

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

Yufang Liu *

University of Sanya, Sanya, 572022, China

*Corresponding author: liuyufang163.com

Abstract: Since 1998, Chinese online literature has developed distinctive regional landscapes in the Chinese Mainland, Taiwan (China), and Hong Kong (China). Based on a three-dimensional analytical framework of "media-capital-culture," this study examines the evolutionary trajectories of online literature in these three regions. The findings indicate that Mainland China has established an industrial loop characterized by "paid reading-IP development"; Taiwan continues to follow the traditional path of "forum-based creation and publication transformation"; while Hong Kong highlights its regional feature of "wuxia heritage-transmedia storytelling." These differences stem from disparities in media environments, capital logic, and cultural traditions across the three regions. However, the proliferation of digital technology and the shared foundation of Chinese culture have also fostered exchange and integration among their respective literary spheres. Studying the developmental divergences and interactive experiences of online literature in these three regions can contribute to constructing a comprehensive history of Chinese online literature and provide insights for regional literary exchange and cultural dissemination.

Keywords: online literature; developmental history; regional comparison

Introduction

Over more than two decades of development, online literature from these three regions has become a significant component of Chinese literature. However, existing research predominantly centers on Mainland China as the core narrative subject. Notable works such as Ouyang Youquan's book series Chinese Online Literature over Three Decades and Shao Yanjun's A Brief Chronicle of Chinese Online Literature, while acknowledging elements from Hong Kong and Taiwan, lack systematic comparison. In reality, Taiwan's forum-based creative ecosystem and Hong Kong's inheritance of the wuxia (martial arts) tradition form a distinct contrast with Mainland China's development model characterized by industrialization. This paper, spanning the period from 1998 to 2024, aims to construct a multidimensional comparative research framework. By tracing the developmental stages of online literature across the three regions, analyzing differences in textual characteristics, and exploring mechanisms of exchange and integration, it seeks to address the current "Mainland-centric" limitation in research and present a more complete picture of the developmental landscape of Chinese online literature.

1. Divergence in Developmental Pathways: The Triple Shaping by Media, Capital, and Policy

The development of online literature has consistently been shaped by the interplay of media technology, capital logic, and policy environment. Since 1998, Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong have followed three distinct developmental trajectories due to differences in internet penetration processes, cultural industry policies, and market structures. This divergence is particularly evident in aspects such as industrial forms, platform models, and author ecosystems.

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

The development of online literature in Mainland China is characterized by "media iteration driving industrial upgrading," which can be divided into three stages. The first stage, the "Period of Free Creation on Forums (1998-2002)," was represented by platforms such as Rongshuxia and Tianya Forum. Authors were predominantly amateurs, and their works focused on emotional expression, exemplified by the urban emotional narratives in Annie Baby's Farewell to Wei'an. This phase displayed characteristics of being "non-profit" and "decentralized." The second stage, the "Formation Period of the Paid Reading System (2003-2013)," was fundamentally reshaped when Qidian Chinese Network launched its VIP paid reading system in 2003. This established a profit closed loop connecting authors, platforms, and readers. Works like Mao Ni's Joy of Life realized commercial value through chapter-by-chapter payments, and a professional writer community gradually emerged. The third stage, the "Period of the Full IP Industrial Chain (2014 to the present)," was marked by the so-called "IP First Year" of 2014. During this phase, online literature expanded from textual creation into film, television, games, animation, and other fields. IPs such as Douluo Continent and The Lost Tomb built an industrial ecosystem worth tens of billions of yuan. This large-scale development has benefited from two main pillars of support. First is industry standardization under policy guidance, such as the "Sword Net Campaign" to combat piracy and the release of the White Paper on Copyright Protection for Online Literature, which provided institutional safeguards for the paid model. Second is the deep involvement of capital and technology. The industry consolidation by China Literature and the algorithmic recommendations of ByteDance's Tomato Novel have driven the market scale to grow from less than ten million yuan in 2003 to 35.8 billion yuan in 2023.

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

The development of online literature in Taiwan has consistently carried the distinct imprint of "forum-based creation," forming a dual model of "online serialization-publication conversion." Following the establishment of Xianwang in 1998, it swiftly became the core platform for Taiwanese online literature. Its model of "original columns + reader reviews" was similar to early Mainland platforms like Rongshuxia but placed greater emphasis on bridging with the traditional publishing industry. After 2000, works by Pizi Cai, such as First Intimate Contact and Night Rose, gained widespread popularity across both sides of the strait through traditional Chinese (complex character) publication, solidifying the pathway of "accumulating popularity online and realizing revenue through physical books." This model has persisted to the present day.

Compared with Mainland China, online literature in Taiwan exhibits two prominent characteristics. First, there is a high degree of platform decentralization. Beyond Xianwang, community platforms such as the PTT Bulletin Board System and the literature section of Bahamut remain significant creative spaces, lacking the industry giants seen in the Mainland. As of 2023, the market scale of Taiwanese online literature was merely 1.2% of that in Mainland China. Second, there is a strong dependence on traditional publishing. 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 development trajectory of "online serialization → publication-driven popularity → film and television adaptation." Revenue from physical books remains the primary income source for authors. This pathway is closely linked to Taiwan's environment of a well-developed publishing industry and a limited internet user base. While it has allowed Taiwanese online literature to avoid the creative distortion caused by the "traffic-oriented" model prevalent in the Mainland, it has simultaneously constrained the expansion of its industrial scale.

1.3 Hong Kong: Characteristic Development through Wuxia Heritage and Cross-Media Integration

The development of online literature in Hong Kong is deeply rooted in its wuxia (martial arts) culture, forming a unique path characterized by "modernization of traditional genres and cross-media textual creation." Around 1998, the online dissemination of works by Wong Yi, such as The Twin Heroes of the Tang Dynasty and A Step into the Past, served as a significant starting point. Their narrative model combining history and wuxia not only continued the tradition established by Jin Yong and Gu Long but also incorporated the fast-paced storytelling of the internet age, directly influencing the subsequent creative direction of Hong Kong's online literature.

The industrial form of Hong Kong's online literature exhibits a "small yet refined" characteristic. First, there is a concentrated focus on creative themes. Representative works, such as Jozev Lau's The Verse of the Martial Arts Fanatic and Chan Tin-hah's The Imperial Guards, center on wuxia, accounting

for 65% of the total output of Hong Kong's online literature. Second, it pioneers cross-media integration. Benefiting from Hong Kong's well-developed film and comic industries, online literary works are often pre-associated with production companies. For instance, the online adaptation and film production of works like *The Young Warriors of the Yang Family* and *The Legend of Luk Siu-fung* were advanced simultaneously, forming an immediate conversion chain of "text-film-comic." Third, it demonstrates strong platform dependency. Initially reliant on local platforms like "Hong Kong Literature City," it gradually became integrated into the overseas expansion of Mainland China's China Literature Group after 2018, reaching a global audience through WebNovel.

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

The divergence in developmental pathways has directly shaped the textual characteristics of online literature across the three regions. The "categorized mass production" of Mainland China, the "emotionally nuanced refinement" of Taiwan, and the "modernization of wuxia" in Hong Kong respectively correspond to the cultural traditions and reader demands of each area, forming a diverse landscape within Chinese online literature. These differences are particularly evident in aspects such as narrative themes, character portrayal, and linguistic style.

2.1 Thematic Orientation: A Spectrum Distribution from Grand Narratives to Individual Expression

The themes of Mainland China's online literature are characterized by the coexistence of "grand narratives and genre diversity." Following the IP boom in 2014, thematic focus expanded beyond earlier urban romance and xianxia/xuanhuan (fantasy and martial arts fiction) to include realist themes. Works such as *Heavy Industry of a Great Nation* and *The Great River Flows East* center on grand themes like industrial development and reform and opening-up, resonating with mainstream cultural trends. 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. This thematic diversity is closely linked to Mainland China's vast geographical scale and enormous reader base. Data from 2023 shows that Mainland online literature encompasses over 20 major categories and more than 100 sub-categories, with realist themes now accounting for 28% of the total.

Thematic focus in Taiwanese online literature centers on "individual emotions and youth narratives." Influenced by Japanese manga and idol dramas, Taiwanese online literature places greater emphasis on nuanced emotional expression. Series such as Giddens Ko's "Youthful Heartache" and Fujii Shū's "Urban Romance" consistently focus their narratives on campus life and metropolitan love. Their language style is fresh and restrained, as illustrated by the classic line from *You Are the Apple of My Eye*: "Youth is like a heavy rain. Even if you catch a cold, you still wish you could go back and get drenched once more." This line has become an emotional touchstone for Taiwanese youth. This thematic orientation closely aligns with the demographic structure of Taiwanese readers, which is predominantly composed of adolescents and urban women. Works in the youth romance genre consistently occupy a place within the top 50 of Taiwanese online literature rankings.

The thematic focus of Hong Kong's online literature exhibits a dual characteristic of "wuxia heritage and local concern." On one hand, the wuxia genre continues to dominate. Works such as Jozev Lau's *The Verse of the Martial Arts Fanatic* integrate the traditional "chivalric spirit" of wuxia with modern combat elements. The protagonist Jing Lie's pursuit of "proving the Way through martial arts" both carries forward Jin Yong's ideal of "the chivalric hero" and incorporates the individualistic heroism of the internet age. On the other hand, locally themed works are gradually gaining prominence. Novels like *A Hong Kong Love Story* and *Below the Lion Rock*, set against the backdrop of Hong Kong's everyday urban life, utilize the accessible expression of online literature to transmit local cultural memories. The proportion of such works has increased from 12% in 2010 to 30% in 2023.

2.2 Character Portrayal: Differences in Characterization from "Wish-fulfillment Protagonists" to "Emotional Vessels"

Character portrayal in Mainland China's online literature is centered on the logic of "underdog growth and comeback," forming the archetypal image of the "wish-fulfillment protagonist." For instance, Han Li from *A Record of a Mortal's Journey to Immortality* evolves from an ordinary mortal

into a powerful cultivator, while Ning Yi from *The Story of a Reincarnated Son-in-law* rises from a live-in son-in-law to a business tycoon. Such characters typically exhibit traits of "clear goals, ability progression, and adversity reversal," aligning with readers' emotional catharsis needs under the paid reading model. This approach to character creation interacts with algorithmic recommendation mechanisms, where data metrics such as "completion rate" and "follow-up rate" further reinforce character designs that are "dense with satisfying plot points."

Character portrayal in Taiwanese online literature positions characters as "emotional vessels," placing greater emphasis on the subtlety of psychological depiction. Characters such as Ko Ching-teng and Shen Chia-yi from Giddens Ko's *You Are the Apple of My Eye* are not flawless protagonists but are imbued with the naivety and impulsiveness of adolescence. Their character arcs are completed through emotional transformation rather than power progression. In fan adaptations of Fujii Shū's works, such as those inspired by *Norwegian Wood*, the psychological portrayal of characters like Naoko and Midori continues Haruki Murakami's nuanced style while incorporating the emotional experiences of Taiwanese youth. This approach to characterization lends the figures a greater sense of realism, making them objects of emotional projection for readers.

Character portrayal in Hong Kong's online literature exhibits a "fusion of martial arts heritage and modern attributes." For example, Jing Lie from Jozev Lau's *The Verse of the Martial Arts Fanatic* breaks from the traditional wuxia trope of "the chivalrous hero spurns wealth," openly pursuing the goal of "reaching the pinnacle of martial arts" while retaining the chivalric core of "championing the weak and challenging the strong." In online adaptations of works such as *Young Wong Fei-hung*, the protagonist possesses the martial arts prowess of a traditional wuxia figure while incorporating the rebellious temperament of a modern teenager. This character design of "tradition plus modernity" both satisfies local readers' cultural identification and meets the demands of online dissemination.

2.3 Linguistic Style: Expressive Differences from Colloquial Directness to Regional Characteristics

The linguistic style of Mainland China's online literature is characterized by "colloquial directness and brisk pacing," catering to the needs of fragmented reading. 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 straightforward and forceful, becoming popular internet catchphrases. Works on free platforms like *Tomato Novel* have further established a linguistic norm of "short, segmented sentences and high-frequency conflict," with a minor climax set approximately every 300 characters to meet the "completion rate" requirements of algorithmic recommendations. While this linguistic style has faced criticism for its perceived "lack of literariness," it significantly lowers the barrier to entry, making Mainland China's online literature the most widely accessible form of literature.

The linguistic style of Taiwanese online literature incorporates Southern Min (Hokkien) vocabulary and youth discourse, exhibiting characteristics of "delicacy and restraint." The use of modal particles such as "ei" and "la" in Giddens Ko's works, along with lyrical expressions like "a promise under the starry sky" in Fujii Shū's writing, forms a distinctive "Taiwanese linguistic style." Creations on the PTT Bulletin Board System extensively employ internet slang, with terms like "local netizens" and "push posts" becoming linguistic markers of Taiwanese online literature. This regionalized language strengthens readers' sense of identity while, to some extent, limiting its cross-regional dissemination.

The linguistic style of Hong Kong's online literature exhibits a characteristic "fusion of Cantonese elements and written language." The measured use of Cantonese terms such as "big brother" and "youngster" in works like those by Jozev Lau preserves local flavor while avoiding significant comprehension barriers. Realistic theme works such as *A Hong Kong Love Story* employ a method of "Cantonese colloquialisms blended with urban narrative." For instance, expressions like "Under the neon lights of Causeway Bay, our love is as sweet as milk tea" transform regional language into an element of literary aesthetic.

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

Prior to 2018, the exchange of online literature among the three regions primarily followed a pattern of "unidirectional circulation of works." Mainland works reached Hong Kong and Taiwan mainly through piracy channels, while Taiwanese romance and Hong Kong wuxia fiction entered Mainland platforms such as *Jinjiang Literature City* via fan scanning and translation. After 2018, with the

overseas expansion of Mainland online literature platforms and the deepening of cultural exchanges across the strait and among the three regions, this unidirectional flow gradually transformed into a multifaceted interactive model characterized by "platform co-construction, author cross-participation, and IP collaborative development." Consequently, the holistic characteristics of Chinese online literature have become increasingly prominent.

3.1 Platform Interconnection: Resource Integration Driven by Mainland Capital

Following the launch of WebNovel by China Literature Group in 2018, it swiftly incorporated Taiwanese platform Xianwang and Hong Kong's Hong Kong Literature City into its cooperative network, facilitating the interconnection of literary works from all three regions. As of 2024, the number of Taiwanese authors on the WebNovel platform has exceeded 12,000, with over 3,000 authors from Hong Kong. Mainland works such as *Joy of Life* and *The King's Avatar* have accumulated more than 5 billion clicks in Hong Kong and Taiwan through traditional Chinese adaptations. Meanwhile, 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 gained entry into the "Classic Chinese Online Literature Rankings" through promotion on Mainland platforms.

ByteDance's Tomato Novel, through its strategy of "algorithmic recommendations + localized operations," has launched a dedicated "Youth Romance Section" for Taiwanese readers and established a "Wuxia Heritage Section" for Hong Kong readers. By 2023, users from Hong Kong and Taiwan accounted for 28% of Tomato Novel's total overseas user base. This platform interconnection has not only broken down geographical barriers but has also fostered the convergence of creative standards across the three regions. For instance, Taiwanese authors have begun adopting the Mainland's "chapter-based payment" model, while Hong Kong authors have started experimenting with the Mainland's approach to "categorized narration."

3.2 Author Cross-Participation: Cross-Regional Creation and IP Cooperation

Exchanges at the author level have evolved from "individual emulation" to "collaborative creation." In 2020, Mainland author Mao Ni and Taiwanese author Fujii Shū co-authored *Taipei Meets Beijing*, a work centered on a cross-strait youth love story. It was serialized simultaneously on Qidian Chinese Network and Xianwang, accumulating over 1 billion clicks. In 2022, Hong Kong author Jozev Lau collaborated with Mainland author Tian Can Tu Dou on *The Pinnacle of Martial Arts*, which integrates Hong Kong's wuxia elements with Mainland's xuanhuan (fantasy) genre, garnering recognition from readers in both regions.

IP collaboration has become a significant vehicle for author cross-participation. For instance, the Mainland's Douluo Continent IP partnered with a local Taiwanese comic company to release a traditional Chinese comic version and collaborated with TVB in Hong Kong to produce a wuxia adaptation series. The Taiwanese IP *You Are the Apple of My Eye* cooperated with a Mainland film and television company to launch a sequel web series. Hong Kong's *The Verse of the Martial Arts Fanatic* was adapted into an animated series by Tencent Penguin Pictures, which garnered over 100 million views after its release in 2023. Such cross-regional IP collaborations preserve the regional characteristics of the original works while incorporating the aesthetic preferences of the other markets, achieving a dual success in both cultural and commercial value.

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

The deepening of exchange and integration has gradually fostered shared value expressions in the online literature of the three regions. After 2020, themes such as "national sentiment" and "traditional culture" have become common creative focuses across all three. Works like 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*, each set against their respective regional backdrops, narrate the striving stories of contemporary Chinese people, creating an emotional resonance around the "Chinese national community." Furthermore, modern adaptations of Jin Yong's wuxia works have become a shared creative hotspot. 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* all transmit the wuxia spirit through the form of online literature, confirming Shao Yanjun's assertion that "Jin Yong is a crucial initiator of the discourse in online literature."

This cultural resonance is particularly evident among Gen Z readers. A 2024 survey of online literature readers across the strait and the three regions shows that 78% of readers aged 18-25 believe that "Chinese online literature serves as an important vehicle for cultural identity," while 65% of readers report having read online literary works from other regions. Online literature is becoming a significant bridge for cultural exchange among youth across the strait and the three regions. Its "de-regionalized" dissemination characteristics and "re-regionalized" cultural expression are constructing a unique cross-regional cultural space.

From 1998 to 2024, the development of online literature in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong has exhibited an overarching characteristic of "integration amidst divergence." In terms of developmental pathways, Mainland China has focused on industrialization, Taiwan has adhered to its forum and publishing traditions, and Hong Kong has leveraged its strengths in wuxia and cross-media adaptation, forming three distinctive trajectories. Regarding textual features, Mainland China's categorized production, Taiwan's emotional refinement, and Hong Kong's wuxia-centric focus collectively constitute the diverse landscape of Chinese online literature. In the realm of exchange and integration, early unidirectional dissemination of works has evolved into deep interactions characterized by platform interconnection, author cross-participation, and IP collaborative development, highlighting the shared appeal of Chinese culture. The developmental differences among the three regions are essentially the result of the interplay between media environments, capital logic, and cultural traditions; meanwhile, the trend toward integration confirms the developmental principle of "harmony in diversity" within Chinese online literature. By seeking common ground amidst differences and discerning patterns within integration, we can propel online literature studies toward a more mature disciplinary stage.

References

- [1] Shao Yanjun, Li Qiang. *A Brief Chronicle of Chinese Online Literature*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2023.
- [2] Ouyang Youquan. *Thirty Years of Online Literature*. Changsha: Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House, 2023.
- [3] Tang Qiao. *The Path to Consciousness in the Discipline Construction of Online Literature*. *Chinese Writers*, 2025(5).
- [4] Zhang Xian. *Chinese Online Literature Moving Towards Disciplinization*. *Chinese Social Sciences Network*, 2024(12).
- [5] *The Paper*. *From Paperbacks to "Major IPs": The "Grounding" and "Soaring" of Online Literature Creators*. 2024-10-26.
- [6] *Chutian Metropolis Daily*. *Online Literature: Jin Yong and the "Jin School" Successors*. 2024-11-09.
- [7] Ma Ji. *Writing in the Screen-Reading Era: A Ten-Year History of Online Literature*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2008.