

The Growth Trajectory and Contributing Factors of Chinese Online Literature Under the Influence of Internet Technology

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Abstract:

This study examines the three-decade evolution of Chinese online literature and its phased development in international influence, analyzing the transformative path of literary forms driven by Internet technology. Employing methodologies such as historical analysis, data examination, and case studies, this research conducts an in-depth investigation into the growth path and causative factors of Chinese online literature. It clearly posits that: 1) Technological innovation in the Internet realm serves as the core driver, continuously propelling, iterating, and restructuring the production methods and dissemination models of Chinese online literature; 2) The industrial model of Chinese online literature has transitioned from free reading to a paid + full-chain IP development model, ultimately forming a closed-loop ecosystem encompassing creation, operation, and derivative development; 3) International dissemination has progressed from content export to model export, and further to global co-creation of IP; 4) The "Z Generation" is driving content refinement and mainstream integration, with an increasing proportion of realistic themes, and works incorporating national sentiment and cultural confidence. Consequently, this study concludes that Chinese online literature has accomplished the transition from the periphery to the mainstream, and from a local Chinese context to a global stage.

Keywords: Chinese online literature; Internet technology; international communication; global co-created IP; growth trajectory

1. Introduction

With the rapid advancement of science and technology and the explosive development of the Internet, the global cultural landscape has undergone profound transformations. In particular, the



rise of Chinese online literature in recent years has gradually made it an integral part of global culture. In 2022, sixteen works of Chinese online literature were officially included in the collection of the British Library, marking a significant milestone in its internationalization. In November 2024, another ten works were added to the collection. These works now stand alongside *The Da Vinci Manuscripts*, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, and *Pride and Prejudice*, demonstrating the growing global influence of Chinese online literature. By November 2024, WebNovel—the overseas portal of China Literature Group (Yuewen Group)—had launched approximately 6,000 translated works, with over 2,000 new AI-translated titles added annually, representing a twentyfold increase in growth. In 2024, the overseas market value of Chinese online literature exceeded 5 billion RMB, cultivating more than 460,000 overseas online writers and over 350 million international readers, spanning more than 200 countries and regions worldwide (*China Internet Development Statistical Report*, July 2025). This rapid process of internationalization illustrates the increasingly significant position of Chinese online literature within global cultural exchange.

As one of the most important technological inventions of the twentieth century, Internet technology has profoundly shaped the course of human civilization (Ma, 2014). Technological innovation has continually driven changes in media forms; the popularization and evolution of Internet technology have not only transformed lifestyles but also reshaped the media ecology, prompting structural reform across media formats and industries. In the field of literary creation and dissemination, the Internet has brought about revolutionary transformations, giving birth to a new literary form—online literature.

The rise of the Internet has liberated literary creation from the confines of traditional print media, accelerating its transformation toward electronic and diversified digital platforms. The convenience, interactivity, and immediacy of electronic media have made it a dominant form of reading. Moreover, the Internet has broken through the geographical and institutional limitations of traditional publishing, drastically lowering the threshold for creation and publication, and providing every netizen with the opportunity to produce and distribute literary works—thus facilitating the birth of online literature.

Online literature, distributed via Internet platforms, is characterized by its immediacy, interactivity, and innovation in both language and consciousness (Peng, 2020). This form of writing not only breaks through the closed, top-down model of traditional literary creation but also establishes a new interactive relationship between authors and readers (Yin, 2019). Among its diverse genres, online fiction—with its dynamic storytelling, flexible style, and strong digital attributes—has become the representative form of online literature.

Since the emergence of *Huaxia Digest*, the world's first Chinese-language online magazine, in 1991, Chinese online literature has evolved from an early subcultural form into a globally

influential cultural phenomenon (Ouyang, 2023). The continuous development of Internet technologies, coupled with the Chinese government's emphasis on digital infrastructure and supportive policies, has provided strong institutional and technical guarantees for the growth of online literature. From the launch of the CANET project in 1986, to the promulgation of the *Provisional Regulations on the International Networking of Computer Information Networks* in 1996, and the proposal of the "Internet Plus" strategy in 2015, the Chinese government has consistently created favorable conditions for the flourishing of online literature.

Over more than three decades, Chinese online literature has undergone multiple developmental stages—an initial incubation period, a platform expansion phase, a commercialization era, and finally an era of industrial export—ultimately entering the stage of global cultural mainstreaming. Today, it stands alongside Hollywood cinema, Japanese anime, and Korean dramas as one of the world's four major cultural phenomena.

This study aims to analyze the developmental trajectory of Chinese online literature, exploring its evolution under the influence of Internet technologies and the underlying causes driving these transformations. Specifically, the study seeks to provide a theoretical and empirical framework for understanding the growth logic of online literature as a new cultural form and to offer insights into the interaction between technological innovation and literary production. The research addresses the following core question:

- (1) Under the influence of Internet technology, what stage-based characteristics has Chinese online literature exhibited during its development?
- (2) How have different generations of media technologies progressively shaped the content, form, and dissemination of online literature?
- (3) What are the internal and external driving forces behind Chinese online literature's transformation from a "subculture" to an internationally recognized mainstream culture?

Through a comprehensive historical and analytical approach, this study provides both theoretical and practical contributions. It establishes an academic framework for examining the development of Chinese online literature and offers strategic implications for the global advancement of China's cultural industries within the context of globalization.

2.Literature Review

Since the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, with the widespread adoption of Internet technologies, Chinese online literature has gradually emerged as a significant literary and cultural phenomenon. In 1998, *The First Intimate Contact* triggered a nationwide wave of enthusiasm for online fiction in mainland China, marking the entry of online literature into public view. Wu Guanjun (2000), in his article *The Zebra Crossing of Postmodern Literature: A*

Discussion from a Web Novel, was among the first to engage in an academic exploration of this new form of literature, drawing the attention of scholars to the study of online literary production. Huang Mingfen (2002) argued that the essential characteristics of online literature lie in its dynamism, interactivity, and openness, with “networked-ness” as its defining feature. Ouyang Youquan (2018) traced the origins of online literature to the establishment of *Huaxia Digest* in 1991 in the United States, thus providing an early historical reference for the beginnings of Chinese online literature. Shao Yanjun and Ji Yunfei (2021) further emphasized that the introduction of the VIP paid-reading system by Qidian Chinese Web transformed both the creative and commercial models of online literature. In particular, the “user-generated content (UGC) and fan-based economy” became the driving force behind the sustainability of online literary ecosystems.

From a media-theoretical perspective, Yu Jianxiang (2010) established a new critical paradigm for online literature, proposing a triadic framework based on aesthetics, technology, and commerce. This approach highlights the necessity of cross-contextual cultural criticism and pluralistic evaluative standards. Zhu Weiwei (2020) explored the emergence of online culture as a new cultural form derived from cyberspace in the Internet era, while Deng Hailin (2021) identified its core attributes as publicness, technicality, normativity, and ideological orientation. With the ongoing development of Internet technologies, the expressive forms of online literature have undergone tremendous changes, evolving from pure text creation to include multimedia, interactive, and even virtual-reality-based forms (Yin, 2019). The interactivity and immediacy of digital media have fundamentally transformed traditional modes of literary creation and dissemination (Xia, Yu & Chen, 2018). This innovation allows readers to interact directly with authors, offer feedback, and even participate in plot development, thereby enhancing the openness and interactivity of literary production.

In terms of content, Chinese online literature has become increasingly diversified. It encompasses a broad range of genres—from romance and urban fiction to fantasy and science fiction—thus catering to a wide spectrum of reader preferences (Xia & Yu, 2024). With technological advancement, online literary creation has also integrated audio-visual elements, such as video and sound, further enriching its modes of expression and artistic presentation.

The industrialization of online literature has also become an important topic in scholarly research. Zhan Xinhui and Xu Dandan (2005) examined the industrial development of online literature, emphasizing the importance of intellectual property (IP) development and copyright protection as key areas for future study. Miao Liping (2005) focused on IP operations and the emerging ecosystem of online content, contributing significantly to the understanding of online literature’s commercial potential. In addressing copyright issues, Liu Xiaolan (2011) analyzed the prevalence of piracy and proposed the establishment of standardized regulatory mechanisms,

while Lin Liuxuan and Zhang Jianfei (2017) explored the application of blockchain technology in copyright protection.

The internationalization of Chinese online literature has gradually become a major research trend. Ji Yunfei and Li Qiang (2017) argued that the global dissemination of Chinese online literature should prioritize cultural identification and constructive cultural guidance. With increasing policy support from the Chinese government, online literature has gained access to international markets (Shao, 2025). The breakthrough in AI translation technologies has further accelerated its global expansion, providing new opportunities for Chinese online literature to enter foreign markets (Xia & Yu, 2024). Nevertheless, challenges such as “cultural discount” and market competition remain significant obstacles to global dissemination (Kuo & Lee, 2019). Sung and Park (2022) analyzed the reception of Chinese online literature in European and American markets, emphasizing the necessity of localization and cultural adaptation to meet global market expectations.

Overall, technological progress and media transformation have jointly facilitated the emergence and evolution of Chinese online literature. Scholars have explored this field from multiple dimensions, including its definition, critical framework, industrial development, and transnational dissemination. The general consensus is that Chinese online literature exemplifies the interplay between technology and culture, embodying both the democratization of literary production and the global diffusion of cultural identity. In the context of globalization, balancing cultural export with market competitiveness remains a key issue. Future research should further investigate the impact of successive technological stages on online literary forms, as well as how Chinese online literature can respond to international market demands while maintaining its cultural distinctiveness and aesthetic authenticity.

3. The Developmental Trajectory of Chinese Online Literature under Media Technology

3.1 The Incubation Period (1997–2002)

Technological innovation serves as the core driving force behind the iteration and reconstruction of media forms, which in turn propelled the rapid development of Chinese online literature. In 1994, China officially connected to the global Internet through a 64K international leased line, marking the nation’s formal entry into the digital era. During this time, university students and literature enthusiasts in China began to reprint Chinese-language online literary works from North American websites onto domestic university BBS forums, igniting widespread interest in online writing.

In its early phase, Chinese online literature was heavily influenced by global popular fiction, often adopting and localizing those genres (Shao, Ji & Xiao, 2018). However, due to

technological limitations, early creations were primarily short in form—essays, prose, and poetry rather than long-form fiction.

In 1995, China's first Internet service provider, Yinghaiwei Space, was founded, providing critical technological support for the popularization of the Internet and the emergence of online literature. Around the same time, several early literary platforms such as *Shuimu Tsinghua Station* and *Xici Hutong* were established, creating virtual spaces for literary exchange and creative practice. By 1997, the rise of Internet cafés had made online interaction a defining feature of youth culture, and publishing on the Internet became a new trend among young writers. In order to meet the creative and social needs of this digitally native generation, several influential literary websites were launched, including *Rongshuxia* (1997), *Hongxiu Tianxiang* (1999), *Huanjian Shumeng* (2000), and *Qidian Chinese Web* (2002). These platforms collectively marked the beginning of China's network literature era.

According to McLuhan's theory of media ecology, the openness and interactivity of the Internet—especially its user-participatory nature—fundamentally changed the modes of literary creation and dissemination (McLuhan, 1964). Unlike traditional print journals, which relied on editorial selection and delayed publication cycles, online literature thrived through immediacy and direct author–reader engagement. BBS forums provided spaces for community participation, feedback, and real-time discussion, thereby fostering a participatory and grassroots creative culture.

A watershed moment occurred on March 22, 1998, when *The First Intimate Contact* was first published on the BBS of National Cheng Kung University in Tainan, Taiwan. The novel's immense popularity marked the true rise of Chinese-language online literature and the dawn of a new literary era.

During this stage, Chinese online literature mainly focused on youth romance and fantasy themes. The majority of writers were amateurs, and most works were made available for free. The BBS became the primary platform for these creations, characterized by its grassroots, interactive, and open nature. Representative works such as *The First Intimate Contact*, *A Chinese Odyssey: The True Story of Wukong*, and *Chengdu, Please Forget Me Tonight* revealed both the creative vitality and limitations of this early form—namely, a participatory ethos, user-driven production, and non-commercial orientation.

The early development of online literature—especially its open, interactive BBS-based environment—not only fostered the domestic growth of the genre but also provided an initial pathway for cross-cultural communication. Many of the early literary websites carried the aspirations and creative ideals of a generation, laying the groundwork for the large-scale expansion of Chinese online literature in subsequent years.

3.2 The Period of Platform Development (2003–2010)

Around the year 2000, the widespread adoption of ADSL technology in China signaled the transition from “narrowband” to “broadband” Internet, while reduced connection costs greatly facilitated user access. By December 31, 2002, the number of Internet users in China had surpassed that of Japan, making China the world’s second-largest Internet user population after the United States (*China Internet Development Statistical Report*, 2002). This technological leap spurred a dramatic surge in online literary creation.

However, the rapid expansion of online literature also brought about a number of challenges. The dominance of the “free reading” model led to rampant piracy, homogenized content, and weak copyright awareness—issues that undermined the interests of both creators and platforms. In response, Qidian Chinese Web launched its “online paid reading” service in 2003, marking the beginning of the commercialization of Chinese online literature.

This shift represented a milestone in the industry’s evolution. It not only recognized the labor value of authors but also incentivized higher-quality writing and effectively curbed piracy (Lü, 2020). The paid-reading model established a sustainable business ecosystem, protecting authors’ rights and promoting industrial growth. Over time, this model became the industry standard, sparking an explosion in both the quantity and quality of online literary works.

As the paid-reading system gained popularity, major Internet companies began acquiring leading literary platforms, accelerating industry consolidation. Following Shanda Group’s acquisition of Qidian, Hongxiu, and Jinjiang Original, the VIP subscription model quickly became dominant and attracted a wave of professional writers (Lü, 2020). The previous “volume-driven” model gave way to a more mature “quality-driven” stage (Huang, 2022).

By 2018, the market size of Chinese online literature had reached 7.3 billion RMB and was projected to grow to 38.3 billion RMB by 2023 (Zhang, 2024). With the maturation of paid reading systems, both the number of platforms and the population of writers expanded rapidly. By the end of 2017, China had more than 14 million online literature authors and over 400 million readers (Li, 2018).

This period also witnessed the professionalization of online writing, as paid readerships supported authors’ transition from hobbyists to full-time creators. The resulting professional ecosystem gave rise to a new wave of popular genres—fantasy, science fiction, and urban realism—each reflecting the diversified demands of an expanding audience (Ji, 2024).

Through acquisitions and structural integration, major platforms such as Zongheng Chinese, Tianya Literature, and others established large-scale content portals. The era of amateur, decentralized BBS literature gradually gave way to a phase of specialization and industrial concentration. The maturity of platform-based operations fostered a virtuous cycle between creators, platforms, and readers, marking the full professionalization and commercialization of Chinese online literature.

3.3 Commercialization Model (2011-2020)

With the rise of mobile Internet, online literature began migrating from traditional PC platforms to mobile terminals, marking its entry into a second development stage (Zeng, 2018). By 2012, the Internet penetration rate among Chinese citizens aged 18-70 reached 55.6%, with 29.2% accessing the Internet via mobile phones, a 3.8 percentage point increase from 2011 (China Urban Reading Index Research Report, 2013). This shift reflected the profound impact of mobile Internet on reading habits, signaling the arrival of the mobile digital reading era.

The popularity of mobile devices transformed people's reading patterns. From the second half of 2012 onward, mobile reading gradually surpassed traditional computer and print reading to become the most common reading method. The convenience and low cost of mobile phones made them the preferred medium for reading, particularly advantageous for utilizing fragmented time (Cui, 2013). This transformation represented not merely a change in media tools but a revolution in behavior and thinking (McLuhan, 1964), freeing reading from the constraints of time and location.

The transition from PC to mobile platforms brought about profound changes in the online literature ecosystem. Mobile reading transformed online literature from a niche culture into a mass consumption phenomenon, spawning bidirectional interaction and co-creation models that further diversified and entertained content creation. This shift not only boosted content production but also fundamentally changed its business model.

3.3.1 Rise of IP

With the popularization of mobile Internet, IP adaptation became a key driver of online literature commercialization. In 2011, the success of two classic IP adaptations based on online literature, "Bu Bu Jing Xin" and "Legend of Zhen Huan," marked a new stage in IP adaptation. These successes triggered a wave of IP adaptations, promoting deep integration between online literature and the film and television industries and creating new market opportunities (Su, 2023).

In 2014, the TV series "Swords of Legends," adapted from a game, achieved great success, demonstrating the enormous commercial potential of major IP adaptations. This was followed in 2015 by landmark adaptations such as "Nirvana in Fire" and "The Journey of Flower," which proved that high-quality IP adaptations could not only realize commercial value but also enhance artistic value. During this stage, IP adaptation became the core of the online literature industry, attracting capital investment and promoting the coordinated development of film, television, animation, and gaming sectors (Wang, 2024).

3.3.2 Accelerated Commercialization and Capitalization

As the IP adaptation trend gained momentum, the commercialization of online literature accelerated. In 2015, Tencent acquired Shanda Literature for \$730 million, establishing China Literature Limited and promoting the integration of the online literature industry chain. China

Literature not only focused on literary creation and publishing but also expanded into games, animation, film, and television, forming a complete IP industry chain. In the same year, Baidu and Alibaba also increased their layout in online literature, through acquisitions and resource integration, creating industry chains centered on original creation and distribution (Yuan, 2024).

The establishment of the IP industry chain promoted the diversified development of the online literature industry. With increased capital investment, online literature expanded beyond book publishing to include film and television production, game development, and animation adaptation. This diversification established online literature as an important component of China's cultural industry and advanced its internationalization.

3.3.3 Market Expansion and Future Outlook

By 2018, the market size of Chinese online literature had reached 7.3 billion yuan, and was projected to grow to 38.3 billion yuan by 2023 (Zhang, 2024). Behind this growth were the combined drivers of the payment model, IP development, and professionalized creation. Commercialization ensured creators' interests while promoting quality improvement. By the end of 2017, the number of Chinese online literature authors had exceeded 14 million, with readership surpassing 400 million (Li, 2018). Mobile terminals had become the core scene for online literature, with approximately 90% of reading occurring on mobile devices. The popularity of mobile platforms, the maturity of the payment model, and the full-chain development of IP collectively propelled the vigorous growth of China's online literature industry into a stable growth phase.

In summary, technological innovation not only increased user numbers but also matured Chinese online literature, forming a large-scale industrial ecosystem. Online literature evolved from a single content production industry into a pan-entertainment industry encompassing film, television, games, and animation, becoming an important carrier of China's cultural soft power and promoting the internationalization and industrialization of Chinese online literature.

3.4 Era of Commercial Export(2021-Present)

By December 2020, China's Internet user base had reached 989 million, providing strong technical support and a solid foundation for the development of online literature, with the number of online literature users reaching 467 million. In 2020, the market size of China's digital reading industry reached 37.21 billion yuan, and was expected to reach 41.6 billion yuan in 2021. Online literature continued to play a source and core role, driving downstream cultural industries such as film, television, animation, games, and audio books, with a total output value exceeding 1 trillion yuan (China Internet Network Information Center, 2021).

China Literature owns top-tier IPs such as "Joy of Life" and "Lord of Mysteries," and has established a full industry chain model from serialized text on Qidian Chinese Network, to film and television adaptation by Xinli Media, to secondary creation by Tencent Animation, and

finally to derivative products such as blind boxes and themed stores that reach users in daily life. The 34.2% growth in IP copyright revenue in its 2024 financial report confirmed the success of this multi-channel utilization model.

Driven by both IP development and the overseas popularity of Chinese literature, a series of IP-adapted dramas sparked a "C-Drama" craze overseas in 2024. "Joy of Life 2" achieved global simultaneous release through Disney+, becoming the most popular mainland Chinese drama on the platform. "With the Phoenix" was broadcast in more than 180 countries and regions worldwide, while "Between Ink and Clouds" topped media platforms in Thailand and South Korea. The popularity of these dramas drove the derivative work "Ye Qingmei's Diary" onto multiple platform hot searches, with "Joy of Life" IP blind boxes selling over 200,000 units and collectible cards achieving the highest sales among film and television cards. The readership of the original work increased 38-fold month-on-month, demonstrating the powerful global influence of online literature IP across film, television, and derivative industries.

Influenced by Chinese online literature, British youth Calvin, writing under the pseudonym "JKSManga," began creating on WebNovel. This development signifies that Chinese online literature overseas is not merely content export but the construction of a localized overseas creative ecosystem. From reading Chinese online literature, to discussing Chinese culture, and then to writing Chinese stories, numerous overseas readers have embarked on creative careers. Currently, the WebNovel platform alone has nurtured approximately 430,000 overseas online literature writers across more than 100 countries and regions. They enjoy drawing on Chinese themes and incorporating Chinese elements into their works, giving rise to a new phenomenon of globalized writing of Chinese stories (Hou, 2024).

4. Analysis of Contributing Factors

Williams argued that McLuhan's media theory emphasizes the determining role of technological characteristics on human thinking and behavior, yet to some extent overlooks the social intentions and historical contexts of media users and controllers (Liu & Hong, 2024). McLuhan's technological determinism fails to fully consider social and political factors, resulting in a theoretical bias toward nominalism and idealism (Baudrillard, cited in Liu & Hong, 2024).

4.1 Generation Z Leading Online Literature Trends

Generation Z refers to people born between 1995 and 2009, who grew up during a period of rapid development in the Internet and digital technologies. With abundant material conditions, the Internet and smartphones have become integral parts of their daily lives. Generation Z's familiarity with digital technology means they are not only users of the Internet but also creators and disseminators of content. This group excels at expressing opinions through social media and online platforms and has distinctive cultural and lifestyle interests. Consequently, Generation Z

has gradually become the main force behind Chinese online literature (2021 China Online Literature Development Research Report, 2021).

According to 2021 data, Generation Z accounted for more than 80% of new writers on China Literature platforms and over 60% of new readers (2021 China Online Literature Development Research Report, 2021). This trend indicates that Generation Z is leading the trend of online literature creation, and their cultural characteristics and values are shaping the future direction of online literature.

Generation Z not only dominates in terms of reading volume but also drives revolution in online literature content. In 2024, Generation Z writers accounted for nearly 40% of newly contracted authors (Zhang, 2021). With their sensitivity to society and culture, these writers are increasingly focusing on themes with greater ideological depth and social value, such as realistic works reflecting social changes in contemporary China. Zhang Bonan's "Days Delivering Takeaways in Beijing" portrays the hardships faced by modern workers, while Shi Chensà's "Leaping on the Tide" tells the story of how industrial engineers broke through technological blockades to promote innovation in China's electric vehicle industry. These works not only focus on individual growth and social transformation but also reflect Generation Z's deep recognition of national sentiment and social responsibility.

Furthermore, Generation Z writers emphasize the ideological and social value of their works, demonstrating pride in traditional Chinese culture and technological development. For example, "Gold Medal Apprentice" focuses on the growth and transformation of young Chinese people in the skilled trades, showing respect for the spirit of contemporary Chinese workers. The rise of this trend has transformed online literature from mere entertainment toward a more culturally profound direction.

The cultural characteristics of Generation Z enable them to combine traditional literary narrative methods with modern online culture in their online literature creation, forming distinctive creative styles and dissemination methods. They create through digital platforms and use social media and highly interactive online platforms for immediate feedback and revision, making their works more socially engaging and interactive. In addition, in the dissemination process of online literature, Generation Z writers demonstrate a strong sense of national pride and social responsibility, shifting the focus from early themes of love and fantasy toward more socially relevant topics such as the growth and struggle of the working class and the impact of modern technology.

These emerging themes and creative directions not only enrich the content of online literature but also stimulate the participation enthusiasm of Generation Z readers, forming a virtuous cycle of interaction among "online literature—creators—readers." Under Generation Z's leadership, online literature creation is gradually becoming an important component of

Chinese literature and cultural industries, promoting the diversified development of the cultural industry and, particularly in a global context, increasingly serving as a vital carrier of China's cultural soft power.

4.2 Clear Trend Toward High-Quality Content Creation

Since 1998, Chinese online literature has undergone significant transformation, evolving from early single-genre novels toward a more diversified and high-quality creative trend. Initially, online literature was dominated by youth romance novels such as "The First Intimate Contact" and "Farewell to Wei'an." The success of these works was closely related to the characteristics of Internet users at the time—primarily university students and young highly educated individuals who were interested in youth themes and for whom creative techniques were relatively simple, making youth-themed the main direction of creation.

In 2003, with the introduction of the paid reading model, the quality of online literature creation changed. Creators began receiving economic returns, and creation gradually became professionalized, promoting the industrialized production of online literature and accelerating the process of content refinement. At this time, many well-known writers such as Tang Jia San Shao, Tian Can Tudou, and Wo Chi Xihongshi rose to prominence in online literature, with fantasy-themed works such as "Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons," "Zhu Xian," and "Douluo Dalu" becoming particularly popular among readers.

Following the Chinese government's proposal in 2014 of a "people-centered creative orientation" and its emphasis on realistic themes, online literature creation gradually shifted toward subjects such as social issues, youth struggle, and national sentiment. Generation Z writers (born between 1995 and 2010) have gradually become the backbone of creation—they are not only the main consumer group but also important drivers of content creation.

With their distinctive "Internet sensibility," Generation Z writers have innovated the narrative style of online literature and expanded its creative boundaries. Unlike traditional fantasy and xianxia works, they have begun to focus on social reality, creating numerous works on topics such as modern workers and technological change. For example, Zhang Bonan's "Days Delivering Takeaways in Beijing" reflects the social predicament faced by food delivery workers, while Chensa's "Leaping on the Tide" explores the rise of China's electric vehicle industry. These works emphasize ideological depth and social value, using real life and contemporary backgrounds as support to push Chinese online literature from entertainment toward a more diverse and thought-provoking direction.

At the same time, Generation Z writers are creating more works involving history and culture, endowing online literature with deeper social functions. For example, "A Century of Family Letters" uses historical time travel to present the humiliation and heroism of China's modern history, expressing strong patriotic feelings. The author Feng Diuzi has stated that

writing this novel was intended to commemorate China's humiliation and revival and to express national pride and resilience. Such works not only enhance the cultural value of online literature but also increase its social influence.

In addition, Generation Z writers are constantly exploring new creative methods, combining traditional culture with modern values and promoting innovation in online literature. "Jiang Ye" uses fantasy-themed to explore concepts of justice and freedom in Confucian thought, while "Life is Quite Sweet" focuses on the lives and responsibilities of middle-aged medical workers. These works demonstrate contemporary young people's concern for social responsibility, family values, and professional ideals.

With the addition of Generation Z, Chinese online literature is gradually transforming from mere entertainment toward a literary form with deeper cultural connotation and social significance. Their works not only demonstrate the relationship between personal growth and social change but also, by focusing on contemporary social issues, promote the refinement of online literature. Generation Z has not only broken traditional creative models but has also enabled online literature to demonstrate stronger ideological and cultural value, becoming a form of literary expression with profound social significance.

4.3 Formation of a Comprehensive Cultural Industry Chain for Online Literature IP

Since the late 1990s, Chinese online literature has transformed from early personal creation and reader-interactive platforms into a comprehensive industry chain. With the popularization of the Internet, online literature gradually entered a stage of commercial development and has become an important component of China's digital culture. In 2024, the market size of the online literature IP market reached 298.56 billion yuan, a year-on-year increase of 14.6%, indicating rapid growth and maturity of the industry (2024 China Online Literature Development Research Report, 2025). The most significant change during this stage has been the evolution of China's online literature industry ecosystem from "content creation—platform operation—IP development" toward a comprehensive cultural industry chain, becoming a strategic engine for global digital cultural export.

Early online literature was dominated by fantasy, romance, and martial arts genres, attracting large numbers of young readers. Initial creation relied more on personal interest and the passion of young authors, with relatively simple content. With the promotion of early online platforms such as BBS, writers such as Anni Baobei, Li Xunhuan, and Han Han gradually came to prominence, laying the foundation for later IP development. As the online literature market gradually matured, the introduction of the paid reading model in 2003 provided economic incentives for creators, encouraging the transformation toward professionalization and promoting the diversification and refinement of content, resulting in landmark works such as "Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons" and "Douluo Dalu."

Initially limited to novels and comics targeting specific reader groups, IP (intellectual property) emerged as an important form of expression in online literature. In 2009, "Great River East" won the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China "Five-One Project Award," marking an improvement in the quality and social recognition of Chinese online literature works and further promoting the possibility of IP film and television adaptation. Through film and television adaptation, the value of IP was greatly enhanced, breaking the limitations of original text and comics, expanding into diverse audio-visual products, and broadening the audience base. Film and television works became "amplifiers" for IP, greatly enhancing its dissemination power and commercial value.

The popularity of "Bu Bu Jing Xin" and "Legend of Zhen Huan" marked a turning point in the development of online literature IP. The success of these works not only provided a model for the IP development model of online literature but also attracted capital investment, gradually forming a diversified IP industry chain. Various business models such as film and television adaptation, cultural and creative products, and cross-border cooperation were integrated into the IP development process of online literature, bringing more profit models to the industry. Through emotional interaction based on "BE aesthetics," co-branded products with the Palace Museum cultural and creative program, and AR filters, these works not only attracted fans but also deepened the cultural experience of IP and pioneered new paths for commercial realization of IP.

With the addition of capital and technology, the IP development model of online literature has become increasingly mature. A multi-domain linked IP industry chain encompassing film, television, animation, and games has gradually taken shape, promoting the transformation of Chinese online literature toward a comprehensive cultural industry chain. During this process, content creation has expanded from single text to include audio novels, comics, animation, games, film and television, and offline commerce, forming a rich cross-media communication chain (Lai, 2022). A landmark event in this transformation was the success of drama series such as "Joy of Life 2," which not only attracted the cooperation of numerous brand advertisers but also enhanced the commercial value of online literature IP.

The transformation toward a comprehensive cultural industry chain for Chinese online literature IP has not only enhanced its cultural value but also fully unleashed its commercial potential. In 2024, the scale of the online literature industry reached 35.8 billion yuan, with user scale exceeding 500 million, accounting for 48.6% of Chinese Internet users (Lai, 2022). This development trend indicates that online literature not only occupies an important position in the domestic market but also provides new opportunities for the globalization process. Through cross-platform and cross-media operation, the value of online literature IP continues to be

amplified, promoting the development of downstream cultural industries including film, television, games, animation, and audio.

IP development in Chinese online literature has evolved from sporadic attempts into an important component of industrialization. Following the success of works such as "Legend of Zhen Huan," "Nirvana in Fire," and "The Journey of Flower," the influence of online literature has continued to expand. Sustained capital investment and technological innovation have continuously enhanced the commercial value of online literature IP, providing strong support for film and television companies to develop adaptations of online literature works. This industrialization trend has transformed online literature from a purely literary creation field toward a comprehensive cross-media development stage and has promoted the overall upgrading of China's cultural industry.

By 2020, online literature had entered a new stage, with profound changes in content creation, business models, and IP development promoting the industry toward a more refined and professional direction. As interaction between technology, capital, creators, and consumers continues to deepen, the next development stage of Chinese online literature is taking shape, which is expected to continue occupying an important position in the global cultural industry (Zhou & Zhang, 2021).

4.4 "Global Co-created IP" Becoming a New Growth Point in International Communication

With the advancement of globalization, the concept of the "global village" proposed by McLuhan has become increasingly prominent. Modern media technologies have broken through the limitations of time and space, bringing the world closer together. As an emerging cultural form, online literature has become an important vehicle for promoting cultural exchange between China and the West. With the enhancement of China's national strength, online literature has not only become a window for displaying Chinese culture but also a channel for the world to understand China. Its accessible language, exciting stories, and rich imagination enable it to convey emotions common to humanity and meet the diverse needs of readers from different cultural backgrounds.

China's "going global" strategy for online literature has advanced steadily, gradually forming a multi-level global communication network. In 2024, the number of exported Chinese online literature works exceeded 808,400, covering 352 million global users in more than 200 countries and regions (Liu, 2025). This achievement has benefited from government policy support, such as funding and copyright protection measures, which have created a favorable environment for promoting the global dissemination of Chinese online literature. The industry chain of Chinese online literature has evolved from simple content export toward an industrial model centered on "global co-created IP," becoming an important force in China's cultural export (Chen, 2023).

As a typical case of an online literature IP going global, "The King's Avatar" demonstrates the enormous potential of Chinese online literature. Since its first release in 2011, "The King's Avatar" has gradually become a global cultural phenomenon through diversified development including novels, animation, film and television, and games. Its success in markets such as Japan and the United States once again demonstrates the tremendous potential of cross-cultural communication of online literature IP. By 2024, "The King's Avatar" had spread widely worldwide, with card product transactions exceeding 60 million yuan, blind box sales surpassing 200,000 units, and derivative products sold in multiple international markets (Chen, 2024). The success of this IP is attributable to precise market positioning and innovative content production strategies, while also demonstrating the globalization process of China's online literature IP industry.

With technological progress, particularly breakthroughs in AI translation technology, multilingual output of online literature has become more efficient. The application of AI translation has accelerated the global dissemination of Chinese online literature, enabling more works to quickly enter international markets in multiple languages. In addition, the development of mobile Internet, cloud computing, and intelligent recommendation algorithms has provided convenient channels and precise promotion methods for the dissemination of online literature. In 2024, WebNovel had launched approximately 6,000 translated Chinese online literature works, with more than 2,000 new AI-translated works added, showing significant technology-driven growth in this field (Hu & Feng, 2025).

Through its globalization strategy, Chinese online literature IP has entered a new stage of "global co-creation." This stage not only includes the accelerated promotion of multilingual translation but also the construction of global cooperation platforms aimed at nurturing overseas creators and promoting the joint development of the global IP industry chain. For example, through in-depth cooperation with global partners, the industrial value of Chinese online literature IP has been further amplified, with cross-domain IP development (including film, television, animation, and games) becoming a new growth point. The successful promotion of Chinese online literature has not only enhanced China's influence in the international cultural market but also promoted the diversified development of the global cultural industry.

The successful adaptation of works such as "Empresses in the Palace" and "Treading On Thin Ice" has opened new paths for the globalization of online literature IP. Through various business model developments including film and television adaptation, cultural and creative products, and brand cooperation, they have demonstrated the enormous commercial potential of online literature, attracting significant capital into this industry. With the deepening of IP development, online literature has gradually transformed into a comprehensive cultural industry

chain, with its value expanding into a wider range of fields from original content to film and television, games, animation, and offline commerce.

Looking to the future, Chinese online literature will continue to promote cross-border cultural integration in the context of globalization. Through the global layout of content, platforms, and IP, the global influence of Chinese online literature will be further enhanced, while also providing rich innovation models for the global cultural market. Under the combined influence of technological innovation and policy support, online literature will become an important force in literature and cultural industries in the new era, not only promoting the global dissemination of Chinese culture but also contributing to global cultural exchange and integration (Hou, 2023).

5. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive review of the evolutionary trajectory of Chinese online literature since its emergence, revealing its transformation from a marginal subculture to a globally recognized cultural phenomenon. The core discussion centers on the technological dynamics that have driven its formal innovation, industrial transformation, international dissemination, and the reshaping of its content ecology by Generation Z.

The findings indicate that, first, the iterative advancement of Internet technologies has served as the fundamental driving force behind the continuous development of online literature, restructuring its modes of production, distribution, and consumption. Second, the industrial model has evolved from free reading to paid subscription, and further toward a full-chain IP development system that integrates creation, operation, and derivative ecosystems. Third, international communication has progressed from single-content export and model dissemination to global co-creation of intellectual property (IP), marking Chinese online literature as an active carrier of cross-cultural exchange. Finally, Generation Z, as both creators and consumers, has propelled the mainstreaming, refinement, and value elevation of online literary genres. With the advancement of technology, the “content + platform + IP” model of literary production has provided a broader global stage for collaborative IP creation.

The contributions of this study lie in three main aspects. First, through historical review and case analysis, it reveals both the internal logic and external dynamics of Chinese online literature’s development under the influence of Internet technologies, offering a theoretical framework and empirical reference for understanding this global cultural phenomenon. Second, by examining the roles of media technology, industrial transformation, and Generation Z, the study demonstrates how Chinese online literature has gradually entered the global cultural stage through continuous innovation and internationalization strategies. Third, it provides theoretical support for enhancing China’s cultural soft power and building global cultural bridges, thereby clarifying the significance of Chinese online literature in global cultural dissemination.

Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations. The analysis of specific challenges—such as cultural discount and international market competition—remains relatively limited. In particular, how Chinese online literature can balance the tension between globalization and localization across diverse cultural contexts and market demands warrants further investigation. Additionally, the ethical and humanistic implications of the deep integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in literary creation remain underexplored. The role of AI in the creative process, and the ways to reconcile technological innovation with the essence of literary creativity, constitute crucial issues for future inquiry.

Future research may focus on several areas. First, studies on transnational audience reception mechanisms are needed to understand how different cultural contexts perceive and respond to Chinese online literature in the age of globalization. Second, attention should be paid to the boundaries of technological ethics, particularly regarding the use of AI translation and creative tools, and how these technologies influence the processes of creation, dissemination, and the transmission of cultural value. Third, the tension between globalization and localization deserves further exploration, especially how Chinese online literature can effectively convey Chinese culture in the global market while avoiding cultural homogenization and maintaining its uniqueness and depth. Through such investigations, future research can offer a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic development of Chinese online literature within the global cultural landscape, providing new perspectives for academic exploration.

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“BE aesthetic”(a cyber buzzword) refers to an aesthetic concept derived from cyber culture, specifically denoting the phenomenon where audiences develop a strong emotional resonance with literary and artistic works featuring a tragic ending (Bad Ending). Emerging on social media platforms around 2021, this concept argues that compared with happy endings, imperfect endings are more likely to evoke profound emotional impressions and sustained discussions. Its core characteristic lies in triggering the audience’s psychological state of “lingering regret” (a Chinese expression describing the feeling of being unable to let go of unresolved matters or emotions) through the flawed fates of characters or their unfulfilled emotions, thereby creating a unique aesthetic experience. (n.d.). Definition of “BE Aesthetic”. Retrieved from [Note: If a specific source URL or platform (e.g., Baidu Baike, Douban Encyclopedia) exists, replace this part with the actual retrieval link; if no specific source is available, retain “n.d.”(no date) and omit the URL section as above].

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