



The New Production Mode of Chinese Online Literature: A Case Study on QiYingJun

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Abstract. The authors and readers of current online literature have undergone a generational shift, and the Z-generation is the main group of readers in the online literary community. This study observes this phenomenon through a virtual ethnography. The new model of internet culture is characterized by stronger interactivity, community, fun, and gaming, which is specifically manifested in bullet screen commenting, the use of memes, joining chat groups, and making online purchases and donations. The interaction between authors and fans is characterized by sarcasm, joyfulness, and lightness. The reading habits of young people in online literature are guided and shaped by the attention economy of internet platforms, and the relationship between readers and platforms is mutually constructed, which makes online literature a type of fan economy. As for the content of the text, readers' expectations and perspectives affect the overall type and character setting of the book. Readers' involvement in online literature production has a positive effect on the sale and subsequent development of online literary works.

Keywords: online literature · fans · virtual ethnography · social media

1 Introduction

Chinese internet literature has developed increasingly. It is originally started as a grassroots culture by amateur interests (Zhao, 2011, p. 87). Reviewing from 1990 until now, online literature has experienced from the forum and online literature websites to social media platforms. With the evolution of platforms provided for these writers, the way they interact with readers, the quality of their fiction, and the methods for commercialization have changed in new ways in today's society.

In recent years, with the development of technology and the internet, a new form of writing online literature began on social platforms. Writers write fiction on social media by posting blogs, with fans' subscriptions and direct interaction. QiYingJun is a famous online fiction writer on Weibo, which is one of the most popular social media platforms in China. She writes fiction on Weibo and now she owns 2.5 million fans. She has already finished eight fiction and five of them get published. Her every Weibo tweet has about 10 thousand likes.

This paper, using QiYingJun and her fan community as a case study, the paper is going to analyze the new formation of online literature based on social media, the derived

identity of authorship and readers, as well as the diversified commercialization. With QiYingJun's cases and the specific social media Weibo, this paper is aiming to explore the online literature with its multiple aspects such as fan community, interaction, and commercialization. Combined with a communication perspective, this article means to contribute to the understanding of this industry and later development.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Interaction Leads to the Power of Readers

In the aspect of fandom and interaction, the boundary between writers and readers is getting vague since the emergence of the reader's power. Reader's power has increased while authors may have to cater to their readers. This leads to an even stronger participatory communication process. For this fandom-like relationship between author and reader, Tian and Adojran (2016) write in their paper defining it as "commissioned production" (p. 888), a new power relationship in which authors always alter their content and titles to cater to the reader's taste. They describe it as a fandom activity and coercive empowerment, that authors are pressured to cater to readers who pay for their works by voting or VIP accounts. It matters because it shows that readers have power even over authors and the author must take a balance between readers' tastes and their original content. Another author focusing on this field is Garcia-Iglesias (2021), who analyzes a case study and argues that authors are eventually under the control of their works, while mostly sharing their work with uncertainty because of their anonymous identity in the forum.

2.2 The Guidance of Platforms Has Merits and Limits

Platforms serve as a system to guide readers. Tian and Adojran (2016) wrote that authors are affected by the platform's mechanism (which is for more popularity and profits) to change their writing patterns, to cater to the platform's recommendation. This is caused by the platform's role to guide the popularity, for the platform has its orientation which attracts a certain type of audience. The customer-based platform leads the authors to follow their fans as a way to trigger profits. Furthermore, platforms play different roles in history. In the article *Redefining relations between creators and audiences in the digital age*, Feng and Literat (2017) concluded that different platforms for online literature shape the interaction between authors and readers. They found that social media solves the way Tieba (an interests-sharing forum) can not do, like continuing reading. Also, social media upgrades the way of interaction to direct response, while literature websites separate the response and texts. This finding provides great advantages to writing fiction on social media of its direct interaction and great popularity.

2.3 The Commercialization Evolves to the Social Media Era

Moreover, the way of commercialization both for writers and platforms has changed into a more profitable and more diverse mode over time. Many scholars emphasize the

economic effects brought by online literature. At first, as Zhao (2011) mentions, writers only benefit from being published or adaptations, such as games, movies, and animations. However, with the evolved formula, the income can be derived from the fiction itself directly if there is a contract with platforms. This model was first adopted by a Chinese literature website called Qidian as Ren and Montgomery (2012) find. Also, Zhao in her paper of 2017 concludes that this commercialization model consists of a “freemium business model, the micro-payment system and incentive mechanisms” (p. 1240). This commercialization pays writers for the length of their work, plus the direct support from readers. Although this model greatly enhances the popularity of the work, Zhao argues that this model destroys the creativity of fiction and exerts pressure on the writer. Writers are under great risks such as higher work intensity and limited writing autonomy, while they are even exploited by contracts. However, in the new age of social media, the freedom of using posts and blogs brings free writing to authors again.

2.4 The Affinity Space Constructed by Readers

Under the age of social media, interactive platforms provide a basis to construct an affinity space of online authors, while this community enables the even greater spread and popularity of the work. To begin with, the interaction, as Feng and Literat (2017) mention, is much more private. Many authors post not only their works but also their personal life. Secondly, under the circumstance of social media, the writing is not the traditional way of a total of chapters, rather, authors post a small section of it, and readers will be informed by the platform directly. All of these interactions close the distance between the author and the reader, giving fans a sense of agency in the author they support (Tian & Adojorn, 2016). Thus, the affinity place forms, not only reinforces the tight relationship in the community but also spread the popularity of original work and author in return. Also, another article written by Vlieghe and Rutten (2016) finds that the social media space for reading literature is “a place to share reading experiences” “a place to meet other enthusiasts” “a place to create an identity” and “places to acknowledged and encouraged participation” (pp. 29–30).

3 Methods

For this essay, the researcher plans to use virtual ethnography as the research method. As Wang and Liu (2021) suggested, this method assumes that through communication, people within the same community can construct a culture based on a platform, especially on social media, while communication is the tool for creating culture and identity in an online community. Also, this assumption coincides with the understanding of the affinity spaces online for the fan community of QiYingJun on the Weibo platforms, where the interactions happen through communication and computer-based media. With these assumptions, virtual ethnography serves as a suitable choice to collect data and frame analysis.

The research is based on online fiction writer QiYingJun and her fan community, especially on the comments and posts of her most popular fiction from 2020 to 2021 as well as the responses and interactions of their fans. After about two-month observations

of QiYingJun's posts on her Weibo account and her fan's comments, the researcher chooses data and categories.

4 Discussion

4.1 Authors and Readers: High-Level Authorship over Content but Cater to Readers

Through observation and data collecting of QiYingJun's case, the comments are mainly categorized into two types: giving advice and showing support. In the first type, some fans say to the author they want a happy ending or they want to see how the hero does in the later chapter. However, more comments happen to be an emotional release. Such emotions are like sorrow to see the hero hurt or the dissatisfaction of one certain chapter. From the comments giving advice, most readers do not directly ask the author to follow their thoughts like Tian and Adorjan (2016) who suggested many authors are commissioned to write what readers like. Their power seems not as strong enough to control the author. They do not exert their thought on the author, but just express their thoughts and hope that more fans can have the same emotion as them. Readers serve as only the ones to accept what the author gives them. This situation is understandable if considering the special relationship in social media. In the internet site age, readers used tags and labels to find the fiction that interested them, since social media is not specifically for fiction writing as internet site does, it is not easy to randomly pick an author and follow her.

From the data coding, QiYingJun encourages her readers to give more positive, comprehensive, and long comments and she will give the most liked top five comment money for a reward. QiYingJun's authorship, as well as many other writers on social media platforms, has control over their works, meanwhile, they also need to cater to their readers. Tian and Adorjan (2016) also described that feedback such as comments and likes can determine the "fate" of the fiction, mainly its popularity and financial value (p. 889). QiYingJun has acknowledged this fact and encouraged more comments, she even uses the money to please her readers.

4.2 Reader, Author, and Platform: Advantages of Social Media

Fans are highly engaged in the activity of creating their works of fiction online to show their love of fiction. For example, a fan showed her photos of cosplay, which she dressed just like the heroin in that fiction as the first photo shows. Another way of fan activity is offline activities. Fans actively invite more readers in a certain city to join together as the second photo shows. What's more, fans' integration has the identity of exclusive language use, they use threshold language which others will not understand if they are not a fan of QiYingJun. At the same time, the author is not an outsider of the fan community, but an active participant and even leader. Thus, with the social media platform, both authors and readers gain profits from the mechanism. Vlieghe and Rutten (2016) argued that a suitably constructed social media can form an affinity space for literature appreciation and communication since social media platforms can provide passion, diversity, and

practices. In this case, it has a “super community” for small interesting groups which is the natural basement for fans to construct their own culture and identity. Social media provide direct interaction and personal communication, which greatly strengthen fans’ self-identity and group cohesion (Feng & Literat, 2017). This is called “peer support” as Feng and Literat suggested (p. 2597). The peer support reinforces the collective identity of fans and encourages them to develop into the author and fiction more.

Besides, Social media platform encourages daily routines and small content, as Feng and Literat described, authors may show their personal lives on social media platform (2017). It is true for QiYingJun, and the platform functions matter. As Lugg (2011) suggested, Chinese online taste culture has its characteristics of entertainment. Especially in social media, entertaining words are more acceptable.

4.3 Authors and Readers: Diverse Commercial Methods and Great Support

In the age of social media, internet celebrities are the main target for public relations or marketing of some companies, and the way online authors earn income has developed over time. In this case, QiYingJun has developed diverse methods of commercialization of her fiction and her fame, while her readers mostly support her.

QiYingJun mainly has three types of commercialization as the data shows: one is by publishing her digital fiction into books; one is by adaption of her story, such as anime and drama; and finally by advertising external products for companies. As Ren and Montgomery (2012) concluded that copyright workers are finding an attention economy, which values the author and fan’s popularity more but not the quality of the fiction. Thus, online literature in social media has already become the target for many publishing companies, so publishing is a traditional way to earn income. The second type of commercialization is also mentioned by Zhao (2011). He suggested consumption and production of online literature has a positive ripple effect on promoting many economic markets, including the mobile, game, and publishing industry. Thus, a transformation of one fiction can lead many other industries to earn profits, so the second commercialization is formed.

However, advertising is the new method in the social media age. This action has no relation to her works and fiction, but her readers still support her. There are also some readers complaining about the too much advertisement on her Weibo like the second photo shows, while some fans will persuade this reader to accept it, telling her that QiYingJun will write her fiction more like the third reader in the third photo shows. Here the interaction between fans also shows her fans’ loyalty and agency at the same time.

5 Conclusion

First of all, the power of the author and the power of the reader exist simultaneously on social media, not in a single give-and-take relationship. Thus, readers of social media platforms are mostly fans of the readers. Fans admire the readers, so authors have a high power of control over the content. However, fans’ support and comments are a source of popularity judged by the platform (Tian & Adorjan, 2016), so authors sometimes cater to their readers to please them, creating a two-way relationship where authors are esteemed and at the same time bound by their readers.

The functions of the platform also shape the relationship between authors and readers. One of these is the community activity of fans, who are highly socialized within themselves and use the capabilities of social media to form a concentrated fan community. Meanwhile, authors actively participate in it as a way to close the distance with readers and build a larger network of relationships.

Finally, the changes in the social media era exist not only in more complex relationships, blurred boundaries, and highly-socialized communities but also in commercialization models. The author has been able to develop a variety of business models using popular social media brings to her, one of which is marketing advertising, and most of her readers support this because of their worship and sense of agency towards the author.

Together, the platform changes what the author-reader is like in the social media age. With high popularity and a more accessible audience, social media has direct interaction, complicated networks, and concentrated community while readers and authors can construct their cultural groups. Thus, the advanced platform expands online fiction's possibility of a great number of views, high profits, and a tightly-followed audience. These are all advantages for authors, while the taste in social media as entertaining (Lugg, 2011) is not suitable for literature to be written, which is a harmful effect. However, overall, the change from the previous internet site and forums to today's social media platform gives more advantaged to author and reader's communication and their construct of affinity spaces.

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