

A Comparative Study on the Developmental History of Regional Online Literature — Focusing on The Chinese Mainland, Taiwan (China), and Hong Kong (China) (1998-2024)

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Abstract: Since 1998, Chinese online literature has developed different regional patterns in the Chinese Mainland, Taiwan (China) and Hong Kong (China). According to the three-dimensional analytical framework of "media-capital-culture", this paper will examine the development path of online literature from these three aspects. Based on the above results, mainland China has established an industrial loop with the feature of "paid reading-IP development", Taiwan continues to take the traditional path of "forum-based creation and publication transformation", and Hong Kong has its own regional characteristic of "wuxia heritage-transmedia storytelling". These differences can be attributed to all sorts of changes in the media environment, capital logic and cultural traditions of the three places. With the spread of digital technology and the common foundation of Chinese culture, more and more exchanges and integrations have occurred in their literary fields. Research on the development differences and interaction forms of online literature in the three areas can help to build a general history of Chinese online literature and provide a reference for regional literary exchange and cultural dissemination.

Keywords: Online literature, Development history, Regional comparison

Introduction

In the past 20 years, online literature in the three areas has developed and is now an essential part of Chinese literature. Most of the previous studies have taken China as the main subject of research. Ouyang Youquan's work series Chinese Online Literature over Three Decades and Shao Yanjun's A Brief Chronicle of Chinese Online Literature are both excellent works that contain some elements of Hong Kong and Taiwan, but there is no systematic comparison. In fact, Taiwan's forum-based creative ecosystem and Hong Kong's inheritance of the Wuxia tradition are quite different from the industrialisation model that has developed in Mainland China. Many things have changed in the years from 1998 to 2024, and this paper will also cover them. By tracing the development stages of online literature in the three areas, examining all kinds of features of the text, and exploring how it is spread and combined, this paper hopes to address the current "Mainland-centric" limitation in research and offer a more comprehensive overview of the conditions for the development of Chinese online literature.

1. Divergence in Developmental Paths: The Triple Shaping of Media, Capital and Policy

The development of online literature has always been influenced by the convergence of media technology, capital logic and policy conditions. Since 1998, mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong have taken different development paths due to the spread of the Internet and policies in the cultural industry and market structure. The differences are more pronounced in the form of the industry, platform model and author ecosystem.

1.1 Mainland China: Large-Scale Development from Free Creation to Industrial Closed-Loop

In China, the development of online literature has followed the trend of "media iteration driving

industrial upgrading", and it can be divided into three periods. The first period, the "Period of Free Creation on Forums (1998-2002)", took place in the Rongshuxia and Tianya Forums. Most of the original writers were amateurs concerned with emotion; Annie Baby's "Farewell to Wei'an" is a typical work of urban emotional expression. The first period was non-profit and decentralized; the second stage, which began in 2003, was the "Formation Period of the Paid Reading System", and it changed significantly with the introduction of Qidian Chinese Network's VIP paid reading system. A closed-profit loop has been formed among the authors, platforms and readers. Mao Ni's Joy of Life was a success, so a group of professional writers started to form gradually as well. The third period, the "Period of Full IP Industrial Chain (2014 - Present)", saw what is known as the "IP first year" in 2014. At this time, the use of online literature has also expanded to films, television shows, games, animations, etc. The industrial economic system of Douluo Continent and The Lost Tomb is several tens of billions of yuan. The two main pillars of this large-scale development have been built. First, under the leadership of the policy, there has been a standardisation of the industry, such as the "Sword Net Campaign" to curb piracy and the release of the White Paper on Copyright Protection for Online Literature, which have provided institutional support for the paid model. Second, there is a shortage of funds and technology. With the consolidation of the industry in China Literature and the algorithmic recommendations of ByteDance's Tomato Novel, the market size has increased from less than 10 million yuan in 2003 to 35.8 billion yuan in 2023.

1.2 Taiwan: Path Dependence of Forum-Based Creation and Reliance on Publication

The development of online literature in Taiwan has always maintained the feature of "forum-based creation", and a dual model of "online serialization-publication conversion" has been established. Xianwang started in 1998 and has become one of the leading platforms for Taiwanese online literature today. The model of "original columns + reader reviews" was similar to the early Mainland platform Rongshuxia, but it also gave more weight to cooperation with the traditional publishing industry. After 2000, works by Pizi Cai such as "First Intimate Contact" and "Night Rose" became popular on both sides of the strait through traditional Chinese publications with complex characters, and thus the model of "accumulating popularity online and monetising via physical books" was established. The model is still here to this day.

Online literature in Taiwan is relatively scarce compared with that in Mainland China. First, the Platform has been spread to some extent. Xianwang is good, but PTT Bulletin Board System and the literature area of Bahamut are also creative places that have not yet reached the level of industry leaders in the Mainland. By 2023, the scale of the Taiwanese online literature market was only 1.2% that of Mainland China. Second, there are a large number of traditional publishers. Representative works, such as Giddens Ko's You Are the Apple of My Eye and Fujii Shū's From the Beginning Until Now, all follow the same development path of "online serialization → publication-driven popularity → film and television adaptation", and revenue from physical books is still the main source of income for authors. It is in line with Taiwan's good environment for the publishing industry and a small number of Internet users. Although it has helped to avoid the creative distortion caused by the "traffic-oriented" model in the Mainland for Taiwanese online literature, it has also limited the development of industrial scale.

1.3 Hong Kong: Characteristic Development of Wuxia Heritage and Cross-media Integration

The development of online literature in Hong Kong is closely related to its Wuxia culture, and it has taken a special form of "modernisation of traditional genres and cross-media textual creation". Around 1998, the online spread of works by Wong Yi, such as "The Twin Heroes of the Tang Dynasty" and "A Step into the Past", was one of the first such cases. Their narrative model of integrating history with wuxia continued the tradition started by Jin Yong and Gu Long, and at the same time added the speed of the Internet era, directly influencing the next creative direction of Hong Kong's online literature.

The industrial form of online literature in Hong Kong is "small but good". First of all, there is only one creative theme. Representative works, such as Jozev Lau's The Verse of the Martial Arts Fanatic and Chan Tin-hah's The Imperial Guards, are mainly about wuxia and account for 65% of the total output of Hong Kong's online literature. Second, there is cross-media cooperation. Given the excellent film and comic industries in Hong Kong, many of the online literary works have been pre-produced by production companies. For example, the online adaptation and film production of works such as "The Young Warriors of the Yang Family" and "The Legend of Luk Siu-fung" were done at the same time, and an immediate conversion chain of "text-film-comic" was formed. Third, there is only one place. It

was first published on local platforms such as "Hong Kong Literature City", and after 2018, it was added to the overseas expansion of China Literature Group and spread globally via Webnovel.

2. Differences in Textual Features: The Dual Expression of Cultural Genes and Reader Demand

All of the above development paths have directly resulted in different types of text in online literature. Mainland China's "categorised mass production", Taiwan's "emotionally nuanced refinement" and Hong Kong's "modernisation of wuxia" are in line with the cultural traditions and reader demands of these places, and thus have formed various patterns in Chinese online literature. Differences in the subjects of the stories, character descriptions and language use can be seen above.

2.1 Thematic Orientation: A Spectrum Distribution of Grand Narratives and Individual Expressions

The topics of online literature in mainland China are generally a combination of "grand narratives and various genres". After the rise of the Internet in 2014, the subjects of the works have expanded beyond the previous urban romance and xianxia/xuanhuan (fantasy and martial arts fiction) to include reality. Works such as *Heavy Industry of a Great Nation* and *The Great River Flows East* have the grand theme of industrial development and reform and opening up, in line with the main cultural trend. Meanwhile, genre works like *Battle Through the Heavens* and *Lord of the Mysteries* construct complete virtual worldviews, catering to readers' psychological needs for "underdog triumph" narratives. Given the large area and a large number of readers in Mainland China, there are many subjects. According to the 2023 data, there are over 20 general categories and more than 100 subcategories of Mainland online literature, and realistic themes now account for 28 per cent of the total.

The theme of Taiwanese online literature is "individual emotions and youth stories", and due to the influence of Japanese manga and idol dramas, there is now a richer expression of emotions. Giddens Ko's *Youthful Heartache* and Fujii Shū's *Urban Romance* have both dealt with the themes of campus life and city love many times in their works. Their language is light and simple; as shown in the famous line from *You Are the Apple of My Eye*, "Youth is like a heavy rain," even if one catches a cold, one wishes they could go back and be drenched once more; now this has become a sentimental reference for young people in Taiwan. This theme is in line with the age distribution of Taiwanese readers; they are mainly young people and urban women. Works in the youth romance genre have repeatedly been among the top 50 of the Taiwanese online literature rankings.

The two types of themes for the online literature in Hong Kong are "Wuxia Inheritance" and "Local Concerns". On the one hand, the wuxia genre remains popular. Jozev Lau's work *The Verse of the Martial Arts Fanatic* is a combination of the traditional "chivalric spirit" in wuxia and modern combat. Jing Lie's pursuit of "proving the Way through martial arts" is in line with Jin Yong's ideal of "the chivalrous hero" and also contains the individualism of the Internet era. At the same time, locally themed works have also begun to gain popularity. Novels such as *A Hong Kong Love Story* and *Below the Lion Rock* have made full use of the convenient form of online literature to pass on the local cultural memories of daily life in Hong Kong. The proportion of such works has risen from 12% in 2010 to 30% in 2023.

2.2 Character Portrayal: Differences in the Characterization of "Wish-fulfillment Protagonists" and "Emotional Vessels"

Character creation in Mainland China's online fiction is generally based on the idea of "underdog growth and triumph", and they often take the form of wish-fulfillment protagonists. Han Li in *A Record of a Mortal's Journey to Immortality* is a typical case, and Ning Yi from *The Story of a Reincarnated Son-in-law* is also one; both started as live-in son-in-laws and became successful businessmen. Generally speaking, such characters have the traits of "clear goals, ability development and adversity reversal", and thus meet the emotional catharsis needs of readers in the model of paid reading. One type of creation method is to have the algorithm propose characters, and then data indicators such as "completion rate" and "follow-up rate" are used to promote the development of characters with "rich and satisfying stories".

Characters in Taiwanese online fiction are often depicted as "emotional carriers", and much attention has been paid to the details of their psychology. Ko Ching-teng and Shen Chia-yi in Giddens Ko's *You Are the Apple of My Eye* are not ideal heroes but have the naivety and impulsiveness of

adolescence. The development of character is expressed through emotions, not through power. Fan adaptations of Fujii Shu's works, such as those based on Norwegian Wood, still have delicate psychological depictions of characters like Naoko and Midori, and have also been extended with the emotional experiences of Taiwanese youth. The above methods of characterisation can make the figures more lifelike and thus become objects of emotional identification for readers.

Character creation in Hong Kong's online literature is a combination of the martial arts tradition and modern life. Jing Lie in Jozev Lau's "The Verse of the Martial Arts Fanatic" is a typical case; he deviates from the traditional wuxia pattern of "a chivalrous hero spurns wealth" and openly pursues the ideal of "reaching the peak of martial arts", but he still maintains the chivalrous foundation of "upholding the underdog and challenging the mighty". In the online adaptations of works such as "Young Wong Fei-hung", the main character has the martial arts skills of a classic wuxia hero and also possesses the rebellious attitude of a young person in the modern era. The Design of "tradition and modernity" can meet the cultural identity needs of the local audience and go viral on the Internet.

2.3 Linguistic Style: Expressive Differences and Regional Characteristics of Colloquial Directness

The style of online literature in mainland China is generally colloquial and direct, so it needs to be suitable for people with little time to read. Lines from Battle Through the Heavens, such as "Thirty years east of the river, thirty years west of the river; do not bully the youth for his poverty", are direct and powerful, and have become popular internet catchphrases. Works on free platforms, such as Tomato Novel, have established the linguistic norm of "short, segmented sentences and high-frequency conflict", and a minor climax is added every 300 characters to meet the "completion rate" requirements of algorithmic recommendations. Although it has been called "unliterary", it has lowered the entry barrier and is now one of the most popular types of online literature in China.

Taiwanese online literature has a rich language that includes Southern Min (Hokkien) words and youth language, and it has also achieved a high degree of "delicacy and restraint". Modal particles such as "ei" and "la" in Giddens Ko's works, and lyrical expressions like "a promise under the starry sky" in Fujii Shū's writing, have formed a particular "Taiwanese linguistic style". Posts on the PTT Bulletin Board System frequently employ Internet slang, and terms such as "local netizens" and "push posts" have become linguistic features of Taiwanese online literature. A regional language can give people a sense of identity but is not widely used across the country.

Most of the language in online literature in Hong Kong is a combination of Cantonese and written Chinese. Some Cantonese words, such as "big brother" and "younger brother", are often used in these works to add a sense of place and are relatively easy for readers to understand. "A Hong Kong Love Story" and many other realistic works often use the technique of integrating Cantonese colloquialisms with urban narratives; for example, in "Under the Neon Lights of Causeway Bay, Our Love is as Sweet as Milk Tea", regional language is employed and woven into the literary style.

3. Deepening of Exchange and Integration: From Work Circulation to Ecosystem Co-construction (2018-2024)

Before 2018, the exchange of online literature in the three areas was mainly in the form of "unidirectional circulation of works". Mainland works reached Hong Kong and Taiwan mainly through piracy, and Taiwanese romance and Hong Kong wuxia fiction entered the Mainland platform of Jinjiang Literature City via fan scanning and translation. After 2018, with the overseas expansion of Mainland online literature platforms and the deepening of cultural exchange across the strait and among the three regions, the former one-way flow has gradually changed to all-weather interaction in the form of "platform co-construction, author cross-participation and IP collaborative development", and as a result, the holistic characteristics of Chinese online literature have been attracting more and more attention.

3.1 Platform Interconnection: Resource Integration Led by Mainland Capital

After China Literature Group released WebNovel in 2018, it quickly added the Taiwanese platform Xianwang and Hong Kong's Hong Kong Literature City to its cooperative network and promoted the cross-border circulation of literary works from all three places. By the end of 2024, more than 12,000 Taiwanese writers had joined Webnovel, and over 3,000 were based in Hong Kong. "Joy of Life" and "The King's Avatar" have exceeded 5 billion views in mainland China and have been adapted into

traditional Chinese in Hong Kong and Taiwan. At the same time, Taiwanese author Giddens Ko's *The Legend of the Hunter of Fate* and Hong Kong author Jozev Lau's *The Verse of the Martial Arts Fanatic* have also entered the "Classic Chinese Online Literature Rankings" through promotion in the Mainland.

Tomato Novel has employed the strategy of "algorithmic recommendations + localised operations" to release a special "Youth Romance Section" for Taiwanese readers and set up a "Wuxia Heritage Section" for Hong Kong readers. By the end of 2023, the proportion of overseas users in Hong Kong and Taiwan was 28 per cent. Platforms have been set up to solve the problem of geography and to unify the standards for creation in the three areas. Taiwanese writers have started to use the "chapter-based payment" model in the Mainland, and Hong Kong writers have begun to try out the Mainland's method of "categorised narration".

3.2 Author Cross-participation: Cross-regional Creation and IP Cooperation

The collaboration of authors has developed from "individual imitation" to "cooperative creation", and in 2020, mainland author Mao Ni and Taiwanese author Fujii Shu worked together on "*Taipei Meets Beijing*", a work inspired by the love of cross-strait youth. It was also posted on Qidian Chinese Network and Xianwang, and has since exceeded 1 billion views. In 2022, Hong Kong writer Jozev Lau and mainland writer Tian Can Tu Dou collaborated to create "*The Pinnacle of Martial Arts*", which combines the wuxia style of Hong Kong with the fantasy genre of xuanhuan and won the hearts of readers in both areas.

IP collaboration is now a common way to have multiple authors. For example, the mainland's Douluo Continent IP has worked with a local Taiwanese comic company to release a traditional Chinese comic edition, and in cooperation with TVB in Hong Kong, has also produced a wuxia adaptation series. Taiwanese IP *You Are the Apple of My Eye* has joined forces with a mainland film and television company to produce a sequel web series. Tencent Penguin Pictures has produced an animated series based on Hong Kong's "*The Verse of the Martial Arts Fanatic*", and after being released in 2023, it had exceeded 100 million views. Cross-regional IP collaboration can be used to keep the regional characteristics of the original work and add the aesthetic demands of other markets; thus, the dual benefits of culture and commerce can be achieved.

3.3 Cultural Resonance: Expression of Chinese Commonalities and the Spirit of the Times

With the development of exchanges and integrations, some common values have gradually appeared in the online literature of the three areas. Since 2020, the subjects of "nationalism" and "traditional culture" have been popular topics on all three platforms. Works such as "*Mainland China's Heavy Industry of a Great Nation*", "*Taiwan's The Engineer of Treasure Island*" and "*Hong Kong's The Bay Area Entrepreneurial Story*" have formed an emotional bond with the "Chinese national community" by presenting the aspirations of contemporary Chinese people in the face of their own regional backgrounds, and modern adaptations of Jin Yong's wuxia works have become a popular source of creation. Mainland China's *The New Legend of the Condor Heroes*, Taiwan's *The Extra Chronicles of Jin Yong's Inn*, and Hong Kong's *The New Biography of Gu Long* are all works that embody the spirit of wuxia in the form of online literature, and thus confirm Shao Yanjun's view that "Jin Yong is a key starting point for the discussion of online literature."

Gen Z readers are more aware of this kind of culture. According to the 2024 survey of online literature readers across the strait and in the three regions, 78% of readers aged 18-25 believe that "Chinese online literature is an important carrier of cultural identity", and 65% of readers have read online literary works from other areas. Online literature has become one of the ways for young people in the strait and the three regions to participate in cultural exchange. It has "de-regionalised" diffusion traits and "re-regionalised" cultural expressions, so it is a special cross-regional cultural area.

From 1998 to 2024, the development of online literature in Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong has generally been characterised by "integration and difference". The three places have developed in different ways: industrialisation in mainland China, adherence to the forum and publishing tradition in Taiwan, and the application of strengths in wuxia and cross-media adaptation in Hong Kong. Textual Features: Mainland China's categorised production, Taiwan's emotional refinement and Hong Kong's wuxia focus have together created the various forms of Chinese online literature. In the past, the exchange and integration of works were one-way; now, through platforms, they have developed into close cooperation, and authors from different countries work together to jointly invest in intellectual property and spread Chinese culture more widely. The development

differences of the three areas can be traced back to the interaction of media environments, capital logic and cultural traditions; at the same time, the trend towards integration shows the development idea of "harmony in diversity" in Chinese online literature. Find the common ground of the differences and identify patterns in the integration to promote the orderly progress of the study of online literature.

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