprises apparently show the largest gender wage gaps. Liu attributes this situation to the fact that women are usually seen as having jobs rather than careers, meaning that they only work in order to make money, without consideration for their personal development and growth.542 According to gender natural differences, women should be offered stable positions while men should get challenging ones:

In the Chinese white-collar context, the concept of career is closely linked with a masculine image, fighting for success at work, with family responsibilities taken care of by his wife.543

We can observe that this vision is incompatible with the concept of identity building and coming of age through work implied in most workplace novels.

Liu also explains that the segregation of women away from managerial position was historically linked to differences in qualifications. However, since the beginning of the 2000's, most women, still segregated in assistant positions, also have university degrees.544 Eileen Otis also observed how the economic reforms witnessed the re-installation of a more obvious segregation of jobs according to gender, which is usually legitimized on the basis of natural differences of abilities between men and women:

Managers mobilize biological understandings of gender differences to compel employees to work hard, to train their bodies to act in ways that conform with the feminine ideals that

539. LI 2013, 10.
541. LIU 2007, 139.
542. LIU 2007, 140.
543. LIU 2013, 80.
women should exhibit deference, care, delicacy, selflessness, and a certain fragility. These skills ultimately become measures of employee's putative innate femininity. Norms of femininity, in turn, become a means to inculcate these capacities. Paradoxically, women workers learn to display deference while coming to understand deference as a natural competency that is the by-product of female physiology.545

According to Otis' research, the new gendered expectations towards women in the workplace aim at displaying their physical attractiveness and weakness, as well as their soft, caring and motherly nature, which is hardly compatible with the qualities usually associated with professional competence and efficiency:

But as vessels of signs, women find themselves in a double bind. Embodying characteristics that reflect men's status places them at risk of disqualification in fields requiring authority and intellect, which offer the greatest status and monetary rewards. Feminine capital in the form of beauty and charm is widely taken to be inversely correlated with masculine-typed skills (analytic, scientific, and managerial aptitudes, for example), whereas an absence of this capital raises questions about feminine normalcy. These values are double-edged in that they benefit women on marriage and dating markets but also objectify their bodies and render women as a kind of resource that is possessed and displayed by men. Furthermore, feminine capitals coupled as they typically are with youth, lose their value over time. In pursuit of feminine capital, women may gain access to skills and forms of bodily expression that signal their feminine class sophistication, but these alterations rarely enhance their opportunities for employability in markets outside of the consumer service sector, or even in the sector, as they age.546

The conception according to which women are not suited for all positions in a company seems to be influenced by different sets of representations regarding the inclusion of women in the professional world. Despite the recent focus on economic growth and consumption in China, the accumulation of wealth and power seems to still hold a morally ambiguous position in collective representations. Firstly, the assumption that someone who acquired status and economic resources did so by using immoral or illegal means is apparently frequent. In workplace novels, this problem is usually solved by the assertion that the heroines are ordinary women who do not have useful connections or a prestigious family background and who thus succeeded relying only on their hard work and dedication. The fact that these characteristics should be mentioned and emphasized probably illustrates that they are perceived as exceptions rather than as rules. Despite this particularity, the idea that, in order to succeed in an increasingly competitive job market, people have to be ruthless and cunning and thus to renounce some important moral values, like benevolence and kindheartedness, still seems pervasive in some of the narratives apprehended in this research, as

545. OTIS 2012, 52.
546. OTIS 2012, 22-23.
illustrated in the assertion of Cai Xiaoxia's first boyfriend:

"When I just graduated, I thought that money was the most important. I got a house, money and face, but now I know that money really ruins people!" 547

As we have seen, the novels frequently depict successful and powerful male characters who managed to conserve their morality and honesty, but it is usually not the case for female characters. This allows us to think that women are perceived as more easily corruptible by money and power than men, probably because feminine nature seems to be associated with weakness.

At times, even hard work seems to be evaluated ambiguously in workplace novels. Despite the fact that it is encouraged as the only legitimate mean to reach success, status and wealth, for women, to strongly focus on work and disdain other aspects of life - their looks, finding a partner, starting a family - is generally ill perceived. In many novels, working too hard and being too serious is described as masculinizing the heroines and thus as decreasing their attractiveness to men, as illustrated in Li Bingbing's considerations:

If they can, women should be flower vases. As a vase, you can arrange the flowers as you want, dress beautifully and avoid working. But for me, who cannot be a vase, the only choice is to sit upright and still like men, and to discuss about law and national affairs with them, while, in the bottom of my heart, I would really prefer wearing a long, fitting skirt and sit on their laps to speak about love. 548

This is also what we can observe with the character of Sha Dangdang in the Du Lala saga. As a reasonably successful and well-paid professional who attracts a handsome boyfriend with her wealth, Sha Dangdang reverses the balance of power in the usual man-woman relationship pattern, which results in her being ultimately masculinized in her partner's eyes:

Ye Tao thought with hatred: how did I never realize before that her bone structure was so big and sturdy? She looks like a man! 549

In that sense, it is apparently seen as unnatural for women to focus all their energy on work, while it is apparently acceptable for men, which creates another gender-related imbalance in the reachability of professional success for women.

Similarly, the white-collar women interviewed by Liu Jieyu often say they have been advised not to work too hard in order to have time to find a partner. Liu has also observed how career impediments push women towards other routes for self-fulfillment:

Since their career plans were disturbed, many young, single, women sales assistants prioritized their own pursuit of self-development; for example, they learned piano, studied a

547. CHEN 2014, 160.
548. LIUJING 2011, 9.
549. LI 2010, 279.
new foreign language and some even secretly started online enterprises. These women valued the challenges and experienced satisfaction and success from these activities, which they felt went some way to counterbalancing their unjust treatment at work. Other, married, women sales assistants with childcare responsibilities placed priority on the family.\textsuperscript{550}

Apparently, women who try to overcome the gender segregation of work and climb the hierarchy are often ill perceived, notably by other female employees. Moreover, these gender differences seem to be unavoidable because, as expressed by the heroine and narrator in \textit{Run, Mia}, the female aspect of working women's identities will always be considered as more important than their professional roles:

Female bosses are fundamentally different from male bosses: male bosses are bosses first, then people, then, lastly, they are men. But female bosses are female first, then bosses, and then people.\textsuperscript{551}

Finally, we have observed that workplace novels usually describe the beginnings of careers and that their heroines are fairly young. This implies that none of the novels of our corpus deal directly with the issue of balancing career and family life. We consider this particularity to be a consequence of the ambiguity surrounding the encouragement directed at young women to work hard in order to become economically independent, but not too hard as to hinder their roles as girlfriends, wives and mothers. We have seen that some professions are perceived as encouraging and developing femininity. In many cases, working women are described as more attractive and desirable than housewives or stay-at-home moms, as expressed by one of Yu Lei's male colleagues:

"[...] Women who don't work are never adorable, no matter if they are someone's wife or mistress."\textsuperscript{552}

This seems contradictory to the idea that wifely and motherly duties and qualities are inherent to the female nature and that working too hard threatens femininity. If this contradiction is possible to resolve when describing the life of young heroines usually beginning relationships towards the end of the novels, it would be much more complicated to maintain the uplifting and encouraging tone of most of the narratives when dealing with issues like maternity leave, child rearing and household managing, which are still mainly the responsibility of women in modern day China, despite the fact that most of them also work outside of the home.\textsuperscript{553} As we have mentioned, descriptions of, and expectations towards women also go through important changes as they grow older. The characters and narrators of the novels seem relatively forgiving towards young women, even when they behave in a negative way, but their judgment usually grows harsher towards older women. In their case,

\textsuperscript{550} LIU 2013, 83.  
\textsuperscript{551} QIN 2009, 94.  
\textsuperscript{552} TAN 2004, 24.  
\textsuperscript{553} ZHOU 2011.
jealousy, emotionality and impropriety are difficult to ignore and justify. Moreover, while most novels propose positive descriptions of older male characters, usually depicted as experienced, wise and benevolent, they rarely contain positive older female protagonists - they are either single, too focused on career, greedy, manipulative and bitter, or married and consequently losing focus on their profession and their loyalty to the company.

2.2 Imposition of Restrictive Moral Values and Behavior Norms on the Employees

We have observed that the novels from the zhichang category describe the adaptation of young white collars to the rules and practices of the workplace as a positive process allowing them to become independent and productive adults, to develop work ethic and civility, and to grow into civilized and cosmopolitan individuals. The entanglement of professional formation into the core fabric of the individual is possible because the workplace - especially in foreign companies - is not only supposed to teach how to be competent and efficient in a specific profession, but also to inculcate norms of appearance and behavior, as well as a set of values associated with, but not limited to, professionalism, hard work and civility. As we have seen, due to the prestige of the foreign corporate world and the standards by which it is supposed to abide, and through the seemingly positive example of the characters whose status and material comfort increase with their integration in their professional environment, readers are invited to perceive the fact that the characters are progressively adapting to and being incorporated into the companies they work for in a positive light.

Most novels imply or illustrate that failing to conform to the workplace rules and values brings negative outcomes. The characters who play negative roles in the narratives generally embody defects which make them unfit for the foreign workplace. They often lack work ethic, are short tempered, and unable to work in teams. In some cases, they are also excessively ambitious, greedy or jealous, and use immoral or illegal means to further their own goals and to harm other characters. We can observe that, as long as the narratives depict a main character who is hopeful towards her future and trustful towards the ability of the workplace to provide her with the opportunities she needs to grow, these negative characters are generally punished, for example by losing a promotion or by being laid-off. However, if - or when - the heroine starts doubting the original promises of the corporate world - namely, that everyone is offered the same chances to grow and to succeed - the narratives show negative characters managing to succeed, sometimes better than the heroines. The promotion that Du Lala loses to Li Weidong at the end of the fourth volume of the saga, and which motivates her to leave SH, is an example of such situations.

As the novels usually emphasize the importance of respecting the companies' rules as well as the
country's law, as we have mentioned above, it is not surprising that characters who steal from the company, commit fraud, give or accept bribes, anonymously write deceitful letters to harm the reputation or career of other characters, etc. are portrayed negatively and punished according to the degree of workplace morality that the author wants to display. However, when the narratives shed a negative light on characters whose "bad behavior" is not related to the company's rules nor to the country's law but to unspoken, and nonetheless omnipresent, moral values which should be the private concern of the individual, the picture proposed by workplace novels becomes more complex, as we can observe in this quote from the narrator of the Du Lala saga, associating companies' rules and morality:

The norms of business activity are simply the company using a formal and written form to tell the employees what they can and cannot do, and what are the sanctions for misdeeds. Through these standards, the company makes employees understand what the local corporate culture considers as moral and immoral.\(^{554}\)

Most of the novels of our corpus star characters who are blamed and, in general, punished, for behaviors which are not necessarily related to professional competence or work ethic, even if inappropriate behavior is most of the time embodied in the same characters who also display lack of dedication and hard work. It is notably the case for female characters who flaunt their sexual availability.

We have mentioned that the ability to interact with men in a way that pleases them is represented as an important skill for young women to acquire and develop. However, being overly seductive and "open" is generally ill perceived and associated with psychological imbalance. At times, the moralism of some of the novels regarding women's sexuality conflicts with the heroines' desire for love and intimacy in a new social context where it is generally not condemned to date and have sexual intercourse outside of marriage, and where intimate relationships with boyfriends are seen as positive and necessary steps towards the establishment of a more durable commitment. In most cases, romantic encounters before marriage are described in a positive light and seem to be desired by the heroines. While the sexual component of such relationships is generally not described in much detail, concepts of virginity or purity before marriage do not seem to represent big concerns for young women who fancy themselves as modern, independent, open-minded and cosmopolitan.

However, to ultimately be acceptable, relationships between men and women apparently need to be sanctioned by sincere feelings. With the exception of Na in *Account of Li Bingbing's Struggle*, the female characters embracing a materialist vision of intimacy and sex are depicted negatively, despite the fact that some degree of pragmatism and practicality seems to be encouraged in relationships. Complete disregard for the educational and familial background, as well as for the

\(^{554}\) LI 2013, 14.
socio-economic status of a partner is generally absent from the novels, except when dealing with relationships started at a very young and still innocent age. Moreover, even when a couple's relationship is legitimized by the sharing of true love, it can still lead to regrets or bad consequences for the heroine, if the relationship does not end in marriage. This is what we can observe in the case of Du Lala's relationship with Zhang Dongyu, her first boyfriend. Lala apparently wants to keep the fact that she was living with Zhang Dongyu hidden, especially from Wang Wei. When the later finally discovers the truth, it seems to be difficult to accept for him. Moreover, Lala's mother uses this period of the heroine's life to explain the fact that she is more than thirty year old and still single, as if this had damaged her reputation and image.

We have also observed that women's reputations can be put at risk by their work, thus creating an ambiguity regarding the topic of women's morality in workplace novels. We have mentioned that some professions involving frequent socializing with male colleagues and clients can be complicated to deal with for female employees. As they are used, usually by their superiors, to entertain clients and facilitate some business transactions, they can be associated with the realm of prostitution, even though this aspect is never mentioned explicitly in the narratives. Without going so far, numerous novels describe how women are used as figureheads rather than as active participants during business gatherings. Moreover, we have seen that most of the heroines of our corpus face sexual harassment at some point of the story, events which are generally not denounced or punished and that seem to be apprehended as a normal and inherent aspect of professional life, as we can observe in the assertions of the heroine and narrator of Tan Yiping's first novel:

So all of this was because she was sexually harassed! New employees are the most likely to encounter this problem and, as they are not familiar with their professional environment, they generally have no choice but to suffer in silence. Sexual harassment is the AIDS of the white-collar profession. It is the same with smallpox and cholera, as for today, there is no way to annihilate them, and we have thus no choice but to prevent ourselves from them.555

And later:

"Kong Qin [one of Yu Lei's female colleagues], at work as in life, escaping is not the way." I said, "The most important thing is for you to clarify your attitude to not let them treat you like an innocent victim. For example, if your boss tells you that he loves you again, print a certification form about it for him to sign, and see if he dares to talk nonsense to you again."556

This particularity reveals an ambiguity of the contemporary workplace, namely, that women are supposed to maintain a high level of morality to be considered as adequate members of the

555. TAN 2004, 220.
556. TAN 2004, 222.
corporate world - with the sexual restrictions that this requirement involves - while their very integration in this world threatens their morality, especially if they are ambitious and want to be able to compete with their male colleagues, which necessitates their involvement with male clients during social gatherings. For example, in The Art of Winning, Yi Yun blames herself for having been forced to drink in a business dinner:

Yi Yun moaned in silence: today her image of virtuous woman had been completely destroyed in front of her boss.557

Similarly, the white-collar women interviewed by Liu Jieyu seem to consider that, by dressing conservatively, they protect themselves against sexual harassment, thus making it their responsibility to avoid being harassed and abused:

My data suggest that these professional women were expected to perform sexualized labour during socializing activities. However, because the restrictions on women's autonomy in sexual relations are still strong and women's sexuality is highly moralized, their frequent contact with male clients has caused problems for women professionals and thrown doubt upon the morality of women who work in professional occupations that require them to provide emotional, aesthetic and sexual labour services.558

In her research, Eileen Otis explores the relationships between women's employment and morality in China and explains that, before the 1949 revolution, only women from poor households were engaged in paid labor because their presence outside of the home, and thus in contact with unknown men, was seen as a threat to their morality. This changed with socialism, as women started to be expected to work along with men. At the time, women's reputations were protected by strict standards of clothing and attitude diminishing gender distinctions. Women were supposed to dress modestly and to behave as strong and confident individuals. However, Otis asserts that

[...] the party perpetuated the norm that women should be the standard-bearers of sexual morality. In the workplace, women became the focus of concerns about sexual morality, and the regulation of their clothing was a measure to limit sexual enticement. At the height of the state's attempt at "gender erasure", during the Cultural Revolution, female Red Guards were frequently subject to accusations of sexual impropriety.559

With the economic reforms, women's bodies have been re-feminized, re-sexualized and used to sell products and services, but the requirements towards their sexual morality do not seem to have relaxed significantly. Otis observes a strong ambiguity in a service sector that sexualizes its employees in order to sell better but that still attempts to distinguish itself from the sex industry. Women working in the service industry who want to prove their virtue and distance from sex

557. LING 2009, 158.
558. LIU 2008, 97.
559. OTIS 2012, 42-43.

289
workers usually have to display a relative disinterest for wealth accumulation. Limited ambitions in terms of social climbing and material enrichment are thus the proof of female virtue.\footnote{OTIS 2012, 119.} Otis speaks of "virtuous professionalism" to describe how young women hired in services or hospitality perform their work in a feminine and attractive way, while clearly distinguishing themselves from sex workers by dressing and acting conservatively.\footnote{OTIS 2012, 3.} This notion of virtuous professionalism seems to apply to the perceptions observed in workplace novels as well.

Other types of behavior not related to sexuality but still exceeding the strict sphere of profession can also be denounced and potentially punished in workplace novels. For example, while, as we have seen, being aware of the company's rules and of one's rights in that context seems to be acceptable and even encouraged, using these rules for oneself against what is perceived as the company's best interest is generally condemned. Many narratives depict disputes surrounding the benefits to be paid for a laid-off employee - how individuals attempt to make sure that they will receive them, how the company tries to avoid the fees - or the question of maternity leaves - how long is it appropriate to be absent from work, how some people try to get pregnant in order to avoid being laid-off, etc. This type of behavior is generally associated with a lack of dedication and hard work, as well as other questionable attitudes and actions, and is often displayed by older characters close to retirement or by female characters who are already married and have children or are considering the option for the near future. Especially, the depiction of working mothers, though the issue is never addressed explicitly, allows us to think that the decrease of commitment towards the company usually associated with family life and the consequent increase of commitment towards oneself and one's closest relatives is not described nor perceived in a positive light in workplace novels, despite the fact that getting married and starting a family seem to be important goals for most of the heroines. From a broader perspective, all behaviors displaying a lack of adaptation and commitment to the company - sloppy appearance, being late or disordered, pettiness, greed, laziness, narrow-mindedness, speaking English poorly or lacking ambition and aspirations - are generally ill perceived and associated with negative characters in the narratives of our corpus.

At first glance, these different elements might lead us to think that workplace novels advocate strict observance of the corporate world's rules and practices and a deep integration of its values into the intimate being of individuals as a guarantee of positively evaluated behavior, personality and morality. However, many novels also depict the young characters' learning and adaptation as a normalizing process depriving them of their individuality and unicity, contradicting their description as stories of coming of age and identity building. This is notably the case of the heroine of \textit{Run, Mia}, as we can observe in the considerations of the heroine and narrator of the novel:

\begin{itemize}
\item[560.] OTIS 2012, 119.
\item[561.] OTIS 2012, 3.
\end{itemize}
Foreign companies are full of one-way [danxiangdu 单向度] people, they have been standardized by the powerful company culture. They sit in the same cubicles, they think about the same things, they speak in the same way. No matter raises or promotions, these are all pursuits that they don't need to think about anymore, they have been brainwashed and they lost their self-awareness.  

Xiao V also expresses that her individuality is being repressed at work:

I'm an easygoing person, I like originality, but, if you work for a professional company, you don't need any individuality, people with character easily overstep the rules, and this should be avoided. So I often feel like my individuality is being constrained, this is very painful.

She mentions the danger of working "like robots" and the necessity of expressing one's personality outside of the professional realm.

As in the example from Run, Mia quoted above, many novels speak of the trainings that the new employees have to go through when joining the companies as processes of "brainwashing" (xiao 洗脑). In the Du Lala saga, female characters go as far as altering their physical appearance in order to be more successful at work. Du Lala decides to dye her hair darker to look more serious and be more appreciated by her new boss. Moreover, Sha Dangdang surgically alters the shape of her face to look prettier, which she associates with more chances of being professionally successful:

"Beauty can make you happier, it also helps with your professional development, I want to go through with my quest for beauty."

Similarly, Eileen Otis observed that the more the employees feel that they gain benefits and prestige from their employers, the more they are ready to accept the transformations that the workplace tries to impose on them. To insure employees' conformance, managers also "attempt to cultivate personal, trusting, and ultimately paternalistic relationships with their workers". Otis explains that employers often describe their young and inexperienced employees as "white pages" - a metaphor used in a few workplace novels - and that they see themselves as guides in their transition to adulthood and self-realization:

Managers suggest that the hotel [workplace where Otis lead her research and interviews] is a site for workers to discover, articulate, and realize their individuality, an individuality that is ultimately expressed though their service achievements. Workers are thus taught to view creative and proactive customer service as a vehicle for the expression of their selfhood.

We have observed that workplace novels often depict the kind of paternalistic relationships between

562. QIN 2009, 199.
563. XIAO V 2011, 144.
564. LI 2013b, 266.
565. OTIS 2012, 77.
566. OTIS 2012, 83.
superiors and subordinates evoked by Otis in her research. Notably, numerous heroines have older male mentors in the companies they work for. Moreover, in most of the texts, the characters accept transforming their appearance and behavior to conform to the companies' rules only as long as they feel valued and are given opportunities to grow, which seems to fit Otis' description. Otis' observations reveal the existence of a contradiction in the managers' descriptions of the normalizing and brainwashing processes of professional training as a way to display individuality. This contradiction is also present in workplace novels and their advertisement.

Thus, we can observe that, while the novels seem to encourage adherence to a set of moral values congruent with the ones that the foreign companies uphold, which blend "traditional" elements (those regarding women's sexuality, specifically) and "modern" or "professional" elements (respect of rules and laws, civility, and necessity of identification and commitment to one's company, for example) they also evoke the problems that conforming to these values can bring about. In general, the novels do not question the inherent validity of these values, but they warn the readers against the potential loss of individuality that can result from a strict adherence to the companies' precepts, in a context where individuality - as leading to initiative, innovation, and consumption in the economic realm - seems to be highly valued. Workplace novels thus display strong contradictions between a conception of career as allowing identity building and the difficulties that the integration of the companies' norms - indispensable to progress and success - impose on individuation processes.

2.3 Careers as Ultimately Failing to Provide Self-Fulfillment, Success, and Happiness

We have mentioned that the corporate world and the workplace in which most of the characters of our corpus evolve is described as highly competitive. Usually, the competition starts when the characters attempt to join the foreign companies located in major metropolises, as this seems to be perceived as the ideal job for most university graduates, whose number is said to exceed the one of available positions for qualified labor force:

Nowadays it is very difficult to find a job, we wouldn't dare to slack even for a second, because our "golden bowl" can be stolen away at any time.567

And:

"You are right! In the past, only 10% of the population was going to university, now the

567. TAN 2004, 141.
number has reached 80%, colleges and universities are already completely industrialized.\textsuperscript{568} One of these days, it will be enough for examination candidates to be willing to study to be enrolled... Compared to twenty years ago, what it means to be a ‘university student’ has completely changed. A huge group is trying to blend into society every year, and of course finding a job has become very difficult. For university graduates it is still ok, but kids from other schools face worse difficulties.\textsuperscript{569}

Once the young characters are hired, the pressure does not seem to decrease. They have to adapt to a new environment described as more constraining and demanding than what they experienced during their studies. They have to learn how to deal with different types of personalities, with hierarchy and with strictly following instructions. Many novels describe this transition as difficult. Moreover, the young employees usually have to work numerous extra hours, as it is ill perceived for them to leave before their superiors, generally depicted as workaholics. They also have to fulfill, in short periods of time, demanding assignments they usually do not know how to deal with due to their lack of experience, and for which they do not receive much help, either because their superiors are too busy or because they refuse to mentor them because of rivalries or jealousies. Finally, due to the increasing competitiveness of the job market, and of the fast evolution of the economic and business realm as a whole, they constantly face the threat of losing their appeal for their employers and being laid-off and replaced, especially if their results are not satisfactory.

As we have seen, numerous Chinese scholars emphasize the importance of recent changes in the job market and in society as a whole to explain the appearance, proliferation and success of workplace novels. It thus seems important to address these evolutions in order to obtain a better understanding of what is perceived as the social, economic, and cultural background of the category, what these works mean in the realities and everyday lives of readers, and why they are appealing to a certain social group. Our aim here is to propose a contextual explanation to the representations of work (perceived as a career rather than as a fixed and life-long position), individualization, pursuit of wealth and personal fulfillment, as offered in workplace novels.

As the works of our corpus focus on the professional evolution - or career - of the main characters, we want to emphasize the difference between the concept of "job" - as a relatively static and stable position where the purpose is to make a living - and the one of "career" - as a personal evolution aiming at bettering one's material conditions and sense of self-fulfillment.\textsuperscript{570} Until the 1990s, most employments were assigned by the state and guaranteed to last a lifetime, drastically limiting

\textsuperscript{568} This number is importantly exaggerated as, according to the China Statistical Yearbook 2011, year of publication of the volume containing this quote, only 8.93% of the country's population attained a junior college or above level of education. http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2011/indexeh.htm (last consulted on July 16th, 2018).
\textsuperscript{569} LI 2011, 194.
\textsuperscript{570} See, for example LIU 2007, or LIU 2013.
professional mobility and individual wishes for professional evolution out of the political realm. Amy Hanser's research is particularly valuable to apprehend how the reform era witnessed a gradual shift from the concept of "job" to the one of "career". Hanser's study describes how the disappearance of life-long employment, the ever-growing competitiveness of the job market, and the employers' requirements for new qualifications and talents have altered the experience of young people in search of their first employment in the post-Mao period. 

Apparently, already in the late 1970s, the government started to motivate young adults to look for jobs by themselves instead of relying entirely on the official assignment system, because of the high rate of youth unemployment in the cities. During the 1980s and 1990s, the requirements of the market economy led to a relaxation of state control over employment and, by the end of the 1990s, the official system merely represented a backup plan, even for college graduates who preferred to look for employment through newspapers' adds, job fairs, personal connections, etc. Moreover, all life-long employment disappeared in the mid-1990s, and job competition - which already existed in the state controlled job assignment system prevalent before the 1990s - shifted away from political criteria "[...] to an increasingly profit-seeking framework in which success or failure is built on autonomous choices and individual ability, initiative, and effort." Thus, according to Hanser, it is at that time that young people started to view employment as a realm for autonomy and self-development, but in which it also became possible to fail or to be left behind.

Through a series of interviews, Hanser demonstrates how the growing intensity of employment competitiveness has forced young people to adapt to new realities. If many of her interviewees seem to perceive competition as natural, fair, and necessary for economic growth, they nonetheless feel an increased pressure and sense of responsibility for their success or failure, especially since:

Job seeking and work became important routes for defining and fulfilling oneself.

Apparently, in the 1990s, when the interviews were conducted, it had become important to find a job suiting one's abilities and personality, and allowing the realization of one's full potential:

Some of my interviewees said that an important factor in making good choices is knowing what kind of person you are. They felt their job choices were limited in part by their personalities. [...] Self-help books designed to assist young people in finding the "right" job also stressed that one should begin with one's strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes. One such text includes an extensive section on personality, complete with various personality tests by which a job seeker might come to understand him- or herself more clearly and make better employment decisions; failure, it implied, is a consequence of bad

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572. HANSER 2002, 190.
Hanser asserts that young people gradually gave up the ideal of job stability and started to focus, rather, on autonomy, mobility, self-development and fulfillment. She has observed that it had become acceptable, and even preferable, to switch jobs frequently in order to develop one's careers, and that job stability had come to be perceived as hindering people's path to full potential realization.\textsuperscript{575}

Hanser also mentions that the people who felt at a disadvantage on the job market - those with a relatively low education level, for example - were experiencing discomfort and lack of confidence in their ability to compete and succeed, which is what we can observe in the case of Li Bingbing in the eponymous novel, for example. Moreover, for college graduates, the realities of the workplace often fell short of their expectations. Thus, the market economy and its influence on employment seem to have pushed young people to see themselves as autonomous and responsible individuals in charge of their destiny and success but, at the same time, many Chinese young adults might feel limited in their autonomy by their lack of education, social connections and so on. Apparently, the system is rarely challenged because:

\begin{quote}
The faith that many young people had in what they saw as a new meritocracy led them to accept responsibility for their own success or failure in finding work and pursuing a career.\textsuperscript{576}
\end{quote}

As we have seen, the concept of meritocracy and the "democratic" nature of upward mobility through education and professional achievements is omnipresent in workplace novels - as the characters always succeed through individual zeal and efforts - and is also used in the books' advertisement, as a promise of success for anyone who reads them and works hard enough. However, we have also mentioned that most of the characters do not see their original aspirations fulfilled by the end of the narratives.

In most of the novels of our corpus, we can observe that the workplace is depicted as ruthless and unforgiving. Most characters seem to be under constant pressure to keep learning and improving themselves in every way possible, in order to keep up with the requirements of the companies and the evolution of the market, as well as to avoid being laid-off, as illustrated in this quote from \textit{Run, Mia}:

\begin{quote}
[...] The rule here is up or out, [...].\textsuperscript{577}
\end{quote}

In numerous novels, this pressure is described as altering the health of the characters who

\textsuperscript{574} HANSER 2002, 197.  
\textsuperscript{575} HANSER 2002, 195.  
\textsuperscript{576} HANSER 2002, 202.  
\textsuperscript{577} QIN 2009, 28.
experience important changes in their weight, develop insomnia or anxiety symptoms, and who lose contact with most of their friends and family members due to the lack of time they can spend on leisure and personal affairs. This is what Xiao V observes in her professional surroundings:

I often hear colleagues crying in the bathroom, I know that it is because they are under too much pressure.578

For the heroines, who usually live on their own far away from their hometowns, friends and families, the fear of losing one's job or not performing well enough is extremely strong because employment is perceived as the main, and sometimes only, source of stability and security in their lives. However, as workplace newbies, their position in the company is precarious, and, as ordinary individuals trying to reach a better life, their social and economic status is precarious as well, especially since the Chinese state fails to provide consistent and reliable support for the unemployed and other temporarily or permanently unproductive social groups. Seeing that the characters can rely only on their jobs to survive, they are forced to dedicate all their time and energy to it. As working becomes the main, and, sometimes, only activity of their lives, and the principal measure of their self-worth, losing one's job or being poorly evaluated holds important psychological implications, far exceeding the realm of economic stability and security, as we can observe in the third volume of the Du Lala saga:

At that moment, Lala, who had never been fired, felt so fragile that neither Wang Wei nor her home could calm her anxiety. The fear of losing face in front of her family and friends was making this fragility look even more threatening.579

In his 2012 research The End of the Chinese Dream: Why Chinese People Fear the Future, Gerard Lemos addresses the sense of insecurity, instability and precariousness felt by an important part of the Chinese population.580 According to Lemos, the economic reforms brought about new inequalities and anxieties linked to the disintegration of social and family life:

Prosperity, security and stability was the Chinese dream in the 1980s. Although political reform was indefinitely abandoned after the 1989 Tiananmen protests, since 2002 President Hu Jintao's policies, the "harmonious society" and the "scientific path to development" have been meant to ameliorate the insecurities that followed the seismic economic and social transformation.581

Apparently, few people actually benefit from the reform, leaving the majority fearing for their jobs and without social security, despite the fact that the material betterment of people's lives has become

578. XIAO V 2011, 24.
581. LEMOS 2012, 1.
the main source of legitimacy for the Party since 1989. Through an experience lead in Chongqing where "Wish Trees" were placed in different areas of the city and people were invited to share their hopes and aspirations by writing them down on the trees' leaves, the author discovered that most people fear for their basic livelihood and only wish to keep or find a job and to not get sick, as they generally lack the means to afford health care:

Many people welcomed the economic reforms after 1978. New opportunities had opened up and the evidence of prosperity for some could be seen all around in the city. A Chinese dream had emerged of security, prosperity and stability and this optimistic prospectus was reflected in the responses of the Wish Tree. A tidal wave of entrepreneurship had gathered pace since the planned economy was largely replaced by a much more free market. However, not everyone could be an entrepreneur and some who tried their hand at business would fail. Many had come to feel they were in a poor position to exploit the new opportunities. Alongside the opportunities the changes had created a wrenching discontinuity which bred disquiet in itself. It wasn't just that many, perhaps most, people watched China's much talked about economic growth passively from the sidelines without any beneficial prospects for themselves.582

The experience thus reveals that many people wish and hope for a better life but are also anxious about their ability to seize the right opportunities to actually improve their condition.

As we have mentioned, the characters of workplace novels generally seem to rely solely on their jobs to gain a sense of purpose and success in life, to explore their identities, socialize, develop, grow up and realize themselves. Moreover, it is also their only source of economic security and stability. In that sense, we can infer that their expectations towards the companies that hire them are high: as they give all their time and energy to transform themselves into the individuals the companies need and want, and as they subsume their own benefits and well-being to the gain and growth of the firms, they should be rewarded in a way that matches their efforts. However, as many novels express, the corporate world generally fails to meet the characters' expectations in terms of recognition, valorization and even material rewards. The companies are usually depicted as treating their employees as disposable and interchangeable commodities to be used until they break, and which are then tossed away and immediately replaced. In consequence, most characters feel insignificant and helpless at work, which clashes with the quest of identity inherent to their young age and the junction they reach in life - the beginning of their careers - and with their expectations towards work in terms of identity building. The focus of the volumes constituting our corpus on the professional life of the characters probably presents an exaggerated version of the importance of career in people's identity and self-evaluation. However, we consider that, in contemporary China, as probably in other developing economies, social and economic status are highly relevant in

582. LEMOS 2012, 80-81.
individuals' perception of their identity and worth. In this context, work, as the most legitimate and unquestionable way to gain status, will necessarily be given great importance in the process of identity building and social climbing.

We have also seen that the novels' characters deeply integrate the company's culture into their personal identities. However, despite the reputation of foreign companies as providing good work conditions, good salaries and as respecting the employees' rights, opinions and individualities, in general, they ultimately discover that the corporate world is devoid of kindheartedness and understanding for individual characteristics considered as flaws or weaknesses, and that it fails to validate their identities - even though they are molded according to the companies requirements - as well as their efforts, as expressed by the Du Lala saga's narrator in the second volume:

No matter their code of conduct or core culture, you will discover that transnational companies always proudly proclaim that their mission is for their product to have a deep meaning in people's life, that they worship honesty, protect the shareholders' interests, and even guarantee that every partner will receive an equal share of the benefits. But you will never hear about "kindheartedness". 583

More often than not, the employees do not seem to consider that the promotions and salaries they receive match what they give to the companies. As the characters use their employers and the rewards they provide - or do not provide - in order to evaluate their identity, their coming of age, their self-worth and their success, we can infer that the fact that the companies usually fail to meet their expectations leaves them with a feeling of void and disappointment. This situation is reinforced by the fact that young people often seem to rely on the foreign corporate world to judge others and their environment: the company becomes the moral compass they use to determine who is worthy, civilized, moral, of high quality, etc. The fact that the structures that employ them usually fail to display the values they are supposed to uphold thus also leaves them without a clear sense of values. Xiao V's novel illustrates the extent of the damage the working culture of big companies can exert on individuals:

One evening, we worked until eleven, as usual, then everyone went home. Rose had left her computer at a client's office to avoid carrying it with her the next day. But the morning after, she didn't come to work. No one knew where she went, we couldn't reach her on her cell phone either. We didn't really feel like looking for her and we did not worry. But the manager was very stressed, because no one was doing her work. Later, he called the HR department, asking them to contact her family. It took a while for the news to spread, but I finally learned that, on that morning, she had jumped out of her window. 584

In the Du Lala saga, a character gives birth to a dangerously premature child because of work

583.  LI 2013b, 11.
584.  XIAO V 2011, 69.
pressure and, in Run, Mia, Helen's death is associated with her obsession for work, which pushed her to neglect curing her cancer properly.
Chapter 3 - Reasons and Implications of Idealizing an Imperfect World

The present research considers that literary production is to be understood as part of a wider social and cultural context, and that mutual influences can be observed between these two realms, to some extent at least. This is all the more true for novels like the ones apprehended here which, as part of popular culture and intimately linked to online culture, are usually seen as closer to people's everyday life and concerns than "serious" or "elite" literature.\(^{585}\) Moreover, we have mentioned that the works included in the zhichang category are generally advertised as realistic and reliable, thus asserting their proximity to readers' experience. As we have seen, many elements appearing in workplace novels seem to be congruent with the observations of researchers interested in contemporary Chinese society and professional life, thus encouraging us to consider them as partially reliable representations of the realities experienced by a specific group, namely, the urban white collars.

We have mentioned that workplace novels are generally advertised and described - in the paratext and in some academic studies - as realistic depictions of the contemporary workplace, explaining their usefulness for readers. In the present research, we have observed similarities between recurrent representations of workplace-related issues in the novels - notably regarding women's situation in their professional environments - and sociological studies conducted in the Chinese corporate world. These observations support, to some extent at least, the assertions of the novels' authenticity. A detailed comparison of the actual corporate world and its representation in the narratives of our corpus would necessitate an extensive analysis exceeding the scope of the present research. However, we would like to offer some basic observations casting doubt on the realism and relatable nature of workplace novels.

First of all, while coming of age workplace novels' heroines are generally described as ordinary, according to the China Statistical Yearbook 2016 (Zhongguo tongji nianjian 中国统计年鉴), compiled by the National Bureau of Statistics of China (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guojia tongji ju 中华人民共和国国家统计局), in 2015, only 3.57% of the urban employed population was working for a foreign-owned company, as most of the heroines of our corpus do.\(^{586}\) It thus seems that the professional paths described by the novels are not as relatable and easily duplicable as they are advertised to be. This is probably linked to the fact that workplace novels aim to be inspirational at least as much as they aim to be relatable: they describe the type of career perceived as most desirable among the target readership. According to a research on the development of the private sector in the Chinese corporate world, working for a foreign-owned company is the preferred choice

of university graduates, especially in big cities. In the narratives of our corpus, foreign-owned companies are often positively compared to Chinese companies, both state-owned and private, as well as to enterprises from other Asian countries (Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, etc.). In the novels, the desirability of foreign-owned company is explained by their reputation of providing higher wages, the opportunity to interact with "people of high quality", good work conditions, numerous opportunities to grow, and fairness in the attribution of promotions (because office politics and personal connections are supposed to play a lesser role than in Chinese firms). The preference of actual college graduates for foreign-owned companies allows us to think that these representations of, and expectations toward Western firms are realistic.

However, different studies have showed that these representations do not necessarily match reality. First, while Chinese private firms - especially small ones - are generally unable - or unwilling - to match the benefits and salaries offered by foreign firms, according to the China Statistical Yearbook 2017, in 2016, people in urban areas working for state-owned units in the tertiary industry were the ones receiving the highest average wage. Regarding the "quality" of employees, it is apparently true that workers have, on average, a lower educational level in Chinese private firms than in foreign firms, which is mentioned as a reason for the lack of prestige of the former among college graduates:

In addition, they [Chinese private firms] also tend to have few college graduates, reducing the incentive for new graduates to join because of the limited opportunity to interact with people of the same background.

We did not find information about Chinese state-owned companies on that matter.

Regarding work conditions, studies have showed that foreign-owned companies give more importance to humanistic goals (employees' growth and welfare, in contrast with economic goals, concerned with financial profit) than their Chinese counterparts, public and private. This seems to indicate that foreign-owned companies are indeed more likely to offer comfortable work conditions. However, as far as growth opportunities and fairness are concerned, the results are less clearly in favor of foreign-owned companies:

We found that Chinese domestic companies (including public-owned and private-owned) were behind foreign-invested on HR autonomies over managerial and employee recruiting,

588. GARNAUT, SONG, YAO & WANG 2012, 104.
590. GARNAUT, SONG, YAO & WANG 2012, 104.
but not on other high-performance HR practices. While public-owned enterprises were behind in training as well, similar percentages of workers were trained in private-owned domestic and foreign-invested enterprises. The different types of companies did not show significant differences in selection pools, performance contingent pay, internal promotion and internal recruiting practices. This empirical evidence demonstrates that differences between organizational types, classified by type of ownership, are rapidly disappearing in China. Chinese domestic companies are learning fast from their foreign-invested counterparts.592

These different elements seem to indicate that foreign-owned companies do not necessarily outperform local companies as significantly as it is described in workplace novels, where Chinese and other Asian firms are usually described as inefficient, employing incompetent and "low quality" staff, and providing unsatisfying salaries and work conditions.

Most workplace novels also imply that Western companies encourage open communication among employees of all ranks, because they do not give as much importance to hierarchical differences and respect of superiors as what is observed in Asian companies. This characteristic is generally perceived positively. In studies on the actual corporate world, Chinese companies are usually said to put a greater emphasis on hierarchy and internal harmony than their Western counterparts, which is attributed to Confucianism.593 In different studies, "Confucian authority chains" are said to hinder communication, collaboration, and innovation in Asian firms, which is detrimental to employees' well-being as well as efficiency.594 This supports the idea that workplace novels' representations on that matter are realistic, to some extent at least. However, researchers have apparently observed that, in Asian firms, Confucian authority practices are often counterbalanced by guanxi, which facilitate constant and two-directional communication:

A new activity can be developed allowing authority and guanxi to interact in a complementary manner in which the vertical communication lines of Confucian authority, with its emphasis on respect, loyalty, and listening to those higher in the hierarchy, and the horizontally strong communication channels of guanxi, emphasizing mutual respect, reciprocity, and long-term trust, are integrated. The new model allows two-way communication in both vertical and horizontal dimensions, making the authority principle consider also the personal and relation-centered objects and the guanxi approach consider the production-oriented objects.595

592. WANG, BRUNING & PENG 2007, 697.
This type of observations cast doubt on the definite superiority of "Western" patterns of interaction and communication in the corporate world. Moreover, Confucianism is also sometimes mentioned as a possible remedy for ethical problems frequently encountered in business, because it stresses the importance of morality in that realm. 596

In workplace novels, the patterns of communication associated with Western business practices seem to be positively evaluated by the characters. Nonetheless, when first hired in the companies, the heroines do not seem particularly familiar and comfortable with these practices and thus have to get use to them and learn how to master them. As we have mentioned, in the narratives of our corpus, the main characters seem to remain relatively impervious to Western mindset and behavior, and greatly appreciate the hierarchical and paternalistic relationships linking them to some of their male superiors. These relationships, somewhat similar to master-disciple bonds, seem closer to Confucian than Western ideals. Moreover, these male superiors generally conform to the Confucian image of the kind-hearted and benevolent superior who teaches through the example of his own morality and behavior, even when he is Western. Thus, we can observe that, while Western models are idealized in their theoretical and abstract form, the heroines seem more comfortable in relationship patterns associated with Confucianism. The later, disparaged in theory, are valorized in practice and represented positively in the novels.

The above considerations are not sufficient to evaluate workplace novels' realism in a definite manner. This would necessitate extensive research on the different types of corporate organizations operating in China and on their evaluation by the employees. However, we can observe that, in the narratives of our corpus - and probably in the minds of part of the contemporary Chinese youth as well - foreign-owned companies are the most idealized and desired type of workplace. This might be explained, at least in part, by the fact that they are relatively new and personally experienced by only a small part of the population. This idealized vision of Western firm and of their superiority compared to local ones does not always match the results of academic studies on the contemporary Chinese corporate world. In general, the foreign-owned company fantasy is also contradicted by the experiences of the heroines of our corpus, allowing us to think that the main characters' struggle and disillusionment might be realistic.

In the following sections, we will observe that most workplace novels' descriptions of what individuals should be, and of what they should aim for in terms of self-betterment and success, are congruent with widespread official discourses on the necessity of raising the quality of the population in order to build a harmonious society and a strong Chinese nation. This characteristic allows us to think that these discourses exert an influence on the authors' psyche or, at least, on the

way they express their views. We can infer that it is in the best interest of workplace novels' writers - as producers of entertainment culture - to conform to the government's leitmotif - in other words, to the official rhetoric of a given time - in order to see their books published and promoted, to gain a wide readership and to make money. Congruence with official discourses is thus to be expected in novels sold for profit, like workplace novels, and illustrates how the government can exert a more discreet and pervasive influence than direct censorship over a literary production that we consider to be mostly apolitical. As we have seen, this conformance does not prevent the display of social issues and questioning in the novels, but it probably explains, at least to some extent, why they are mostly advertised as success stories and as didactic works of fiction offering models to be imitated by readers dreaming of social climbing and wealth accumulation.

On the other hand, we consider that fiction, as other types of widely read and consumed cultural products like magazines, TV shows, movies and so on, exert an influence on society, especially when they are the vehicles of stereotypical information. Indeed, the repetition of similar patterns of representation in different media and different narratives probably exert an influence on how people perceive a certain type of behavior or experience, if these patterns manage to reach a wide enough audience to become an important part of the cultural landscape in a given time and place. We have seen that, despite their singularities, most workplace novels stage similar characters who hold similar goals and work towards these goals in similar ways, encountering similar difficulties. We can thus assume that the representations of workplace and career to be found in the novels of our corpus might have become archetypes in people's imagination of what the life and work of urban white collars might be or should be. In that sense, by conforming to official discourses and expressing them in an archetypal way, workplace novels can be seen as reinforcing their power and their integration in the social and cultural fabric of contemporary China. We do not assert that all the novels selected in our corpus exerted an influence on current Chinese society. However, we consider that the most popular among them - especially the Du Lala saga - might have become famous enough and omnipresent enough - through the existence of the story on different media - to be perceived as influential on the way people represent the workplace in other novels, for example, or how they picture it in their imagination.

3.1 Raising the Population's Quality: Personal Development as Mean of National Development

As we have seen, novels of the zhichang category do not only describe the workplace and provide tricks to help young urbanites succeed. Rather, they also propose tales of young women's

development and coming of age and describe their attempts to build their individual identities. The requirements of the category imply that this quest for identity is mainly undertaken through work, perceived as the central locus for independence-building and transitioning to adulthood. The novels describe how the foreign company universe, characterized by its efficiency, professionalism, respect for law and regulations, civility, elegance and cosmopolitanism, motivates the heroines to conform to its standards and thus to build their adult identities around its values. According to these narratives, entering and thriving in the corporate world allows the heroines to reach economic independence from their families, to maintain an above-average lifestyle in terms of comfort and consumption, but also to become "high quality" individuals and women.

We can observe that the qualities that the characters of our corpus are supposed to acquire to succeed at work conform to the ones mentioned when discussing the raising of the population's quality and the building of a harmonious society - concepts which are contemporary to workplace novels' popularity peak. For the positive characters of workplace novels, some of these qualities are already actualized, illustrating how urban white collars represent good candidates for self-betterment and quality improvement, while others still have to be further developed. In general, discourses about raising the quality of the Chinese population mention the necessity of good education, a requirement that most of the characters of our corpus meet. Then, concepts of hygiene and civility, understood mainly as respect of others, as well as of rules and laws, are also emphasized as crucial for the building of a harmonious society. Most of the characters of our corpus seem to already be relatively "civilized" at the beginning of the narratives - otherwise they would not manage to be hired in foreign companies - but can still improve in terms of professionalism, maturity and rationality, as well as their care for appearance and knowledge about consumer goods, especially the luxurious ones coming from abroad, which are all associated with the concept of civility.

According to Andrew Kipnis, the pursuit of quality explains why many people in contemporary China study, exercise, and are engaged in an overall quest for self-betterment. 598 Apparently, the term "quality" took its contemporary use from two propaganda campaigns from the 1980s: firstly, the family planning campaign, which was referring to the "population quality" (renkou suzhi), and which asserted that controlling the number of births would ensure its elevation; and secondly, the education reform campaign calling for an "education for quality" (suzhi jiaoyu). Kipnis explains that the concept of suzhi is linked to different perceptions of self-cultivation in ancient and recent Chinese intellectual history:

As Judd argues, Confucian and Marxist traditions of cultivation inform contemporary suzhi discourse. The holistic form of development implied in the word suzhi - simultaneously

physical, intellectual and moral - finds its intellectual roots in these two traditions. Confucian modes of cultivation included physical, musical, ritual, intellectual and moral training. Throughout the imperial period the study of Confucian classics was imagined as ensuring the intellectual, moral and social development of the individual. The examination system further linked Confucian cultivation to worldly power. The Marxian tradition, especially in China, likewise emphasized the all-around development of individuals. The early 1980s birth control advocates repeatedly quote Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao as arguing that only socialism brings about the development of well-rounded individuals and that it was the duty of a socialist government to produce well-rounded individuals. Mao is often quoted as declaring that socialism should "make those who receive an education develop morally, intellectually and physically and become cultured workers with a high degree of socialist consciousness."

Kipnis associates the emergence of the suzhi term with the return of competitiveness in education and employment and the fear of being left behind. In an article by Yan Hairong, suzhi is further defined as a set of qualities like civility, self-discipline and modernity. Yan argues that the term "marks a sense and sensibility of the self's value in the market economy". The concept entails that all humans have a latent potential that can be optimized and exploited, and that accumulating quality leads to self-development and to class mobility. We can observe, in public discourses, that the meaning of the term suzhi shifted from designating innate to acquired qualities. However, in some cases, the concept is used ambiguously and, as we will see, some social groups which already benefit from a relatively high quality are presented as the most likely - or the only ones - to be able to improve.

According to official discourses, people of high quality are indispensable to national development, as high quality people are supposed to understand, foster, and take part in the nation building process. According to Luigi Tomba, the Chinese quest for economic development and international influence is strongly correlated, in public discourses, to the quality of the population. In this "civilizing" project, the urban and educated middle class plays an important role as "the object, inspiration, and exemplary yardstick for contemporary governmental discourses of self-improvement." Indeed, the members of the middle class are seen as the models and examples of what a modern and responsible citizen should be. Tomba describes them as politically docile, active consumers, and as fostering social stability and ethics. Apparently, this representation of the middle

601. YAN 2003, 506.
603. TOMBA 2009, 592.
class is intimately linked to the concept of harmonious society, because high quality individuals are virtuous, responsible, keen to improve themselves, respect order and avoid conflicts without government intervention:

Also, the "self-discipline" and apparent acquiescence of this group to the existing regime in urban China appears to be a consequence of the group's long-term involvement in the developmental strategies of the state, as members first of a privileged urban workforce and then of an upwardly mobile educated elite.604

The main characteristic of the middle class in terms of quality improvement is that, in contrast to other groups, its members are said to work on their self-betterment by themselves. Members of the middle class are expected to be models of civilized behavior and virtue and are thus seen as the motor of the elevation of the Chinese population's quality and of the national development. Tomba also emphasizes that, in official discourses, the concept of quality is strongly linked to the respect of the country's rules and laws, and thus to adherence to the Party's principles and to its nation building project, giving it an important patriotic undertone.605

Sociologist Jean-Louis Rocca has studied in detail the relationship between the party's civilizing project and the middle class. His research opens with the mention of a discourse pronounced by Jiang Zemin in 2002, which asserted that entrepreneurs, as well as private and foreign companies' employees, were the builders of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and that they should be protected and supported in order to strengthen the nation. Rocca describes how an imagined and idealized middle class came to be presented as the only social group able to boost economic growth through domestic consumption, as well as to ensure harmonious relationships between the government and the population. Apparently, discourses on the middle class appeared in the 1990s with the deepening of the reforms, the economic growth, the bettering of the population's quality of life, and the emergence of a consumption society and of new social representations questioning the former social stratification. Rocca explains that this period witnessed an important augmentation of productivity and of income, but also of inequalities and competition:

Making money, consuming, fighting to climb the social ladder, taking care of oneself as a valorizing commodity were understood to be positive attributes.606

These changes allowed the rise of a group of middle level income urbanites and, more importantly, of academic and political discourses on the growth of the middle class as a necessary result of modernization. This theoretical middle class was described as conforming to new moral values and new behavioral standards, as facilitating modernization, and as the perfect citizens and consumers -

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604. TOMBA 2009, 596.
605. TOMBA 2009, 602.
606. ROCCA 2017, 5.
open, educated, honest, and politically moderate. The emerging middle class came to be described as the model everyone should conform to in order to contribute to the country's development:

More importantly, they are at the core of the "civilizing process" which has overwhelmed Chinese society. Most Chinese people are convinced that their fellow citizens are backward in terms of manners. Being modern means to change the way people speak, eat, walk and behave in the public sphere in order to catch up with the civilized countries. This conversion cannot be driven by either the lower classes — migrants and farmers — who lack good manners, or by the newly rich who have... newly rich tastes. Only the middle class, or more precisely the growth of the middle class, can civilize China. The middle class is associated with "culture" (wenhua), "civilization" (wenming), "quality" (suzhi).”

Rocca emphasizes the importance of the relaunching of the economic reforms in the beginning of the 1990s to explain the emergence of an urban middle income group. After the Tiananmen protests, and throughout the 1990s, a new "contract" was established between society and the party, where the government had to maintain its legitimacy by bettering people's lives and by providing new opportunities and hopes. The deepening of the reforms also gave rise to new social representations where wealth accumulation and consumption became the most desirable life goals. Moreover, the economic reforms created a need for educated and talented workers, because the new private and foreign companies as well as the public sector needed new types of skills. In the popular conception, holding a college degree became essential to obtain a middle income job, motivating more and more urban young adults to enroll in universities. Holding a university degree, obtaining an intellectual job and making money became the most determinant elements of social stratification, and the aspiration shared by the majority of people. Professionals such as lawyers, doctors, or entrepreneurs reached the top of the employment hierarchy, while the manual workers were relegated to the bottom. This led to a growth of investments in education and to an augmentation of the number of people accepted by universities:

By applying this policy, the government aimed to meet the scheduled needs of the labor market for highly qualified manpower and to open up opportunities for upward social mobility for urban dwellers.

In the middle of the 1990s, the government suppressed control over the salaries in order to promote productivity, mobility and equilibrium between supply and demand on the job market. From then on, salaries were determined by the job market rather than by the state, and income disparities grew. The job market also became increasingly competitive, and education was seen as a primary asset for success and a guarantee of social standing.

607. ROCCA 2017, 6.
According to Rocca, with the growth of social inequalities, the theories on the middle class were a guarantee of social stability and of society's auto-control. Indeed, by describing the middle class characterized by its desirable lifestyle and civilized behavior - in an idealized manner and by asserting that it was the result of China's modernization, the state was disseminating the idea that people should conform to the standards of manner and civility of this imagined social group to be able to join it. According to official discourses, upward mobility - allowing one to join the middle class - was possible for those who conformed to these standards and worked hard enough. Moreover, it was encouraged because members of the middle class, supposedly respectful of laws and order, were often described as promoting modernization and social stability:

Economic development and social stability presume the emergence of a well-educated, modern, white-collar class of people. China does not need people who are only able to make money (shopkeepers, small businessmen, etc.) but people who have the ability to behave as conscious citizens. Two kinds of people seem to fit that profile perfectly: first, technicians and managers working in foreign and private enterprises, and more specifically in transnational companies; and second, "intellectuals," people with a very high level of education, that is the so-called talented people (rencai).

Thus, the new middle class was created by the valorization of intellectual work over manual labor.

With time, the criteria defining the belonging to the middle class became more numerous and demanding. A middle level income is not enough to qualify as middle class anymore, one should also conform to standards of education, civility and manners, embrace modernity and economic development, and consume abundantly but rationally. As education level and types of employments came to be considered as intimately correlated, people's occupation also became an important factor in one's inclusion to, or exclusion from the middle class:

Well educated, skillful, holding high-level positions in administration and business, likely to progress professionally and to take initiatives, the middle class members are able to adapt themselves to new situations. They have a direct impact on social and economic productivity, which will result in an overall improvement of the population in terms of education, skills, initiatives and satisfaction. Middle class people have a modern and positive lifestyle. They have very strict moral values and a clear set of standardized behaviors. They are polite and have civilized manners (wenming). They have resources (ziyuan) and capacities (nengli).

Moreover, the middle class came to be described as having obtained its status solely through education and hard work, proving that it is possible to acquire wealth and status in an honest way,

610. ROCCA 2017, 77.
611. ROCCA 2017, 89.
and thus that money and moral values are not necessarily incompatible.612

In the official rhetoric, the orderly behavior of the middle class is described as "rational".613 Moreover, each individual's effort towards high quality and civilized behavior is described as participating in the creation of the harmonious society. The creation of a harmonious society has been popularized by Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao around 2004. The concept's underlying idea was

[...] to maintain high rates of economic growth but to do so by balancing growth with equity, in this way improving the standards of living for a larger proportion of China 's population and, ultimately, keeping the CCP in power.614

Thus, the CCP seems to consider that, by improving people's quality of life, it will obtain their support and prevent demands for political reforms and social unrest:

The CCP 's current commitment to rapid economic growth and a harmonious society has produced remarkably high levels of popular support and, as a consequence, has reduced pressure for political change.615

According to William Callahan, the concept of harmonious society is a detailed set of policies promising to solve social and economic issues of contemporary China, notably the growing inequalities.616 The definition of the term remains blurred but seems to be based on the notion of socialism with Chinese characteristics, which emphasizes that harmony is the traditional ideal of the Chinese civilization:

The socialist harmonious society we want to build should be a society featuring democracy, the rule of law, fairness, justice, sincerity, trustworthiness, amity, full vitality, stability, orderliness, and harmony between mankind and nature.617

According to Zhao Suisheng, the concept of harmonious society is based on a rhetoric describing China and its population as a "genetically" peace loving nation that pursues concord and harmony above all.618 In this rhetoric, the benevolent China is opposed to the belligerent and brutal West. Many recent theories interpreting the Chinese imperial past assert that China insured the adherence of neighboring countries to its vision of order and hierarchy by offering a model of good and efficient governance and virtuous behavior.619 This explains why, following the harmonious society

612. ROCCA 2017, 90.
613. TOMBA 2009, 604.
615. CHENG 2010, 302.
616. CALLAHAN 2013, 50.
619. ZHAO 2015, 965-966.
concept, the CCP under the leadership of Hu Jintao also promulgated the concept of harmonious world (hexie shijie 和谐世界), according to which a stronger Chinese influence in the international order would lead to the establishment of peace and collaboration between nations. \(^\text{620}\) However, the accuracy of these interpretations of China's past is questionable.

Malcolm Warner and Zhu Ying explain that, nowadays, Western forms of human resources management are also described as contributing to building a harmonious society:

Pari passu with the above there was a State Council initiative to introduce "corporate culture" (qiye wenhua) in large Chinese state-managed corporations. In a recent study, Hawes has shown how these were urged to take on board such foreign concepts in order to improve their performance and to keep the firms in line with government policy priorities. Such developments are said to directly link into the drive for a more "harmonious society". [...] In more recent years, the government's emphasis on reducing workplace conflict by addressing the importance of respecting workers' rights and improving working conditions has been as one of the approaches towards "social harmony" under the current leadership. This new shift towards more "pro-labour" policies may have an influence on how Chinese enterprises implement their human resources policies. \(^\text{621}\)

Notably, the Labor Contract Law, frequently mentioned in workplace novels, is described as potentially leading towards harmonious society.

In the novels, like the harmonious society, foreign companies are said to provide individuals with fair rules and regulations that protect them as well as benefiting the community as a whole, recalling the concept of rule of law. In comparison with other types of companies, they are also supposed to allow the expression of personal opinions, to value open communication and healthy debates, as well as to give equal opportunities for advancement and development to anyone who works hard enough, thus evoking an ideal democratic society. Finally, foreign companies are also said to provide their employees with comfortable and beautiful offices (working in one is sufficient to give them a sense of prestige and face), higher salaries than in most other companies, and different material benefits (traveling, accompanying clients to golf courses or expensive restaurants, enjoying the services of the company drivers, etc.), which are unavailable for most of the population. This last element reminds us of the patriotic pride linked to the building of a strong and prosperous nation at the core of the concept of harmonious society. In exchange for the enjoyment of these different benefits, the employees - or the citizens - commit to becoming self-sufficient and productive members of the company - or of the nation - and to work for its benefit, as explained by one of Du Lala's superiors:

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620. CALLAHAN 2013, 51.
"We cannot only think about what is convenient for ourselves, management implies control, it is not possible to satisfy everyone. In the end, this is work, democracy is important, but discipline is even more important, otherwise wouldn't it be messy? [...]"

Moreover, they should also work ceaselessly to better themselves and increase their quality according to the companies' values, enhancing the necessity for the employees to be professional, hard-working, honest, respectful of rules and hierarchy, civil, open-minded, clean, elegant and cosmopolitan, to mention only the most striking and obvious qualities necessary to be a successful white collar according to workplace novels.

Thus, we can observe that, according to workplace novels (to their main narrative lines, at least), finding a white-collar job and understanding one's professional life as a career (meaning, as a developmental path towards self-betterment and ever higher achievements and rewards) is represented as the way to become a functional, independent adult, healthily integrated in society, enjoying a supposedly happy, consumerist lifestyle, and contributing to national growth and development. We consider that the prestige associated with the white-collar status, linked to the economic situation of this group, its perceived knowledge and abilities, and the trend-setting glamour of its lifestyle, represent the reward and the justification for hard work, efforts for self-betterment and for conforming to the companies' standards of appearance and behavior in workplace novels. The fact that foreign companies are presented as the best option to acquire the qualities necessary to be a "good Chinese citizen", namely, someone who participate in economic growth, consumption, and maintenance of peaceful relationships between society and the state, seems contradictory. However, we should keep in mind that skills and behavior patterns that white collars are encouraged to learn from the West, through their inclusion in foreign companies, concern their work, their ways of consuming, and their appearance, rather than their moral values or political beliefs.

Raising the quality of the population and building a harmonious society are generally part of a patriotic rhetoric, and we have observed the presence of such discourses in workplace novels as well. We have mentioned that most workplace novels seem to shed a positive light on the foreign nature of corporate culture. As we have seen, Western companies are associated with professionalism and good work conditions. Moreover, the West and people working in close relation to it are surrounded by a positive aura and associated to a luxurious and desirable lifestyle. In general, the highest ranked employees are Westerners who perfectly embody the values of the company: they are described as professional, good-looking, always perfectly groomed and dressed, polite and friendly to everyone, worldly and cultured. They are often said to resemble movie stars or famous politicians. These elements, as well as the wide-spread use of English in the companies

622. LI 2013b, 237.
depicted in workplace novels - most Chinese characters have and use English names at work; some brands, work-related words and, at times, emails and conversations, are printed in English in the Chinese text; proficiency in English is an important criteria defining if one is suited to work in the company or not - can lead us to believe that the narratives univocally advocate the adoption of cosmopolitanism as well as of Western culture, practices and standards, as illustrated in Yu Lei's words:

   English is the vehicle that allows us to advance along with our times. If there is really a God, for us, secretaries, I think that it is English.  

However, a closer look at the narratives reveals a more complex vision of the West - or of countries perceived as more "westernized" than China, like Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong or Japan - and of its relationship to China than can be assumed at first glance. First, many novels flaunt the impressive nature of China's recent development and economic growth. The importance of the Chinese market in the international scene, and the West's recognition of that importance, especially since the 2008 financial crisis, are also frequently asserted and China is represented as the market of the future:

   [...] American economy was waling into a bleak period, but the Chinese market was maintaining its great vitality.

This characteristic might contribute to explain why knowledge of China and of Chinese language is an important factor to evaluate foreigners working in the country. In many novels, the most positive foreign characters are those who show interest in Chinese culture, who try to learn the language and to understand the customs and realities of the country, even if they never manage to grasp them completely. On the other hand, disregard for the local characteristics, or underestimation of China's power and potential often sheds a shadow on foreign characters, even when they are otherwise positively described:

   Li Weidong thought: calling an organizational manager from Hong Kong to come help? To say it in an informal way, people from Hong Kong are not as useful as people from the Mainland! Did this Hong Kong manager even know the sales managers from the Mainland? He didn't even speak Mandarin correctly!

Moreover, while some Western patterns of behavior, especially those related to politeness, professionalism and consumption of luxury products and leisure activities, seem to be valorized as remedies for some perceived problems of contemporary China - poor service, laziness and corruption in offices, lack of taste and elegance in the overall population - most of the heroines do

624. CUI 2012b, 130.
not embrace them completely. We have seen, for example, that most of the heroines do not speak English as well as they are supposed to, that Du Lala and Li Bingbing do not appreciate Western food, and that most of them lack knowledge and confidence in consuming foreign brands. Furthermore, none of the main characters of our corpus seem to integrate Western standards of behavior on a personal level. While they seem to have more or less adapted to speaking their mind at work, even in front of their superiors, most of them still seem to associate Western behavior with a form of impropriety in men-women relationships, and with a disregard of "traditional values", or "Chinese values", involving filial piety or visions of marriage and family, for example. In these spheres, adopting foreign practices and values does not seem to be advised or promoted.

In general, workplace novels give the impression of valorizing a certain degree of Westernization as signs of distinction and of status, or as a way to improve efficiency, standardization and globalization in work practices and relationships, but not of promoting an all-encompassing Westernization of customs and values, as illustrated in this address to a "westernized" employee of Qiao Li's company by a superior perceived as "more Chinese":

"You acquired outstanding knowledge in the West, and these things can help you cultivate good thinking habits, for example the importance you give to logic and to relying on concrete evidence. But it is not guaranteed that these things completely fit the Chinese spirit." 626

The question of defining Western values is never addressed in the novels, while "Chinese values", like filial piety, benevolence or righteousness, are often praised and embodied in positive characters.

To some extent, the narratives also seem to perceive patriotism as positive. This is what we can observe when Su, one of Mia's best friends in Run, Mia, decides to resign from the American company she works for because they refuse to let her take holidays to go help the earthquake victims in Sichuan, and because the company fails to provide financial aid after the catastrophe, while it had sent money to help the victims of Hurricane Katrina. This shows that, ultimately, the heroines' loyalties are supposed to be stronger towards their country than towards their company, which remain foreign, as we can observe in Yu Lei's words:

As a Chinese person, no matter when and where, if I hear the grand national anthem, my heart fills up with pride, and my sense of responsibility as a Chinese person also arises. 627

And in a conversation between two Chinese businessmen in Ups and Downs:

"Director She, you and I are both yellow skinned Chinese men, There is no need for us to fight for the Americans! [...]" 628

626. CUI 2012, 319.
627. TAN 2005, 236.
628. CUI 2012b, 212.
Laurie Duthie's research addresses the paradoxical attitudes of white collars towards issues of cosmopolitanism and patriotism. The researcher explains that, in the 1990s, the state started promoting globalization as an important component of national modernization, which lead to a stronger focus on foreign languages in business-related majors, for example, while, at the same time, patriotism was also taught and encouraged in schools' curricula.629 Duthie asserts:

In 1996, I asked a group of more than 60 university students what they hoped to do after graduation, and all but two replied that they hoped to work for foreign-invested companies. Although a seemingly paradoxical goal for adamant patriots, ideologically, it followed the state goal of modernization through globalization.630

Duthie explains that white collars are fervent patriots because they grew up in a period of economic growth and nation-building projects:

It is commonly said that the cohort born in the 1970s developed along with the nation.631

For many white collars, working, making money and contributing to the national economy is apparently perceived as patriotic. They also seem to believe that they are helping China in its development by introducing foreign knowledge and techniques to the country, as was mentioned in Run, Mia, when the heroine denounced the superiority complex of white collars working for foreign companies. As most of the authors of our corpus belong to the post-1970 generation mentioned in Laurie Duthie's research, the congruence between her observations and the content of our narratives is understandable.

Lisa Hoffman proposed similar observations in an article exploring the new responsibilities of individuals regarding employment in the reform era. She explains that, though young people are now autonomous in the choice of their professions, their autonomy is actually limited by new norms of appropriateness, which she calls "patriotic professionalism":

As individuals make their own decisions about where to work, they do so in relation to statements about being "responsible" with their autonomy. Governing in the reform era is no longer through an intense dependency on the state, but is through newfound autonomy and choices handled responsibly. An emphasis on responsible choices is rooted in neoliberal regimes of appropriate forms of self-entreprise, while also echoing Maoist demands for service to the nation and duty to one's fellow citizen. Throughout the research process, I hear people tell me that young workers should not only think of themselves as they made decisions about where to work. Their employment choices had to be informed by a sense of

630. DUTHIE 2005, 5.
social and national responsibility too.  

Hoffman observed that young people are invited to think about their taste and abilities but also about what the nation needs when choosing their job:

Thus, while patriotic duty is not a new device encouraging certain activities and behaviours, making choices in these fields is. College students hear about the intermingling of individual development and competition with national strength and identification from a variety of sources, including school officials, local papers, popular publications and even parents.  

In the official rhetoric, fulfilling one's potential fosters national development and is thus patriotic. From this observation, we can infer that being patriotic is perceived as an important requirement to be a high quality individual who participates in the building of a harmonious society and strong nation.

In the novels, the ambiguity surrounding issues of patriotism, cosmopolitanism, "Chineseness" and Westernization are eloquently embodied in the characters from Hong Kong, Taiwan or Singapore. Perceived as ethnically and, to some extent, culturally Chinese, these characters are often said to have a deeper knowledge of Western culture and professional practices, due to their longer and more intimate exposure to the West in the recent history. This intermediary position between China and the West allows them to often occupy higher ranks than most Chinese employees in the companies where the heroines work. When they are female, they are usually described as beautiful and as mastering the art of makeup, clothing and buying brands much better than the heroines. However, while some of these characters are described as hard-working, they are never described as positively as Western characters. They are often depicted as disdainful and rude towards Mainlanders, as underestimating and disliking China, and as lacking the experience of such an important market, as illustrated in the statement of one of Yu Lei's friend:

"Even if my boss [from Taiwan] was very satisfied with my work, I finally understood that, deep down, he despised mainland Chinese people. Like these ten technicians [who he just fired], in his eyes, I am only a tool."  

And in the first volume of the Du Lala saga:

Wang Wei complained to Lala: "Why did they bring this Singapore guy to take care of sales? He will ruin the company."

This characteristic allows us to think that distance - in hierarchy and in ethnicity - allows more  

634. DUTHIE 2005, 8.  
635. TAN 2004, 314.  
636. LI 2013, 216.
idealization of Western CEOs and directors, while the closer proximity of the "not quite Chinese" intermediary characters emphasizes their otherness, which is ultimately disliked. Contemporary geo-political issues might also be at play in these feelings.

We consider that the ambiguous feelings towards cosmopolitanism, globalization and Westernization, discernible in most workplace novels, should be understood with consideration for the context in which the authors grew up and wrote. As we have seen, the post-1970 generation, to which most of the writers of our corpus belong, were raised and schooled surrounded by discourses valorizing their involvement in economic growth and nation building through their studies and careers. The years witnessing the appearance of most workplace novels - around 2009 - were also marked by important events for China, notably in terms of its involvement and position on the international scene, which probably fostered patriotic pride, for example the organization of the 2008 Olympic Games, the sixtieth anniversary of the People's Republic in 2009, and the hosting of the World's fair in Shanghai in 2010.

We have observed that the characteristics and values the heroines should acquire in order to succeed at work are congruent with official discourses on the necessity of raising the quality of the Chinese population in order to build a harmonious society and a strong nation. We have also seen that many novels contain patriotic elements and seem to valorize and encourage feelings of belonging and pride towards China. Despite the fact that the concept of the Chinese Dream started to be widely used in official discourses around 2012, especially in Xi Jinping's speeches, making its association with novels mostly written before that time anachronistic, we consider that workplace novels and discourses on the Zhongguo meng 中国梦 show striking similarities. This is understandable considering that the concept of the Chinese Dream, and the way it is formulated by Xi and, later, by other government representatives and the media, did not emerge out of an ideological vacuum, but were the result of a progressive evolution of conceptions about the links existing between individual and national growth, and the way these links should be expressed in order to obtain popular support and adhesion.

One of the most important characteristics of the Chinese Dream is that it is said to be actualized through the realization of individual dreams. In a tautological rhetoric, its actualization is said, in return, to give to individuals more opportunities and means to realize their personal dreams and aspirations. Even if the question of the nature of these individual dreams is never addressed explicitly in official discourses, we can infer that not all personal aspirations contribute to the building of a strong, affluent, and influential China. Considering that, in recent years, personal freedom and realization has mainly been associated with the availability - for everyone, or everyone worthy, at least - of opportunities to raise one's social status and increase one's wealth, it is probable that professional achievements and success, leading to a more consumerist lifestyle, play an important part in what is considered a legitimate dream for Chinese individuals to cherish and strive
for. Indeed, official discourses in recent years have emphasized the importance of raising domestic consumption in order for it to replace exports as the basis of the country's economic growth, thus making it crucial for the government to provide the population with ways to consume more. As we can see, workplace novels, showing how young individuals dedicate their time and efforts to progress in their career, notably in order to reach a more comfortable lifestyle in terms of consumption, seem to promote visions of the "good life" that could benefit the Chinese government.

3.2 Possible Government Influence on Workplace Novels' Production and Diffusion

It is generally acknowledged that, in contemporary China, the government exerts an influence on the production of popular culture. This influence takes different forms, from direct censorship to political guidelines or propaganda. The government also displays its support for different works by giving certain things more visibility in the cultural landscape. We consider that the political rhetoric of a given time also influences the general cultural and intellectual atmosphere and the way people express their views, with no need for direct coercion. It seems that, in most cases, the different agents involved in cultural production have a reasonable idea of what is acceptable for them to write, film, or else. In a context where cultural production needs to be financially viable and profitable, it is in the best interest of the producers to conform to government regulations in order to avoid difficulties, financial and other. In many cases, entertainment culture seems to be produced and consumed with little to no concern for political matters and is not directly confronted to censorship. It has been observed, in modern day China, that numerous works of popular culture have indeed displayed a withdrawal from political matters to focus on the individual, his or her life and concerns. At times, this disinterest in politics is interpreted, notably by Western scholars, as political in itself, and individual disengagement from politics is perceived as an expression of discontent or disillusionment. However, it can also be interpreted as a sign of adhesion, or, at least, of lack of opposition to the government from the part of many writers and intellectuals, who are not all dissidents, far from it. We consider workplace novels to belong to this realm of apolitically produced and consumed novels, despite the fact that, as we have seen, it seems that their narrations have integrated, at least in part, the official rhetoric on quality, harmonious society and individual work participating in national strengthening. This could indicate that the authors belong to a group which adheres to the government's rhetoric for reasons of patriotism or of desire of stability maintenance, which seems to be the case as they are apparently members of the middle class. We can also infer that the production and consumption of workplace novels was encouraged at a time of high visibility for China on the international scene - roughly from 2008 to 2010 - which could

contribute to explain their proliferation, visibility and success.

We will now address the different forms of governmental interventions which can influence literary production and consumption, in direct or indirect ways. We will start with the question of direct censorship, indispensable to understand the intellectual and psychological context of literary production in contemporary China, despite the fact that workplace novels have not been impacted in this way. Eugene Perry Link's research proposes a description of the establishment and functioning of the literary control system created by Mao, which continues to exert influence in different ways until today. Link mentions Mao's "Talks on Art and Literature" as the foundation of literary control in socialist China. He explains:

Literature had to "serve" politics, both by teaching socialism to readers and, more concretely, by supporting the current political campaign of the leadership, be it "resist Japan" (in 1942), "expose landlords" (1952), or "smelt iron at home" (1958). Individual literary works were to be judged by political as well as artistic criteria, with political criteria taking precedence.  

According to this idea, the purpose of literature was to guide readers' thoughts in any direction decided by the leadership, seen as a benevolent father figure. Socialist literary control was - and is - used to limit a great variety of elements, like critiques of the party, exposure of social problems, cultural "pollution" from the West (until the end of the 1980s, Western ideas regarding individualism or consumption were seen as dangerous and described as "bourgeois"), etc. The underlying idea seems to be that the government should preserve social unity and people's loyalty to the party and should thus encourage optimistic narratives supporting the official claims concerning history and society, while attempting to make the contradicting voices disappear. As it is apparently well known by the different agents of the literary field that direct political criticism is impossible to publish, it is de facto never written for publication. Critiques are generally indirect, and a simple description of a social issue can sometimes be perceived as an attack by the officials, and thus sanctioned.  

According to Link, censorship in socialist China was more discreet and pervasive than it had been under the Nationalist Party, as, for example, it never left blanks in texts or removed pages from books. Instead, it relied mostly on psychological pressures forcing writers to comply to state rules and ideology. Moreover, Link explains that literary control was always alternating between relaxing and tightening periods, which were very difficult for writers to identify and predict, putting them in a constant state of fear and uncertainty, and motivating a self-censorship sometimes stronger that what was really judged acceptable at the time:

638. LINK 2000, 63-64.
639. LINK 2000, 59.
640. LINK 2000, 56.
Socialist China did not have the kind of formal censorial organs that other autocratic regimes have maintained. Literary control was less mechanical, and more psychological, than it has been elsewhere. It depended primarily on the private calculation of risks and balances in the minds of writers, editors, and those who supported them. Link explains the unpredictability of censorship by emphasizing the fact that it obeyed the principle of "rule[d] by people instead of rule[d] by law". Leaders were seen as taking literary censorship decisions rapidly and arbitrarily, with little or no support of clear and concrete written documents. We consider this particularity of the Chinese censorship system to contribute to explaining the indirect government influences on literature. The psychological pressure exerted by the system probably gave people the habit of internalizing the official rhetoric and of using it to express themselves.

In the contemporary context of post-reform era China, Latham describes an important shift of paradigm in the state control over culture, linked to the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989: during the 1980s, the press and intellectuals benefited from an unprecedented freedom of speech, which was shut down by the violent repression of the movement, marking a period of stricter control over culture and media production. Since 1992, with Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour, the pressure was somehow released by the optimism of the deepening of the reforms and the consequent promise of further - and faster - economic growth. However, political aspirations seem to have disappeared and the media to focus mainly on consumption and new technologies:

> The media industries therefore channeled their energies more into commercially driven changes than politically driven reform.

This would probably explain the generally apolitical nature of popular culture in contemporary China, despite the fact that, since the 1990s, the necessity for the media to be financially independent - though they are still public and state-owned - has created some space for criticism and expression in popular culture.

The fact that popular culture seems to be mostly produced and consumed in an apolitical manner does not mean that the government does not exert any influence on it. Various scholars have attempted to describe how the state has continued to impact on the production of entertainment culture in post-Mao China, in ways that do not necessarily imply direct censorship. It is what Paul Festa attempts to demonstrate in his research on the regulatory measures imposed on mass culture, using the example of mahjong. According to Festa:

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641. LINK 2000, 81.
642. LINK 2000, 76.
644. FESTA 2006.
It is, I will argue, through a modern mode of regulating — of cleansing and policing — mass culture that the state maintains its grip on society and works to realize the articulation of the public and private, state and society.\textsuperscript{645}

Festa's study asserts that it is now mainly through an "apparatus of moral regulation" - encompassing schools, universities, mass media, propaganda, sports, and national holiday celebrations - that the state controls the population.\textsuperscript{646} Festa bases his approach on the theory of moral regulation, which describes mass consumption as a requirement of the normative regime of accumulation, rather than as a spontaneous and individual phenomenon encouraging autonomy and happiness. According to this theory, authoritarian states feign relaxing their ideological control and allowing a form of individualism to rise, only to outsource the task of normalizing and controlling people to the individuals themselves. In this context, leisure and consumption participate in an ethical process of self-discipline, pushing individuals to use their autonomy to conform to the established rules.\textsuperscript{647}

Festa uses the example of the reintroduction of a state-directed form of mahjong after the Cultural Revolution to illustrate his assertions. Apparently, this phenomenon was inscribed in the context of a shift in official discourses after the Tiananmen Square protests, with a new emphasis on nationalism, rather than on modernization. "Chineseness" started to be represented as a way to oppose the hegemony of "modernity", a Western concept imposed on China. According to Festa, playing mahjong came to be encouraged because it was represented as an embodiment of "traditional" Chinese values, that the government wanted the population to acquire. Festa explains:

Mahjong is discursively constructed as a unique embodiment and medium of Chineseness owing to its deep historical roots within cultural traditions as well as its capacity to reflect the Chinese aesthetic sensibility; conceptions of mind, body, and will; and notion of individuality. In a fascinating section on civility that exemplifies moral regulation in action, Sheng [Chinese scholar] proceeds to suture these essential Chinese attributes of mahjong to the figure of self-discipline and to mass culture. [...] "Civility," explains Sheng, refers to "self-cultivation" (ziwo peiyang) and "correct social behavior" and demands hard work in order to "train, educate, temper, and control oneself" according to "proper moral, ideological, cultural as well as professional and intellectual norms." By coupling self-cultivation with ideological norms of correct social behavior, Sheng equates civility with self-regulation (ziwo tiaojie), making it a key point of articulation between technologies of the self and political technologies.\textsuperscript{648}

According to Festa, state-directed mahjong became part of a campaign which aimed to allow

\textsuperscript{645} FESTA 2006, 8.
\textsuperscript{646} FESTA 2006, 10.
\textsuperscript{647} FESTA 2006, 13.
\textsuperscript{648} FESTA 2006, 21.
Chinese people to realize their great potential. While asserting that authoritarian states never succeed in completely controlling the population's practices in entertainment culture, Festa concludes by saying:

In the mid-1990s, the party-state began an official campaign to endorse leisure culture by appropriating it into its new ideological agenda of cultural nationalism. As Jing Wang points out, democratic participation in officially regulated forms of leisure consumption not only constitutes leisure culture as a "state instrument for subject formation" but also "disciplines production simultaneously."649

Marco Fumian proposes similar observations when describing the commercialization of the production and consumption of literature in the 1990s, which did not mean that the state was ready to renounce its influence on popular culture:

Perhaps it is the concept of leitmotif (zhuxuanlü, 主旋律), that best captures how, in the newly sanctioned mode of production, political power gained the capacity to incorporate into its own hegemonic voice the various narratives emerging in an increasingly pluralized society. The concept refers to the ideological leading themes that the CCP's propaganda aims to infuse in commercial cultural works so as to convey in a soft and seductive manner what it regards as the most important political directions of the day.650

Indeed, the state understood that literary works could not be ideologically efficient if they were not popular and successful as well, illustrating that the incentives motivating the relative relaxation of control on entertainment culture were economic rather than ideological. Fumian mentions the slogan raised by Jiang Zemin in 1994 - "promote the leitmotifs, advocate diversification" (hongyang zhuxuanlü, tichang duoyanghua 弘扬主旋律，提倡多样化) - to explain that, since the early 1990s, literary production was supposed to be varied and entertaining in order to obtain commercial success, but should also be uplifting and pedagogical, and thus fit in the mainstream discourses of the state. This explains the appearance of politically and morally conservative bestsellers, fitting the taste of the emerging middle class.651 If this evolution allowed writers to break away from an elitist vision of literature in order to produce entertainment fiction, as well as to pursue freelance careers independently from the Writers Association, Fumian deplores that:

The establishment of a cultural market led to the proliferation of mass-culture consumer products that were either didactic and patriotic or hedonist and utterly depoliticized, leaving very little room for a serious literary practice.652

As we have seen, workplace novels seem to fit in both types described by Fumian as they are

650. FUMIAN 2009, 148.
651. FUMIAN 2009, 148-149.
652. FUMIAN 2009, 150.
didactic, slightly patriotic, but also depoliticized and giving great importance to the middle class' hedonist lifestyle, thus illustrating how they are inscribed in the state's leitmotif. While their diffusion and promotion have probably been encouraged by the government because of their alignment with its rhetoric, we cannot infer that they have been written in this way purposely. Rather, we consider them to illustrate how an important part of the population displays a relative adherence to the general political and cultural atmosphere of a given time.

According to Winnie Yee, even today, with the commercialization of culture, the PRC still uses the production of literature as a means of ideological indoctrination, while giving people the impression that they are living in a free and open market where they have the autonomy to consume - or read - what they like. Yee asserts that, if the marketization of literature allowed for a greater variety of genres and titles to emerge, and if authors are now pushed to write stories that sell well, they are also still expected to publish politically correct content which could have some social or political use. Yee explains:

While state-owned publishers are under pressure to make greater profits, senior Chinese officials continue to lay stress on social value and high quality content. This suggests that the Chinese government has the intention to use the publishing industry to promote specific kinds of reading communities that would share mainstream cultural consciousness.

And further:

I would add that in the case of China the creation of bestsellers was the product of the collaborative efforts of publishers and the state. In producing bestsellers of certain types, both publishers and the state benefited. Many bestsellers in the new millennium would not have been bestsellers if they had not first been promoted and disseminated on CCTV, the state-owned television broadcaster.

This supports the idea that the CCP maintains a strong influence on which books will be widely distributed and thus get more chances to be popular, even without intervening directly on the content. This observation is relevant to the study of workplace novels because, as we have observed, these narratives are well aligned with official discourses on the raising of the population's quality, on civil and law-abiding behavior as contributing to the building of a harmonious society and strong nation, and on individual quests for wealth and self-improvement as a patriotic endeavor, for example.

Using the example of what we have observed about the genesis of the Du Lala saga, we consider

654. YEE 2016, 135.
that, while the publication of the first parts of the text online was probably motivated by a desire to share experiences and gather a community of like-minded netizens in order to gain support and advice, regarding the rest of the saga and other novels of the same type published shortly after the success of Li Ke's books, financial profit probably constituted an important incentive for the authors as well. Thus, the congruences between the content of the novels and official discourses might be explained, at least in part, by the authors' knowledge of what would make their works acceptable, and even desirable, for the officials in charge of validating the publication of the works. We could also infer that politics do not concern them at all and that their way of expressing their views on the workplace and on individual development is congruent with official discourses because these discourses are so wide-spread and omnipresent in contemporary Chinese society that writers cannot help but be influenced by them. This would mean that individuals' discourses are shaped and defined - notably through the use of stereotypical vocabulary - by official discourses. If, as Festa asserts, the government's priorities and its way of expressing them at a given time are unified and consistent throughout official discourses, school curricula, and mass media, it is not surprising that individuals, including workplace novels' authors, integrate them and reproduce them in their narratives. This second explanation thus seems more convincing to us.

We have mentioned that the Chinese government does not only carry out propaganda through forbidding works that it does not judge acceptable, but also through strongly encouraging the publication of the works that foster its values and by giving them more visibility. Though we cannot be certain that this has been the case for workplace novels, the important visibility they benefit from and the number of works that have appeared allows us to think that the government might have supported their proliferation and dissemination, especially since the readership of this genre is probably less important than the one of other categories of popular novels. As we have seen when discussing the inventory, the majority of workplace novels have been published by state-owned publishing houses rather than by private companies. Moreover, the TV series inspired by the Du Lala saga and by *Ups and Downs* were both broadcasted by important channels - Beijing TV official Channel (*Beijing weishi* 北京卫视), the Shanghai Media Group channel (*Shanghai dongfang weishi* 上海东方卫视), and Shenzhen Satellite Television (*Shenzhen weishi* 深圳卫视) for Du Lala, and Dragon Television (*Dongfang weishi* 东方卫视), Beijing TV official Channel, Zhejiang Satellite Television (*Zhejiang weishi* 浙江卫视), and Shenzhen Satellite Television for *Ups and Downs*. These characteristics of the narratives' production and diffusion, as well as the numerous articles focusing on the genre and on its major works - in the academic realm as well as in the general press - all support the idea that the category might have benefitted from government approval and encouragement.

This is what Marco Fumian explains in the case of the Du Lala saga:

I argue here that Du Lala should be considered not simply a spontaneous manifestation of a
capitalist ethos and lifestyle somehow naturally produced by the market, but rather a component, however indirect, of the ideological apparatus of the CCP with the goal of educating its citizens to the values, norms, and aims of the socialist market. This state ideological role is ultimately what links Du Lala to Wu Qionghua: whereas her elder cousin exemplified the ideal subjectivity of the communist society, Du Lala exemplifies the ideal subjectivity functional to the socialist market society. What Du Lala and her Maoist predecessor have in common is that they are both models: as such, they typify the most desirable attitudes and behaviors sanctioned by their social order and therefore help their audience internalize and emulate the same kind of attitudes and behaviors.\textsuperscript{656}

We consider that the novels examined in the context of the present research illustrate how some entertainment narratives align with official discourses without the direct intervention of the government. Indeed, they display an uplifting and didactic tone, seem to promote unity and fidelity in the companies and, more importantly, among Chinese people, despite the difficulties encountered in everyday life and work, and encourage the formation of civil and high quality individuals who respect the country's rules and laws. This can be interpreted as a sign that the authors, members of the middle class, integrated the principles of self-governance described by Festa and learned to use their autonomy to respect and foster the state's rules and principles in their writing. Despite the workplace-related issues described in the novels, these characteristics, as well as the paratext of the novels, seem to encourage the readers to take the characters as models and to follow their paths of self-betterment and self-discipline to hope to reach an undefined success and a middle-class lifestyle.

3.3 Realism and Didacticism Leading to Normalization and Imitation

As we have seen, novels from the \textit{zhichang} category propose an idealized vision of the workplace and of the opportunities for growth and development it provides to individuals, but also describe a more ambiguous and bleaker picture of the corporate world and of what it costs to integrate and thrive in it. We have observed that these issues and difficulties - sexual harassment, glass ceiling, competitiveness, pressure, anxiety, etc. - are generally similar to sociological studies focusing on the contemporary Chinese workplace. These accurate descriptions, as well as their potential echo in readers' personal experiences of the workplace, probably support the claims of realism displayed in most of the novels' paratext, despite the inaccuracies mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. These assertions are also reinforced by the authors' knowledge and experience of the workplace. As most of the narratives encourage readers to use them as career guides, realism is linked to a didactic

\textsuperscript{656}. FUMIAN 2016, 81.
function. Reading about the experiences of relatable and like-minded characters, through the prism of the maturity and experience of the author, is presented as helping young white collars get accustomed to their new environment, to adapt to it and to thrive in it.

In his research on realism in China, Marston Anderson asserts that May-Fourth intellectuals considered this new type of fiction writing, imported from the West, as literary form most likely to transform Chinese culture and society:

Chinese intellectuals resolved to remake their literary culture only after their efforts at political reform had failed, and they did so with a specific purpose in mind. They reasoned that literature could reach a deeper level of cultural response than political manipulation had succeeded in doing; a new literature, by altering the very worldview of its readers, would, they hoped, pave the way for a complete transformation of Chinese society.657

According to Anderson, Confucianism already promoted the conception of written texts as didactic and as vehicles of moral values, making the implantation of May-Fourth intellectuals' vision of literature easily adaptable to the Chinese context. In its early stages, Chinese realism was thus supposed to criticize cultural prejudices as "the realist plot invariably dramatizes the disappointment of conventional pretensions, desires, or ideals"658 and consequently to liberate people's minds by denouncing what was perceived as damaging beliefs and practices. Moreover, the fact that realism was often describing the lives of a disenfranchised group and denouncing their suffering contributed greatly to its appeal.659

In a 1902 essay, Liang Qichao explained that Western popular fiction had had the power to "awaken commoner's aspirations for a better life and so served the high moral purpose of encouraging them to work for their own and for society's betterment".660 Liang believed that popular and social fiction could inspire the masses to participate in the campaign for national restoration. This idea was also supported by the advocates of socialist realism:

According to the formula, literature was to reflect and describe reality but also to direct and propel reality. Literature was to be the subjective expression of the masses' class interest but was also to be an active force in organizing the masses and in systematizing their worldview. Literature was to stand at the level of the masses but was at the same time to raise their cultural level. Literature was to constitute the author's objective observation of and research into reality but only from the perspective of a correct worldview, specifically that of the

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658. ANDERSON 1990, 11.
660. ANDERSON 1990, 29.
According to this view, texts thus had to be both realistic - in their depiction of social issues - and inspirational - in the way they described how people were to deal with those issues. We have observed that most of the novels of our corpus propose numerous descriptions of the difficulties, hindrances and questioning faced by the heroines during their professional development, but that they also idealize the foreign corporate world and the opportunities for growth and self-betterment it provides to the heroines, whose careers are often described as successes. Workplace novels thus seem to fit, to some extent at least, the internal ambiguity described by Anderson when discussing socialist realism, even though the texts of our corpus do not belong to that genre. Moreover, Chinese researchers usually assert the value of these narratives on the basis that, by reflecting the struggles of young white collars and depicting successful careers, they provide readers with possibilities for identification, understanding, moral support, encouragement and advice.

Like in other literary traditions, Chinese realism seems to have been associated with denunciations of some undesirable aspects of the functioning of society, which often involves the sufferings of subaltern groups. In many cases, such novels thus endorsed a social and political mission. As we have seen, workplace novels, instead, describe the professional paths of a social group generally perceived as an elite in Chinese society, despite the asserted ordinariness of the characters. Moreover, the narratives contain numerous elements linked to the prestige resulting from working in a foreign company based in an important metropolis, and to the enviable lifestyle of the urban white collars. These elements, despite the difficulties and angst that the characters go through, reinforce their image as being part of a privileged class. In that sense, workplace novels are deeply ambiguous. Indeed, the attraction of the professional environments they describe is mainly based on the pride and material comfort it provides to its employees while, at the same time, the fact that the characters are ordinary people who can rely solely on their own efforts to succeed is frequently mentioned to the readers. We consider the fact that the novels flaunt the elite status and desirable lifestyle of the characters, as well as an idealized vision of the workplace, while asserting that they are realistic accounts of professional climbing, to hinder the power of denunciation and questioning that the depiction of unfairness, struggle and anxiety they contain could potentially hold. In that case, the idealization depicted in conjunction with the assertions of realism exert a normalizing effect on the narratives, motivating readers to believe that an ideal career path is necessarily difficult, full of pressure, anguish, existential questioning, unsatisfactory rewards, disillusionments towards professional success, and doubts on the meaning of happiness and ways to achieve happiness.

As for the asserted didactic function of workplace novels, we consider it to reinforce the

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661. ANDERSON 1990, 57.
idealization of the characters - who become models - and of their behavior and career paths. The fact that the readers are encouraged to imitate the novels' heroines in order to be successful themselves fosters the idea that the outcomes of the narratives really constitute successes. Moreover, by presenting the heroines and their careers as ideal models to be imitated, the novels also imply that their sufferings - pressure, anxiety, lack of social life, sexual harassment - are an inherent part of an ideal professional life, thus hindering potential revolt and fight against these problems. The narratives also normalize a state of doubt about success, self-fulfillment and happiness as an inevitable component of the life of independent adults, thus failing to provide readers with alternative ways to nurture their psychological well-being, their emotionality, spirituality and morality. We have mentioned that, despite their asserted ordinariness, the heroines' careers are usually exceptional. By asserting that they are, instead, easily replicable by anyone ready to work hard and to conform to the companies' standards of professionalism, behavior, appearance and ethic, the novels tend to normalize these exceptions. Ultimately, this means that they will push readers to have higher expectations towards their own careers, and probably to face harder disappointments and loss of self-confidence and sense of self-worth when reality fails to meet their hopes. This can be all the more psychologically damaging for the Chinese youth because of the increasing accountability of individuals for their successes and failures observed in the country in recent years. As young, urban college graduates are usually said to be offered countless opportunities, failure has come to signify someone's personal incapacity to distinguish and seize these opportunities.

The possibility for some of the consumers of workplace novels to go through a socially and politically aware reading experience of the narratives and of the issues they describe is difficult to evaluate. We consider these issues to hold the potential of leading readers to ponder over their own careers and their own visions of success and happiness, despite the fact that idealization and the didactic function might hinder the questioning raised by the struggles and unfairness described in the texts. Readers might also gain awareness of different workplace-related problems, like sexual harassment, glass-ceiling, work pressure, etc. We do not pretend that workplace novels are written or read purposely as political denunciation novels, but we consider that, through what appears to be realistic descriptions of the workplace and of some of the recurrent problems people (and women in particular) encounter in their professional lives, the novels of our corpus could potentially raise questions on some realities and on the way these realities are usually perceived and represented. The fact that numerous heroines quit their original career paths at the end of the narratives supports the assumption that workplace novels might imply the existence of alternative choices and lifestyles, even if their description exceeds the scope of the novels.
GENERAL CONCLUSION

In the present research, we have offered an overview of the feminine branch of the zhichang category, of its archetypes and of its variations, as well as of its socio-cultural context of production, diffusion and consumption. We have observed important contradictions between, on one side, the paratext and the main story lines of the novels, which usually idealize the workplace and the concept of career as a path guaranteeing professional success, social climbing, and self-actualization for the honest, civil, and hard-working middle class, and, on the other side, the descriptions of unfairness, struggle, and doubt in the actual professional development of the heroines. In Chinese studies, these contradictions, which are never named and stressed as such, are said to allow the novels to be both relatable and encouraging for struggling white collars on their path towards adulthood and a better life. Instead, we consider them to possibly reveal a lack of conviction - probably unconscious - on the part of the authors, in the uplifting rhetoric of the government flaunting the good outcomes of the economic reforms, the countless opportunities for people who agree to work hard to reach a better life (regardless of their background and social connections), and the participation of every individual's success in the building of a harmonious society and strong Chinese nation. Despite the fact that the authors seem to have integrated these discourses, which are pervasive in the way they describe their experiences, the official rhetoric obviously clashes with their empiric experiences of the workplace and of the struggles inherent to contemporary life in major cities.

As we have seen, the zhichang category is clearly divided between a masculine and a feminine realm. The heroines of novels written by and for women are generally said to be ordinary, young, inexperienced and lacking self-confidence. The books start with the beginning of their careers, when they occupy the bottom of the corporate hierarchy, and describe their learning and self-bettering processes, as well as their romantic concerns, questioning and doubts on their life choices and the meaning of success and happiness. Though they generally come to be proficient and successful at work, often with the help of an older and more experienced male character, which puts their agency into question, they never reach the highest level of the corporate ladder and always have to be mindful of the threats that their involvement in their work poses to their morality. Finally, they are usually motivated to work and progress professionally by their desires for financial security and independence, consumption, prestige and recognition. In contrast, masculine novels stage experienced heroes who do not need to learn, better themselves, be guided or to be mindful of their morality to succeed. These heroes generally occupy responsibility and authority positions in their companies and work for the benefit of their teammates and for the image and the profit of the firm at least as much as for themselves. As workplace novels belong to the realm of entertainment fiction and are close to Internet literature, we can assume that their narrative specificities are

329
influenced, to some extent at least, by the perceived preferences of their target readership. We can thus assume that, in contemporary China, women are seen as preferring stories of moderate professional success giving importance to romantic life, consumption and lifestyle, while men are supposed to be more interested in suspenseful business competitions involving high-ranked and powerful professionals. This seems to indicate that leadership and grand ambitions are not seen as frequent or important concerns for women.

The novels of our corpus, belonging to the feminine realm of the category, are deeply ambiguous regarding the meaning of success, the importance that one's career should take in one's life, and the evaluation of employees' integration of the norms and habits of the corporate world. The narratives also seem to reveal the existence of a psychological discomfort in their depiction of the status of women in the professional realm. Despite the fact that women seem to be encouraged to study and work in contemporary China, and that their situation in terms of education and employment are better than in numerous other developing as well as developed countries, their involvement in some professions, their important focus on career, and their hard work, still seem to be perceived with reservations in novels written and published in the 2000s and 2010s. We do not pretend that the gender prejudices and biases displayed in workplace novels are exactly representative of the contemporary workplace and society, or that the situation has not evolved at all since 2014, when the latest novel of our corpus was published. However, we consider the descriptions of unfair treatment of women at work, and also the issues regarding morality and life choices, notably marriage, as they are displayed in workplace novels, to reveal the necessity of questioning the gains women are said to have obtained through the socialist period - usually described as having liberated them - as some important unfairness seems to still exist and to have worsened with the economic reforms. As we have mentioned, the fact that numerous sociological studies on women and work in contemporary China have shown similarities with the issues described in workplace novels allows us to think that they reflect some women's realities, at least partially. It seems that both the positive and encouraging novels' paratext and the widely acknowledged perception of the country as having reached gender equality hinders the emergence of important debates on the condition of women in the workplace.

As we have seen, workplace novels reached a peak of production and popularity between 2008 and 2010 approximately. After that, the genre seems to have gradually lost its appeal. This could be explained by the fact that numerous trends in entertainment culture arise and fade relatively quickly. However, it could also signal a wind of change in the way young people perceive their careers and its importance in their lives. In Western studies, the Generation Y - people born in 1981 and after - is often said to give more importance to leisure time and personal life than to career, in contrast to
the former generations. In her article published on the New Yorker's website, Leslie Chang also explains that, in China, the generation born after 1985 gradually lost focus on professional achievements to look for happiness and self-fulfillment elsewhere, for example in travels and other life experiences. This change of mentality and perception of the centrality of work in people's lives might explain, at least in part, the decreasing success of workplace novels after 2010. It could also reveal a growing disillusionment, on the part of the youth, in the government's promises of social climbing and wealth accumulation through hard work, often necessitating the neglect of one's personal life and extra-professional aspirations, especially if early professional experiences are difficult and disappointing.

During a year spent in Shanghai in order to achieve the present research, an informal survey was conducted among Chinese women born in the late 1980s and early 1990s who were working in foreign companies. None of the respondents had ever read a workplace novel, and they all asserted to look for professional guidance in specialized books and manuals, and that they would not consider turning to fiction for that purpose. This could indicate that, while the cross-genre nature of narratives blending fictional and referential elements might have participated in their appeal to the public at some point, it is not the case anymore. Nowadays, workplace novels might be considered not entertaining enough to be read as pure fiction, in comparison to other genres, and as not reliable and useful enough to be seen as professional guides, which is probably a consequence of their fictional nature. Most of the interviewed women seemed highly pragmatic and purposeful regarding their careers, to which they dedicated a lot of time and energy. However, they did not seem as ambitious and as absorbed by work as the novels' heroines, and apparently did not turn to work in order to find happiness or self-fulfillment. In most cases, the necessity of a relatively strong focus on professional life seemed to mainly result from the difficulty of sustaining a safe and comfortable life in a big metropolis like Shanghai, rather than from grand ambitions or a need to be professionally successful in order to feel fulfilled and happy.

This supposed change of work-related mentalities and perceptions between generations is difficult to apprehend and probably highly dependent on individual preferences and goals. Moreover, representations related to it are, at times, contradictory. Sociological researches on the Chinese youth from the late 1990s to the 2010s usually emphasize its growing individualism and concern for self-fulfillment and personal happiness. This new focus on the self is often described as


encouraging the youth's professional involvement, as a means of self-actualization and consumption, to the detriment of family or politics, for example. Moreover, the recurrent description of the job market as increasingly competitive casts doubt on the possibility for young college graduates and white collars to withdraw their focus on career. We consider that the most significant changes occurring in the past decades regarding the importance given by the youth to notions of self-fulfillment and happiness do not concern the degree of this importance but, rather, the ways through which self-fulfillment and happiness are generally achieved. The idea of sacrificing oneself for the nation, or for one's company, probably lost most of its appeal in the recent years, which could explain the lesser success of warfare workplace novels, where the heroes are mainly concerned by the benefit of their teams or companies, compared to the coming of age subcategory, with heroines focusing mainly on their own social status and level of consumption. Nowadays, young people still seem to chase a sense of agency, independence and self-actualization through work, which also allows them to consume other services and goods seen at increasing one's individuality and happiness, for example travels and different extra-professional activities. We can thus see that work remains majorly important in young people's life, at least as a means if not as a goal. Moreover, as indicated by the government rhetoric of individual endeavors participating in nation building, working for oneself and for one's own happiness can be described and perceived as patriotic, and individualism and care for the nation's lot are thus not incompatible.

Another possible explanation for the decreasing success of the category could be a lesser need, on the part of the government, for this type of narrative, which could have induced a withdrawal of encouragement and support for its production and diffusion. As we have seen, the years 2008 to 2010 were determinant in the positioning of China as a strong nation and important partner in the world order, which could explain the success of works encouraging the formation of hard-working and civilized individuals participating in the nation building process with their endeavors in the realms of profession and self-cultivation. It is possible that, in later years, the official rhetoric shifted and that other genres were put forward to support it. However, we have mentioned that workplace novels' rhetoric shows similarities with discourses on the Chinese Dream, a term which has been progressively popularized since 2012 - after the trend of the zhichang category had already started to fade. This shows that the novels are still aligned, at least in part, with the government's leitmotif under Xi Jinping's leadership.

Through this research, we have come to consider that popular literature in contemporary China, especially Internet literature, is widely used as a medium to transpose oneself into another life and another universe. Apparently, at some point in time, and for some readers, identifying with hard-working and ultimately successful young professionals was perceived as attractive. The fact that workplace novels have not been as popular for as long as other genres might be linked to the fact that, being realistic and depicting very reasonable and mitigated successes, they do not allow
readers to "dream big enough", or to escape far enough from their everyday life, concerns and struggles. We consider that conducting studies similar to the present one on other genres of popular fiction could allow a wider and deeper understanding of the aspirations of contemporary readers, and thus of contemporary society. An observation of the depiction of gender roles and interactions in different categories could also provide a more complete overview of common social representations of these topics. We can assume that, the further from reality a genre is, the more freedom is allowed in the depiction of relationships between men and women, which seems to be the case, notably according to the research conducted by Feng Jin on fantastic genres. Closer to the matter at hand, a deeper exploration of male characters in workplace novels, as well as a comparative study of this category with trade war novels and their protagonists would offer valuable insight and allow the continuation of the discussions initiated here.

We consider that the present research could also be continued with a systematic comparison between the workplace-related descriptions contained in the novels and the practices of the actual corporate world in contemporary China. This would allow us to reach a deeper and more complete understanding on the degree of realism of the novels, as well as on widespread representations and believes on the contemporary workplace. A comparison with Western professional environments and practices would also be valuable, as most of the novels of our corpus, as well as numerous other narratives of the zhichang category, are set in foreign firms.

The role of publishing entities in the formation of literary genres in contemporary China also deserves further analysis and would provide valuable additional information for the present research. We have seen that, in the cases of many popular genres, Internet production quantitatively constitutes the major part of the category, but published books (which are usually the most successful titles in the category, and often conform the most to official rhetoric and expectations) are still considered the most prominent representatives, and thus normative examples of the genres. Thus, a detailed exploration of the selection and formatting processes carried out by publishing houses would probably provide a unique perspective on the way literary genres are created, enforced, legitimized and canonized in contemporary China.
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APPENDIX A

The present research was integrated in a collective project titled *Popular Literature in Contemporary China: Traditional Values, Confucianism, Politics*. This project, financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation and conducted at the University of Geneva from August 1st, 2014 to July 31st, 2017, was directed by Professor Nicolas Zufferey and included Doctor Nadia Sartoretti, Jonathan Truffert, and myself. The objective of this research was to describe and explore the production, diffusion and consumption of fashionable and successful novels in contemporary China. To do so, we have delimited and researched a corpus of a hundred works which benefited from the most important visibility in the cultural landscape from the year 2000 to the year 2015, approximately.

From May 7th to May 31st, 2015, we conducted a field research in Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Suzhou and Qingdao, in order to get a better understanding of the functioning of the publication industry and of online reading websites. Indeed, the researches published on the book market at the time rarely addressed the developments occurring in the last decade. During that stay, we obtained interviews with representatives of six publishing entities (the Changjiang Wenyi Press, the Writers Publishing House, the Chongqing Publishing Group - which were mentioned when discussing the inventory of workplace novels - the Beijing Shiyue Wenyi Chubanshe 北京十月文艺出版社, the Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe 上海文艺出版社, and the Shanghai Wenhua Chubanshe 上海文化出版社), of three online reading websites (Qidian, Jinjiang Literary City and Motie 磨铁, the two first, mentioned in the present research, being the most visited platforms for Internet literature at the time), and of the media analysis company OpenBook. We also met with seven authors of our corpus (Liu Liu 六六, Cai Jun 蔡骏, Du Muzhou 独木舟, Xiao Yi 小佚, Fenwu Yaoji 纷舞妖姬, Qian Baise 浅白色 and Zhuang Zhuang 桩桩), and with four researchers focusing on contemporary popular literature (Fan Boqun 范伯群, retired from Suzhou University, Huang Ping 黄平, from the East China Normal University, Shao Yanjun 稀燕君, from Beijing University, and Zhang Li 张莉, from the Tianjin Normal University).

This field research allowed us to better understand the different editorial strategies adopted by publishing houses, some of them being keener than others to get involved in the publication of novels with high selling potential but contested literary quality. We also discovered that numerous official publishing houses now sell ISBNs to private companies, which are usually more proficient to discover and promote young and fashionable authors. We were also introduced to the functioning of online reading websites, especially regarding the system of authors' reward and the encouragement of interactions between writers and readers on those platforms. We learned that, in general, online reading websites do not dismiss submitted texts on the basis of literary quality. Any
text which does not go against national regulations is made available on the platforms, and its success among readers is the sole measure of its value. Finally, the different types of collaborations existing between online reading websites and "traditional" publishing entities were also explained to us.

Meeting different popular authors allowed us to apprehend different views on writing activities, as well as different paths to fame and different ways to enact the author's identity. For example, Xiao Yi, author of a few time travel novels, writes as a hobby kept separated from her professional and social life. She embodies how "ordinary people" can gain some level of popularity and fame through online writing, which constitutes a side activity for most Internet writers. Cai Jun, who writes thrillers inspired by the universe of Stephen King, founded a company aiming at promoting and diffusing the thriller genre and its new authors in China. He fits Kong Shuyu's description of the cultural entrepreneur. Du Muzhou, author of essays and novels centered on romance and the urban life, cultivates the image of an aloof, free-minded artist who has no interest in fame and money, which is contradicted by the omnipresence of mentions of brands and consumption in her writing, as well as by her use of her own appearance and lifestyle in the promotion of her texts.

Our encounters with Chinese researchers focusing on contemporary popular literature allowed us to apprehend different perceptions on texts which are still often considered as low-quality literature and as unworthy of attention and analysis in the intellectual and academic circles. Our discussions with the four scholars mentioned above also introduced us to some trends of studies and elements of interests in Chinese articles on popular literature. For example, as we have mentioned, Fan Boqun dedicated a few chapters of his research to the categorization of contemporary online novels, as well as to their literary origins. Huang Ping mainly studies popular writing as part of a socio-cultural phenomenon linked to the specificities of the post-1980 generation. Shao Yuanjun focuses on Internet literature, its evolution in the context of globalization, as well as its controversial status. Finally, Zhang Li is the author of different researches on gender representations in popular novels.

These are only a few examples of the valuable information that this field research allowed us to gather. It was also the occasion to visit different bookstores and to acquire novels, movies and TV shows which are not easily available for purchase in the West.

664. KONG 2005.
APPENDIX B

Inventory tabs

826 works

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JLAPH = Jiangsu Literature and Art Publishing House; CPH = Chongqing Publishing House; WPH = Writers Publishing House; NWPH = New World Publishing House