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# Algorithmic Drive, Aesthetic Transformation and the Production Logic of Chinese Online Literature within the context of the Platform Economy: The Case of *Qidian*

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## ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of the internet has made online literature a key component of China's cultural sector. With the increasing influence of platform algorithms, literary production has evolved beyond a purely individual creative endeavour, becoming increasingly shaped by reader preferences and commercial imperatives. While much existing scholarship has focused on the exploitation of writers within the platform economy, this paper shifts attention to how algorithms contribute to the emergence of new aesthetic values and forms of creativity. The study investigates the dynamic relationship between platform economies, algorithmic writing, and aesthetic transformation in Chinese online literature, with a specific focus on *Qidian*, one of the leading platforms in this domain. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this research combines a literature review, case studies, surveys, and interviews with both writers and readers to provide a comprehensive analysis of the evolving literary landscape. The paper critically evaluates how the production logic of online literature platforms encourages new creative and aesthetic practices, providing insights into the future development of online literature.

**KEYWORDS:** Chinese online literature; platform economy; algorithms; aesthetic value

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## 1. Introduction

With the rapid rise of the Internet, online literature has emerged as a vital part of the cultural industry in the People's Republic of China (hereafter China). By the end of 2023, the market value of China's online literature reached 40.43 billion RMB yuan, with 537 million users, comprising 49% of China's total internet population (CASS, 2023). This rapid expansion highlights the evolving landscape of online literature in China as part of the global scene, largely driven by digital platforms that use advanced algorithmic systems to enable new modes of production, circulation and consumption.

Online literature, though lacking a universally accepted definition, is widely regarded as a form of literary production deeply rooted in digital environments. This is to do with the essential role digital platforms play not only in the creation, but also in the publication, distribution and consumption of online literature. Langley and Leyshon describe platforms as “dynamic arrangements shaped by socio-technical and capitalist practices,” emphasizing that they are not just technological tools, but active agents in cultural production (2017:13). Using algorithms, mathematical formulas designed for making predictions and decisions, to structure interactions between authors and readers, platforms classify reader groups and evaluate content output based on an economic logic, thus transforming online literature into a data-driven product orienting to market choices, responses and evaluations. Within this form of platform-based creative economy, algorithms are as much tools for generating text as mediators that drive creative production and literature consumption, notably in China's online literature ecosystem, as this paper will illustrate. On platforms like *Qidian* Chinese Website (起点中文网, [www.qidian.com](http://www.qidian.com), hereafter *Qidian*), one of China's most influential online literature platforms, algorithms act as intermediaries between authors, readers, and platform managers, shaping creative decision-making to align with economic and market imperatives. This restructuring creates a production environment where literary creativity is adapted to algorithmic demands, transforming authors into digital labourers whose work is commodified within the platform economy. For contracted online literary writers in such labour processes and working conditions, the cost of capital appreciation in network platforms includes increased labour risks, intensified work demands, reduced compensation, and the erosion of workers' rights (Zhang and Wu, 2020; Wang and Ma, 2021).

Despite the continual boom of China's online literature platform economy since the implementation of payment services in 2003, the focus of academic research has remained primarily on the exploitation of writers' labour value. Little attention has been paid to how the production logic of the platform

economy has fostered creativity in the online literature ecosystem or the broader transformation of the literary production landscape in China. Previous studies on Chinese online literature have highlighted its prosperity as a cultural phenomenon (Hockx, 2015, 2024; Li, 2023) and have largely concentrated on key areas such as gender analysis (Liu, 2024; Du, 2023; Chang, 2023), translation studies (Li, 2023), and its global impact (Zhao, 2023). With regards to the platform economy, scholars have examined how social capital positively influences attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Zhuoma, 2023), but there remains a lack of in-depth research on this phenomenon as a new form of creative economy. For example, some studies have explored the transformation of writers from literary youth to digital labourers (Jiang & Huang, 2020; Hu, 2020), while others have analyzed the platform-author relationship within the framework of capitalist exploitation (Graham & Wood, 2018; Srnicek, 2017). Nonetheless, these discussions often adopt a predominantly pessimistic view, suggesting that the literary creativity and aesthetic values of online literature are gradually declining due to digital commercialization. However, according to Wu Wenhui, the founder of *Qidian* and CEO of China Literature Group, "Commercialization marks the beginning of online literature's most prosperous phase." (Shao & Ji, 2018:1). Wu asserts that when creators receive sufficient compensation, the self-sustaining system will rapidly expand, attracting more participants. As a leading example of the platform economy, *Qidian* operates on a subscription-based publishing model, enabling readers to pay for access to serialized content. This system fosters sustained reader engagement, allowing authors to cultivate a dedicated audience while refining their narratives over time. Unlike the reward-based model, subscriptions encourage long-term reader commitment, motivating authors to maintain consistent literary output and to innovate. (Shao & Ji, 2018).

Current research on Chinese online literature has yet to systematically examine whether algorithms in the platform economy foster creativity among writers. If the aesthetic power is shifting from writers to readers due to algorithmic recommendations and payment systems, how exactly does this shift take place? Additionally, how do algorithms contribute to the development of new aesthetic values? This paper aims to address these important questions by analyzing the production logic of Chinese online literature from a perspective that goes beyond capitalist exploitation, focusing on how the platform economy fosters new aesthetic values and creativity in reconciling with traditional literary aesthetic standards (given that literary criticism remains dominated by elite critics). Adopting questionnaire surveys, participant

observation, and interview-based analysis, this paper will reveal that platform algorithms and data-driven online literature industry have fundamentally altered the logic of literary production. Taking online novels on *Qidian* as a case in point, it shows that monetary compensation directly motivates writers' creativity; it encourages them to produce works that align with readers' expectations and market demands. Moreover, readers are involved in the creative process through interactions with writers, and therefore possess aesthetic influence. Even if traditional literary standards may view popular online novels as merely products of an author's self-indulgence, the unprecedented level of reader-engagement they invoke cannot be ignored. High readership, as this paper will suggest, indicates that both the author's output and self-fulfillment and the reader's input and appreciation are at work and aligned through algorithmic mechanisms. In what follows, we will first establish a theoretical framework for exploring the algorithm-driven dynamics of literary production and the accompanying shift in aesthetic values, before empirically investigating the production logic of Chinese online literature within the platform economy on *Qidian*. We will conclude that algorithm-driven online literature does not merely introduce works of varying quality into the market but also fosters a participatory literary model, where authors adapt to reader engagement and market forces. This dynamic encourages creative experimentation while aligning with audience preferences. Despite concerns about commercialization and homogenization, algorithmic governance reshapes rather than suppresses creativity, redefining its expression, distribution, and evaluation. The platform economy establishes a reader-driven aesthetic paradigm, challenging traditional notions of authorship and literary value.

## 2. Theoretical Framing

In this paper, we describe the form of online literary production mediated by digital platforms as algorithmic writing, which is fundamentally distinct from traditional literary creation and entails much more than the direct generation of content by algorithms. On online literature platforms, algorithms regulate interactions between authors and readers by recommending works based on readers' preferences (Burke, 2019). These recommendations significantly influence the visibility of literary works and the creative decisions made by authors. Authors operate within digital environments heavily mediated by algorithms and platforms. This production system is characterized by the commodification of creative labour, whereby creative outputs are treated as products with measurable market value (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). Such commodification aligns with the broader trend of digital capitalism, where

value is extracted from user engagement and creative expression. This shift in the relations of literary production has also led to a transfer of aesthetic power. For instance, during the era of print media, the aesthetic power of literature was primarily held by traditional literary critics (Bourdieu, 1984). In contrast, in the digital age, aesthetic power has increasingly shifted to algorithms and reader data, which now play a central role in redefining literary value.

Traditionally, literary critics, scholars, cultural elites, and publishers have held this power. These gatekeepers evaluate and recommend works based on established standards, thereby determining which works gain prominence and recognition. Traditional literary aesthetic standards refer to the criteria developed over time by critics, scholars, and cultural elites, which are often based on canonical or "elevated" works. For instance, in traditional Chinese literature, the form, imagery, and rhetoric of poetry have long been considered essential indicators of literary merit. In European and American literature, concepts such as "universal aesthetics," "truth," and "moral instruction" form part of the traditional value system. In contrast, in the platform economy of online literature, aesthetic power is increasingly shifting away from such orthodox notions, toward readers and the digital infrastructure of platform algorithms.

Platforms exhibit multiple defining characteristics that shape their function and influence, beyond merely acting as digital intermediaries. First, platforms function as intermediary digital infrastructures, facilitating interactions between diverse user groups, including "customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers, and even physical objects" (Srnicsek, 2017: 43). Some platforms extend their role beyond facilitation by equipping users with tools to create their own products, services, or marketplaces, thereby expanding their economic and cultural reach. Second, platforms rely on and amplify network effects, meaning that their value increases exponentially as more users engage with them. This effect manifests in several ways: a growing user base enables platforms to extract, analyze, and generate value from user interactions at an unprecedented scale. For instance, online literature platforms leverage big data and algorithmic systems to assess reader preferences, influencing the themes, styles, and direction of writers' works. At the same time, readers' interactions—such as comments, likes, and subscriptions—directly shape a work's visibility and popularity. By doing so, platforms shift part of the aesthetic influence from authors and traditional literary critics to reader engagement, gradually altering the standards of literary evaluation and production. This interplay between algorithmic governance, economic incentives, and participatory engagement not only determines which works achieve prominence but also contributes



to aesthetic transformations within digital literature. Ultimately, these characteristics drive the rapid expansion and capital accumulation typical of platform businesses, allowing them to achieve market dominance within a relatively short timeframe.

Driven by the logic of the platform economy, the shifting aesthetic power in online literature becomes increasingly evident. This shift is closely tied to the labour of aesthetic reconstruction, which involves redefining and adapting aesthetic standards, values, and evaluation modes to align with evolving cultural, technological, and economic conditions (Bourdieu, 1993; Murray, 2018). In the context of online literature, this process reconfigures traditional aesthetic frameworks by integrating new metrics of literary value determined by platform-driven engagement rather than conventional critical standards. For instance, platforms like Wattpad illustrate this shift, where metrics such as views, likes, and shares shape literary recognition and success, often superseding the authority of traditional literary criticism (Murray, 2018). This transformation reshapes the agents of literary production and their power relations, raising critical questions about how algorithmic influence affects creativity and the autonomy of authors within platform-driven literary ecosystems.

Based on Karl Marx's (1887) theory of labour exploitation and surplus value, platform capitalism has been critiqued for fostering alienation in labour practices. In the online literature industry, this alienation surfaces as a growing disconnect between creators and their artistic goals, with algorithms increasingly driving production decisions. Platforms also extract surplus value through subscription fees, advertising revenue, and data monetization, further emphasizing the exploitative dynamics inherent in platform-mediated labour systems (Fuchs, 2014). Theodor Adorno's (2002) critique of cultural industries complements this analysis, highlighting how commodification in capitalist systems standardizes cultural production. According to Adorno, the profit motive erodes individuality, reducing cultural goods to repetitive, mass-consumable products. This critique is highly relevant for understanding online literary platforms, where algorithm-driven recommendation systems are understood to prioritize formulaic, high-engagement content over originality and artistic depth (Hesmondhalgh, 2019).

Platform algorithms have gradually assumed a significant role in determining the visibility and popularity of literary works, but this does not mean they have fully supplanted traditional critics as the primary source of aesthetic power. In the field of Chinese Internet literature, both the market and scholars continue to influence what is deemed aesthetically appealing. While algorithms are shifting

literary evaluation from elitist criteria to data-driven metrics, the role of scholars and critics remains important, especially when it comes to debates over what constitutes literary value. This raises two essential questions: what are the changing aesthetic standards in the context of platform-driven literary production? How relevant are traditional aesthetic values in a digital environment where market-driven preferences are increasingly determining what is read and appreciated? These questions must be considered carefully, as we seek to avoid platform or algorithmic determinism in this analysis.

When considering the dynamics of online literary platforms like *Qidian*, the key question is how the intersection of algorithms, labour commodification, and aesthetic production and evaluation collectively shapes the digital labour ecosystem, thereby giving rise to a new logic of literary production. However, literary commodification on digital platforms exhibits distinct nuances that set it apart from other forms of commodification. While surplus value remains a critical framework for understanding commodification in many industries, we argue that this model alone does not fully explain literary production (see also Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Terranova, 2000). Unlike traditional commodities, literary works are shaped not only by economic imperatives but also by aesthetic and cultural dynamics, where factors such as reader engagement, platform algorithms, and evolving literary conventions influence production and valuation.

Thus, rather than surplus value alone, a more appropriate framework for understanding literary commodification necessarily calls upon the concept of aesthetic transformation. Aesthetic transformation, in this context, refers to the shift in aesthetic power — that is, the question of who holds the authority to determine the aesthetic value of literary works and through what mechanisms this evaluation takes place, as discussed by Bourdieu (1984). In the traditional literary system, aesthetic power has typically been concentrated in the hands of critics, scholars, publishing houses, and cultural institutions, which establish distinctions between "elite" literature and "popular" literature through literary theory, aesthetic standards, and critical discourse. Henry Jenkins (2006) further explores how, in the digital age, media consumers actively participate in content production and dissemination across multiple platforms, thereby reshaping the relationship between media producers and audiences. This shift challenges traditional aesthetic hierarchies and suggests that aesthetic value is increasingly shaped by audience engagement and digital platform dynamics rather than by institutional gatekeepers alone. The concept of aesthetic power transfer highlights how aesthetic preferences and cultural labour are influenced and reshaped by platform algorithms, market demand, and reader interaction. The shift from



a purely economic model to one that includes the aesthetic domain reflects the complexity of digital labour in the literary world, resulting in a new form of digital labour that involves both economic and aesthetic dimensions. Along the way, authors as digital labourers experience a complex dynamic that involves the transfer of aesthetic power and a fundamental shift in literary values.

As previously noted, Shao and Ji argue that while the platform economy turns some online writers into digital labourers in the traditional sense, it also stimulates their creativity by offering financial and reputational incentives (2018). When adequate compensation is provided, the self-sustaining system expands rapidly, attracting a large number of writers into the platform's ecosystem. This process essentially builds a network of writers, selecting talent from the grassroots level and integrating them into the online literature production system, providing essential elements for the growth of the industry. Moreover, popular online works cater to public desires mediated by algorithms, which may not align with traditional literary values, yet facilitate emotional communication between authors and readers, a form of algorithmic connection that transcends traditional aesthetic appreciation. It is this kind of complexity in the intersection of algorithmic drive, aesthetic reconstruction and production logic of Chinese online literature that this paper sets out to investigate.

### 3. Research Approach

This study analyzes the production mechanisms of Chinese online literature in the platform economy. It specifically explores how *Qidian*'s algorithmic mechanisms influence authors' digital labour and creative freedom, alter the aesthetic value of literature, and reshape the production logic of literature online. As an exemplar of platform capitalism, *Qidian* plays the role of a digital intermediary that connects authors and readers, leveraging network effects, data monetization, and algorithm-driven incentives to commercialize literary production. Both a capitalist enterprise and a cultural force, *Qidian* presents itself as a salient site of investigation for the purpose of this study. It is noteworthy that *Qidian* distinguishes itself from other online literature platforms through its full-copyright model, professionalized author system, advanced algorithmic recommendations, and multi-platform IP expansion. Unlike platforms relying on user-generated content or ad-based revenue, *Qidian* ensures content quality and author stability by offering financial incentives, structured contracts, and subscription-based earnings. Its data-driven recommendation system optimizes content visibility while

balancing market trends and creative autonomy. Additionally, *Qidian* actively develops a cross-media intellectual property ecosystem, adapting successful works into films, TV series, and games, extending their cultural influence. These factors contribute to *Qidian*'s long-term sustainability and positive impact on online literature, transforming it from a casual, market-driven practice into a structured, evolving literary tradition within the platform economy.

Ethnographic mixed methods were adopted in this study to inform how since the introduction of payment services, the platform economy of *Qidian* has increasingly guided online literature production through algorithmic mechanisms. Three key instruments were employed to obtain an in-depth understanding of how algorithms influence authors' labour and reshape aesthetic values, including:

- (1) Questionnaire survey: Conducted with 110 participants (70 authors and 40 readers) on *Qidian* in September 2024, the survey was designed to understand from both authors and readers generated by *Qidian* the author-platform relationship, readers' payment behaviour, and authors' economic challenges.
- (2) Initiated in August 2023, this study employed regular active observation of platform activities, including forums, chat groups, and incentive programs designed to engage contracted authors and active readers on *Qidian*. To gain a comprehensive perspective, two separate accounts were created on the *Qidian* website — one as an author and one as a reader. The author account was used to participate in literary creation, interact with platform features, and observe how platform rules, incentives, and algorithmic recommendations shape authors' writing decisions. Meanwhile, the reader account provided insights into reader engagement patterns, interactions with authors, and the influence of platform algorithms on content visibility and accessibility.
- (3) Semi-structured interviews: Between May and October 2024, the first author in this study interviewed 10 authors, including emerging and established writers. The interviews were designed to engage authors in discussions about their creative processes, challenges encountered, and perspectives on platform operations.

Ethical considerations of research for this study, such as informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, and transparent communication, have been fully observed and respected. Integrating existing literature, empirical data of questionnaire survey, online observations, author interviews, and

text analysis of online novels, this study will offer an in-depth understanding of Chinese online literature by a detailed analysis of the intersection of platform capitalism, creative labour, and aesthetic transformation, as presented below.

#### 4. Platform Economy and the Transformation of Chinese Online Literature Production

Drawing on existing research (Srnicek, 2017; Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Chen, 2024), this paper examines how the platform economy reshapes the production, distribution, and consumption of online literature through network effects, data-driven strategies, algorithmic governance, and multilateral market dynamics. Platforms such as *Qidian* employ algorithms to recommend content and determine visibility based on engagement metrics, reshaping the dynamics among authors, readers, and the platform itself. In view of this, authors now depend heavily on algorithms for exposure, resulting in asymmetrical power dynamics where platforms dominate value distribution and audience reach. Data-driven reader preferences increasingly shape creative decisions, often pushing authors to prioritize market trends at the expense of originality. This section investigates the platform economy's influence on online literature production through textual analysis. It explores how algorithms determine content visibility and how authors navigate the tension between creative autonomy and platform-driven constraints. Furthermore, it evaluates the broader implications of the digital age on literary values, cultural production, and economic sustainability.

The late 20th century's global media revolution marked a turning point in China's literary production, enabling the creation of online communities where story enthusiasts, dissatisfied with traditional literature, could form subcultural spaces on the Internet. These digital spaces offered a stark contrast to the conventional literary field. Early platforms like China News Digest (华夏文摘), established by overseas students, and domestic sites such as SMTH BBS (水木清华) and Tianya (天涯), were primarily non-commercial, serving as vibrant hubs for literary exchange and social interaction.

Scholars such as Hockx (2015) have analyzed the early stages of Chinese Internet literature, emphasizing its experimental and diverse characteristics. These platforms nurtured creative freedom, enabling authors to explore various genres and styles without the constraints of market-driven demands. Unlike the highly commercialized platforms that emerged later, early online literature prioritized personal

expression and entertainment over profit. This period (1998-2003) represents the formative stage of Chinese online literature, a point also detailed in recent Chinese academic works (Ouyang, 2018, 2011).

Some works from this early stage were highly original and sought literary recognition through innovative plot structures, stylistic complexity, and thematic depth. An illustrative example is *Fengzi Wuyu* (风姿物语), written by Luo Sen (罗森) and serialized on the BBS of National Chiao Tung University(台湾交通大学). Over ten years (1997-2006) and 5.2 million words, this novel blended the chivalrous ethos of traditional martial arts novels, the grandeur of Western fantasy, and the intricate world-building of video games to create a parallel universe rich with historical overtones. The novel not only provided readers with entertainment but also exhibited literary qualities in its narrative architecture, linguistic intricacy, and thematic exploration. However, the concept of “literary value” warrants critical analysis. Are such values universal and unchanging, or do they shift with cultural and technological contexts? From a post-structuralist perspective, literary value is not fixed or universal; rather, it is contingent upon the cultural, social, and technological contexts in which a work is created and experienced. Post-structuralist theorists like Jacques Derrida (1991) and Roland Barthes (1977) argue that meaning and value are not intrinsic to the text but are shaped by the reader, cultural context, and the broader discursive structures in play. Using *Fengzi Wuyu* (风姿物语) as an example, the novel blends multiple genres and cultural traditions, creating a dynamic space for varied interpretations.

The novel combines elements of martial arts ethos, Western fantasy grandeur, and video game-style world-building, creating a fragmented yet interconnected narrative experience. This hybridity is significant from a post-structuralist view because it challenges the idea of a fixed, unchanging literary value. The meaning and interpretation of this work are not only shaped by its internal structure but also by external factors such as the reader’s cultural background, personal experiences, and technological access. Readers approach *Fengzi Wuyu* with cultural expectations, whether it’s the emotional depth of a martial arts saga or the escapism of a fantasy world. The novel’s genre fusion reflects a negotiation of these diverse expectations, making it a product of its time. As technology has progressed, so too has the way readers engage with the text. The digital environment, emphasizing interactivity, fan culture, and virtual communities, has further transformed how the work’s meaning and value are assigned. Online platform readers have shifted from passive consumers to active participants, shaping meaning through reviews, fan art, and even alternative plot suggestions. As Derrida argues, texts exist in a state of

différance — meaning and interpretation are always deferred, with no final, singular reading of any work (Derrida, 1967). Therefore, the “literary value” of *Fengzi Wuyu* fluctuates not only across cultural contexts but also over time, as socio-political conditions, technological advancements, and evolving reader practices shape its interpretation. From this viewpoint, *Fengzi Wuyu* exemplifies the fluidity of literary values in the platform economy.

While *Fengzi Wuyu* was initially serialized in Taiwan, its print version preceded online publication, and thus, its temporal relationship with platforms like *Qidian* is somewhat indirect. However, the later rise of online platforms brought about the introduction of a paid-content system, which fundamentally altered the interactive dynamic between authors and readers. Before this shift, authors and readers communicated directly, with ongoing feedback influencing creative decisions and fostering genre innovation. The introduction of paid content, however, transformed reader engagement and financial rewards into primary measures of an author’s success. This change led to an influx of new writers who sought to replicate the successful narrative framework of *Fengzi Wuyu*. To increase their works’ appeal, these writers not only copied its narrative structure but also incorporated prevalent “shuangdian” (爽点) elements, which cater to readers’ desires for emotional gratification. In *Fengzi Wuyu*, Luo Sen adjusted aspects like character arcs, plot twists, and world-building in response to reader input, while maintaining creative control. Yet, as the platform economy evolved, reader preferences gradually became more decisive in shaping narrative directions. This shift — from collaborative interaction to reader-driven control — highlights how digital platforms shape genre development through participation and feedback mechanisms.

In the initial stage of network literature production, the focus is still the work itself, forming a kind of “works-centered media field” in the digital field. In this context, the relationship between authors and readers is more influenced by traditional literary production dynamics than by capital control. Bourdieu argues that the literary field operates within an economy that disregards market forces (1996: 141-153). In this model, literary and artistic production is driven by intrinsic values rather than market demands, with symbolic capital granted by educational, academic, and professional institutions. This symbolic capital is later converted into economic capital through the publishing and distribution processes. While market-driven literary works, such as those by bestselling authors like Wang Shuo, cater directly to readers’ demands, all works, regardless of their commercial focus, must pass through institutional

frameworks that regulate literature. These institutions aim to strike a balance between the economic interests of the market and the symbolic values upheld by academic and cultural institutions. A purely commercial model is unattainable. In the print era, all works must pass through traditional publishing institutions before reaching readers. They must first accumulate symbolic capital before converting it into economic capital.

On online literary platforms, unalienated labour refers to authors writing stories driven by passion and readers engaging with the content for enjoyment, both deriving a sense of personal fulfillment from the process. Non-exploitative platforms would allow authors to maintain creative control and ensure that their work is fairly recognized, rather than being driven solely by profit-driven metrics or excessive content regulation. However, as platforms began to shift toward monetization, the boundaries between creative freedom and market-driven pressures became blurred. This raises the question of whether such ideals of unalienated labour are overly romanticized or truly achievable in practice. Historical evidence from early Chinese online literary platforms, particularly during the late 1990s and early 2000s, reveals that while participation offered authors and readers self-fulfillment, it was also shaped by the emerging monetization strategies that platforms began to adopt. In particular, the closure of *Rongshuxia* (榕树下), a popular free online novel platform in 2001, marked the decline of this initial, non-commercial phase of online literature. The platform's inability to sustain itself financially, due to the limited income potential of readers and the self-satisfaction of authors alone, demonstrated that the early model was not economically viable.

In October 2003, *Qidian* introduced the "VIP paid subscription" model, marking a key shift in online literature monetization. Other platforms soon followed, transitioning from free-to-read to paid subscription and pay-per-view models. *Qidian's* pricing structure charges readers based on the number of words consumed, with lower rates for premium VIP members. Membership tiers depend on user engagement, such as reading time and interaction. Additionally, *Qidian* has implemented revenue streams like virtual tipping, where readers financially support authors, with the platform taking a percentage. This monetization strategy enhances user engagement, making the reading experience and platform loyalty central to content production. *Qidian* also uses data analytics and recommendation algorithms to tailor content to reader preferences, while incentivising authors with contract opportunities, bonuses, and revenue from reader tips. Promotional campaigns increase visibility for high-



performing works. This model reflects a broader industry trend of shifting from a work-centred to a reader-centred approach, where consumer behaviour, driven by data, shapes both content production and distribution.

It should be noted that in 2018, platforms such as Fanqie Novel (番茄小说网 <https://fanqienovel.com>) reintroduced the free-to-read model for online fiction. Unlike the participatory collaboration seen in the early days of online literature, this model relies on monetization through user traffic and data analytics. For example, algorithm-driven systems precisely target users with advertisements embedded within novel pages. These ads cannot be skipped unless users opt for a premium membership. The platform generates revenue whenever users view or click on these ads. Thus, even under the free-to-read model, the relationship between authors and the platform remains shaped by algorithmic control, with the platform prioritizing reader-generated traffic as its central focus.

Christian Fuchs (2014: 296) defines digital labour as “includ[ing] all forms of paid and unpaid labour that are needed for existence, production, diffusion and use of digital media.” Within the content consumption model, digital labour in the production of Chinese online literature retains elements of material labour and exploitation from the pre-digital era. However, it also encompasses non-material forms of labour, such as emotional engagement, idea generation, and creative knowledge production. While political economic critiques highlight the risks of platform-enabled exploitation of creative labour, they fail to fully capture the evolving nature of Chinese literary production in the digital age, which integrates both material and immaterial dimensions of labour. To better understand the writing practices of online authors, we registered as an emerging writer on *Qidian* and utilized its proprietary writing tool, Zuoja Zhushou (作家助手). We also engaged in activities within Pinzi Fangjian (拼字房间), a collaborative space designed to inspire creativity among writers. This space functions as both a competitive and cooperative labour environment, where participants are incentivised to enhance productivity through gamified challenges. While such environments aim to increase output, they raise critical questions: Should literary works be reduced to mere commodities? Does faster writing or higher word count necessarily enhance the value of a work? Although scholars of political economy have explored similar concerns in relation to artistic and literary production, their analyses often overlook the nuanced interplay between creativity, productivity, and value within these gamified and platform-driven environments.

Data from our questionnaire, which surveyed 50 authors on an online platform, showed that while 24 authors produced an average of over 10,000 characters per day, only 11 earned more than 10,000 RMB per month. This gap suggests that the volume of words written does not directly determine income, emphasizing that digital labour in creative industries operates differently from physical labour. Hardt and Negri (2009) identify the immeasurable value of labour as central to postmodern biopolitics, a framework that examines how labour increasingly embodies human subjectivity and resists traditional metrics of quantification. Applying this lens to contemporary Chinese internet literature reveals how creative labour challenges the modern capitalist logic of quantification. While capitalist economies traditionally seek to enhance labour productivity by increasing output and reducing unit time, this principle has limited applicability in the creative fields, where the production of knowledge, emotions, and ideas is less easily tied to time metrics. However, the demands of internet literature, which often prioritize high-speed output, suggest a partial alignment with the capitalist ideal of maximizing productivity. Yet, in this context, the boundaries between labour time and leisure time blur, reflecting a hallmark of post-Fordist production systems. Unlike Fordist production, which clearly delineates work and leisure, online literary production integrates these spheres, complicating traditional notions of labour and productivity.

## 5. Beyond Commodification: Unpacking Economic, Cultural, and Social Dynamics in Online Literature Production"

In 2004, two years after launching its pay-per-view model, *Qidian* was acquired by Shanda Networks (盛大网络集团), a major online game operator. By 2008, the formation of Shanda Literature Group, which soon controlled over 70% of the online literature market, marked the start of the large-scale, commercial development of the online literature industry.

As platforms like these grew, academic attention shifted towards the transformation of literary forms, the disintegration of traditional modes of literary production, and the reconfiguration of literary value. The commercial success of online literature has provided a compelling context for academic inquiry, particularly as it disrupts established paradigms of cultural production. Despite the remarkable growth of online literature, scholars often take a critical or even pessimistic view regarding its literary value. For instance, researchers like Jiang Shuyuan (2020) have examined the shifting identities of online writers, applying Marx's theory of alienation to analyze their labour. Jiang argues that digital labour in this sphere

is profoundly marked by alienation, as writers' creative output is frequently commodified and absorbed into monopolistic platform economies (Hu Hui, 2020). These platforms extract value from the creative labour of writers, converting artistic production into capital. Similarly, Wang Wanbo (2023) investigates the role of readers within the platform economy, coining the term "playbor" to describe the blend of play and labour that characterizes reader engagement. Wang asserts that while this participatory labour appears voluntary, it is, in reality, subject to capitalist mechanisms of control.

These perspectives resonate with broader international academic discussions on digital labour. For instance, Terranova (2004) in *Network Culture* highlights how user-generated content in digital environments is often exploited by platforms for profit, an observation that parallels Wang's analysis of "playbor." Meanwhile, scholars such as Kücklich (2005) have explored the commodification of play in online environments, further contributing to a global understanding of how capitalist economies co-opt creative and participatory labour. While these analyses vary in their focus — ranging from content creators to readers—they collectively emphasize the inherent power imbalances present in digital labour systems, raising important questions about agency, autonomy, and value in the age of platform capitalism.

We address the complexity of defining online authors as "digital workers" (数字劳工) (Jiang and Huang, 2020) within the platform-driven digital labour ecosystem. To lay the groundwork, it is necessary to introduce and differentiate the concept of digital workers from traditional workers, emphasizing their distinctive relationship with algorithmic systems and platform economies. Key questions emerge: To what extent is the creative labour that drives platform profitability controlled by algorithms, and where do authors retain agency for meaningful creative expression? Are works curated by algorithms reflective of literary value, or are they shaped primarily by market demands? Additionally, how do readers and fan culture contribute to the development of literary aesthetics and trends, and do they disrupt the totalizing control often associated with platform algorithms? This section explores these dynamics, proposing that amidst algorithmic control, spaces of unalienated labour and creative fulfillment persist. By examining the interplay between platforms, authors, and readers, this study offers a more nuanced perspective on how digital labour and literary production intersect in the context of contemporary Chinese online literature.

Online novel platforms have succeeded in attracting a diverse range of readers and writers, effectively creating a "labour pool" that benefits the platform while reinforcing a "winner-takes-all"

structure. On platforms like *Qidian*, content is ranked across various lists, such as popular works, new releases, and social rankings, alongside specialized categories like the girls' selection list. This ranking system fosters competition and visibility, with the top-performing writers placed in a tiered hierarchy. Those at the highest levels are awarded prestigious titles such as "Platinum" (白金) or "God" (大神), which reflect both the commercial success of their works and their elevated status within the online literary community. Writers who achieve "God" status are not only regarded as influential figures but also shape the thematic and stylistic direction of online literature more broadly. Their works often serve as models for other writers, influencing key trends in genre, language, and narrative structure. For example, authors such as Tangjia Sanshao (唐家三少), Tiancan Tudou (天蚕土豆), Xuanyu (玄雨), Chen Dong (辰东), and Innocent have played pivotal roles in popularizing fantasy literature, while Wochi Xihongshi (我吃西红柿), Er Gen (耳根), and Wang Yu (忘语) are credited with pioneering the highly popular xiuxian (修仙) genre, which revolves around the pursuit of immortality through self-cultivation and alchemy.

The working conditions of online writers are often categorized as a form of "digital labour" (Hardt & Negri, 2009). These writers, while passionate, find their creative efforts commodified and dictated by a unified computational system: algorithmic rankings that simultaneously reflect and reinforce the platform's market priorities aimed at maximizing profits. This integration of algorithms and market logic raises pressing questions about the long-term sustainability of this model, particularly its effects on literary diversity and the valuation of creative expression in platform economies.

While much of the scholarly discourse focuses on the exploitation of digital labour, it often neglects the dual nature of this participation, which is not only "unwaged and exploited" but also "voluntarily given and enjoyed" (Terranova, 2000: 36). This duality is central to understanding online literary production and serves as a critical edge of this paper. In a survey of 70 online authors, 55 cited "hobby" as their primary motivation, with financial considerations being secondary. Similarly, of 20 randomly surveyed readers, 18 expressed satisfaction with the platform's recommendation system and were willing to pay for their favorite online novels. From this perspective, "enjoyment" emerges as a significant motivator for both creators and consumers, shaping their engagement in digital labour. Enjoyment often stems from the satisfaction of aesthetic needs and a desire for creative expression. Writing enables individuals to engage in self-exploration, articulate emotions, document the era, and achieve psychological healing while gaining social recognition.

Beyond the entertainment value of its plot, the author uses the protagonist's journey of gaining power as a lens to examine deeper themes such as life, society, and authority. Fennude Xiangjiao (愤怒的香蕉), a "Platinum" author on *Qidian*, has achieved widespread success with his work *Son-in-Law* (赘婿), which has garnered tens of millions of clicks and consistently ranked among *Qidian*'s top 10 bestsellers. Describing the novel as an "experiment," the author shares insights into the creative process, stating:

In the middle of *Son-in-Law*, I experimented with expressing personal opinions in a less conventional way, which was not aimed at catering to the reader's pleasure. Popular literature is generally expected to cater to the reader's preferences, but I was curious: can we incorporate our own perspectives? And if so, how far can we push that? At one point, I even included a few chapters focused on argumentative writing style — something readers typically dislike — just to explore the boundaries.<sup>1</sup>

Our study reveals similar cases, such as those of several undergraduate part-time authors, who strive to balance artistic ambition with commercial demands. These authors strategically leverage platform resources to maintain creative independence, even if it means sacrificing some platform support in the process. Among the authors we interviewed via email, a new author stated:

As a new writer, the platform gives me the chance to showcase my work. I have a passion for literature and writing, and I aspire to be a professional author. This was much harder in the print media era, where entry barriers were higher compared to today's online novel platforms. In the past, only highly talented or formally trained writers could gain visibility, but now, even amateur writers like myself can slowly realize our dream of becoming famous authors.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, the diversity and artistry of literary creation in platform-based ecosystems emerge as a negotiation not only between authors' aesthetic visions and readers' expectations but also between platform control and individual authorial agency.

It is an oversimplification to characterize the digital labour of online authors in platform economies solely as exploitation. The relationship between authors and platforms is nuanced, shaped by a dynamic

<sup>1</sup> Fennude Xiangjiao (愤怒的香蕉). "For Writers with Mediocre Talent, Learn to Enjoy Writing." Chinese Writers Network. <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/n1/2022/0424/c404024-32407092.html>. [Accessed August 20, 2024. Unless otherwise noted, Chinese comments cited here are translated into English by the author of this paper]

<sup>2</sup> Yulin Tianxia (雨临天下), Personal communication, August 30, 2024. [translated from Chinese]

balance between creative autonomy and commercial imperatives. Furthermore, the immediate feedback and interaction between authors and readers foster new aesthetic dimensions in online literature, illustrating the co-evolution of artistic expression and reader preferences within the digital ecosystem. Whether they are established "Platinum" or "God" authors or newcomers succeeding through high output, all writers operate within a platform-centric economic model. Their objective is to transform creativity and ideas into a form of sustainable digital human capital—measured through metrics such as reader engagement, brand influence, and adaptability to evolving market trends. Algorithm-driven competition, therefore, functions not merely as a tool for capitalist exploitation but also as a structured mechanism for generating profits on online literature platforms. However, these roles are not mutually exclusive; the platform's dual function as an enabler of profit generation and a site of exploitation reveals the inherent complexities of its economic structure. The platform's algorithms, while guiding authors' creative direction, also serve to provide a creative space and connect authors with audiences. This interplay between algorithms and the creative environment effectively reconfigures the resources available for literary production. As Bao Jianfeng (宝剑锋), the founder of *Qidian*, explained in an interview with Professor Shao Yanjun of Peking University:

To ensure authors feel secure and continue creating, it is essential to provide them with basic living conditions, which is why I launched the writer's welfare program. If you keep writing and produce quality work, even if you're at the bottom of the pyramid, I can help elevate you.<sup>3</sup>

In 2010, the company enhanced its benefits system for writers, introducing measures aimed at supporting their creativity, personal development, income stability, and brand-building. Key improvements included a minimum income guarantee for contracted writers, higher revenue shares, and a support program for authors with creative potential. In 2020, China Literature Limited (阅文集团), the parent company of *Qidian*, launched the "Professional Writer Star Plan" (职业作家星计划), which offered contracted writers an additional 20% of their platform subscription income as a monthly creative subsidy, supplementing the standard 50% revenue share. Yang Chen(杨晨), Vice President and Editor-in-Chief of China Literature Limited, explained during the launch event that the initiative was designed to

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<sup>3</sup> Shao, Yanjun, and Chen Xinbang, "Interview with Qidian Chinese Website Founder Bao Jianfeng: Historical Details of the Rise of Online Literature", China Writers Network, <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/n1/2021/0115/c404024-32000646.html>, accessed August 25, 2024.



accelerate the growth of emerging writers, foster a higher-quality content ecosystem, and create mutual benefits for both authors and the platform. Xia Lie (夏烈), Vice Dean of the Internet Literature Research Institute at the China Writers Association, emphasized that Chinese online literature is at a critical turning point. He noted that the industry can no longer rely solely on previous models or the demographic dividends of earlier stages for growth. Instead, it has entered a phase of refined development that requires comprehensive and precise collaboration across all sectors of the industry to advance online literature production to new heights.<sup>4</sup> The plan also introduced a new book subsidy of 1,500 to 4,500 yuan per month, automatically disbursed without the need for an application. These initiatives provide online novelists with greater opportunities to gain recognition and establish sustainable careers as professional writers, while reflecting the evolving priorities of the online literature industry.

Content creators are undoubtedly vital assets within the online literature industry. Beyond the application of data-driven strategies, the redistribution of resources plays a significant role in generating value for web writers. The relationship between platforms and online authors is not one of strict subordination. Rather, authors contribute text content that sustains the platform's operations and are prioritized because of the economic value their work generates. The results of our survey revealed that 61% out of 70 authors reported no significant constraints on their creative freedom from their contracts, while 58% expressed general satisfaction with platform-provided resources, such as recommendation algorithms, editorial feedback, and tools for engaging with readers. Many web writers welcome the competition-driven economic model because it incentivises productivity, expands their readership, and offers financial opportunities, fostering a sense of achievement and recognition. These findings demonstrate that both authors and readers view this competitive framework positively. Thus, it would be reductive to describe the production of online literature in platform economies merely as an example of digital capitalism's dominance or "technological feudalism." Instead, it represents a "reconfiguration" of digital labour, allowing creators to navigate and thrive within a platform-centric economic structure.

## 6. Reconstructing Aesthetic Value and the Creative Dilemma in Literary Production

Walter Benjamin famously argued that mechanical reproduction fundamentally transformed art by dissolving the "Aura"(an artwork's unique presence), "authenticity," and the aesthetic distance it

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_9305716](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_9305716), accessed September 1, 2024.

maintains from its audience. He contended that in pre-industrial contexts, limited reproduction preserved the originality and cult value of artistic works (Benjamin, 1969). In the digital age, Benjamin's insights have gained renewed relevance, as digital technologies disrupt traditional notions of "authenticity" and aesthetic distance. Scholars such as Stephen Bury (2019) have extended Benjamin's theory to the digital realm, highlighting how infinite replication in digital formats further erodes the uniqueness of art. At the same time, digital technologies have enabled innovative forms of artistic expression, such as electronic literature, which challenge established ideas of authorship and audience engagement (Couce & Raquel, 2012). These advancements introduce interactive and non-linear narratives, redefining the roles of creators and consumers in ways that blur traditional boundaries between the two.

This shift marks a significant redefinition of literary value and authority in the digital era. With digital platforms enabling continuous interaction between authors and readers, the once-clear boundaries between creator and consumer have become increasingly fluid. This evolving dynamic necessitates a reconsideration of traditional notions of artistic authenticity and cultural production. Revisiting Benjamin's analysis through the lens of digital literature offers valuable insights into how technological advancements are transforming both the creation of art and the mechanisms by which literary value is established and maintained.

### **6.1 Readers' Invisible Labour and the Shift in Aesthetic Power**

In the platform economy, literary production continues its historical intertwining with market dynamics, a pattern evident since the Republican era and the print bestseller phenomenon of the 1980s and 1990s. However, the digital age introduces unique elements, particularly through digital labour. Digital labour, in this context, refers to the work performed by authors and readers within self-publishing platforms, shaped by algorithmic recommendations, reader preferences, and economic incentives. This form of labour encompasses not only the creative efforts of authors but also the participatory engagement of readers, who contribute through clicks, comments, and feedback that influence both the visibility and direction of literary works. As Iberia (2005: 35) observed, literary value is increasingly shaped by market demands rather than purely artistic criteria. While this trend is not new, its manifestation in digital ecosystems is amplified by real-time reader interactions and data-driven content optimization. Contracted online authors, operating within platform-designed economic models, align their work to

shared reader interests, balancing creative aspirations with the demands of algorithmic visibility and audience satisfaction.

While literary value should not be reduced to mere popular appeal, the role of reader empathy and emotional engagement cannot be ignored, particularly within the platform economy. During our interview, one reader shared that to support his favorite authors, he created multiple accounts and repeatedly purchased paid chapters. This was his way of ensuring that their works appeared more prominently on the platform and benefited from greater visibility. However, the platform's rankings are not the sole form of symbolic capital. Many online literature enthusiasts also create comment spaces where they can share their opinions, hoping to influence the dissemination and reception of literary works. An example of this is the "Dragon's Sky (龙的天空)" forum (<https://www.lkong.com>), created by passionate online literature fans. For instance, authors on platforms like *Qidian* often tailor their narratives to evoke strong emotional responses, incorporating popular tropes such as "golden fingers" (金手指) (characters with extraordinary abilities) and "shuangdian" (爽点) (moments of intense satisfaction). The aesthetic judgments of readers, as mediated by platform algorithms, have become a dominant force in defining literary value in the digital age.

A widely discussed post on the "Dragon's Sky" forum explores whether authors of Shuang Wen (爽文) and their readers exist outside the realm of "literature." Underlying this debate is a deeper issue: readers of online literature themselves question whether they possess aesthetic authority. The Shuang Wen culture, which caters to readers' imaginative pleasures, has been extensively examined in Chinese online literature studies by scholars such as Shao Yanjun (2015, 2016), Li Zhanchu (2020), and Ji Yunfei (2024). Shao Yanjun argues that the "pleasure-driven literary perspective" in online literature challenges the traditional elite notion of literature as a means of "education through entertainment" (2016). Drawing on Foucault's theory of "heterotopia," she examines the rapid expansion of online literature over the past two decades and contends that it plays a positive role in both psychological and cultural development. The interplay between readers seeking enjoyment and authors crafting Shuang Wen to fulfill this demand has elevated the reader-centered "pleasure-driven literary perspective" within the cultural sphere, challenging the traditionally elitist literary hierarchy. As Shao Yanjun states, "Online literature has not only attracted a vast mainstream readership but has also developed its own production mechanisms and evaluation systems within the new media landscape" (2016).

However, the shift in aesthetic power in the platform economy introduces significant challenges for literary production. Platform algorithms and reader participation increasingly influence the motivations behind creative processes, often pressuring writers to cater to popular preferences. This trend undermines the diversity and independence of literary creation, aligning it with metrics-driven market priorities. Readers, through activities like clicking, tipping, and leaving comments, indirectly shape the visibility and popularity of works by feeding data into algorithmic systems. However, while this hidden labour empowers platforms to optimize content based on engagement, its control extends primarily to the formal and structural aspects of literature—such as pacing, narrative techniques, and thematic accessibility. Determining whether these formal elements hold aesthetic value remains a matter for scholarly debate, as platforms do not directly dictate artistic judgments. Instead, the platform's algorithmic mediation amplifies works that adhere to marketable trends, exacerbating tensions between creative originality and commercial demands. This dynamic suppresses artistic experimentation, fostering uniformity and potentially leading to a creative bottleneck in digital literary ecosystems.

## 6.2 Platform Algorithms and Work Visibility

Our survey indicates that some authors believe signing a platform contract temporarily compromises their independence and limits their creative freedom. However, this limitation is often only a temporary phase, after which greater creative freedom can be regained. In an interview with an emerging writer from *Qidian*, he explained his views on the platform system:

For inexperienced new writers, the platform offers certain training and support. In the process of their development, they aim to attract the attention of readers and ultimately rely on their own writing skills. The subscription model of Qidian.com involves selling books by chapters, which, although different from traditional literary creation methods, allows authors more time to settle down and write compared to other platforms that require attracting readers' attention in a short period of time.<sup>5</sup>

On *Qidian*, the platform's recommendation algorithm is primarily driven by the frequency of updates and the level of reader interaction. Works that are updated frequently and engage readers effectively are more likely to gain visibility. Conversely, works with slower update schedules or lower engagement are often less visible in the platform's recommendation system. On May 5, 2020, a group of authors staged

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<sup>5</sup> Dongsan Kele (东三可乐), Personal Communications, August 22, 2024. [translated from Chinese]

a protest by halting their updates. The protest was aimed at the platform's unfair revenue-sharing practices, its algorithm-driven recommendations, and the overwhelming pressure on authors to maintain a high rate of content production. Ultimately, the protest highlighted the tensions between the platform's algorithm and the visibility of authors' works, illustrating the challenges authors face in maintaining control over their creative output.

The integration of artificial intelligence, algorithms, and big data has enabled algorithms to "precisely track which books you spend more time on, understand your preferences, and recommend books that are more likely to engage you." This system is the result of data and algorithms developed by tens of thousands of people (Shao Yanjun & Lei Ning, 2024). This indicates that the reader feedback mechanism is both timely and precise, leading to increased visibility for high-quality works. Undoubtedly, on one hand, this environment supports the visibility of talented writers and exceptional works, but on the other hand, it also concentrates resources on "top-tier" authors and popular works, which hinders the development of new writers and innovative themes. The dominance of certain algorithm-driven story types may also result in a reduction in the diversity and artistic quality of literature.

Moreover, censorship plays a significant role in shaping the visibility of literary works. Online platforms in China implement rigorous content review systems to ensure compliance with public moral standards and legal regulations. This process not only determines which works are allowed to be published, but also influences which themes and topics receive greater exposure. As a result, writers must carefully navigate the risks of censorship, often avoiding sensitive topics to prevent their works from being censored or marginalized. This self-censorship restricts the creative freedom of authors, hindering their ability to fully express their intended messages.

By analyzing the current digital labour ecosystem and changes in literary aesthetics, it becomes clear that the future of Chinese online literature depends on improving the creative environment. Achieving this requires efforts from platforms, policymakers, and authors.

## 7. Discussion

As one of China's leading online literature platforms, *Qidian* has historically relied on data such as clicks and tips for its recommendations and rankings. However, after recognizing the issue of content homogenization, the platform began experimenting with new ranking mechanisms. For instance, *Qidian* introduced categories such as the "Potential List," "New Book List," and "Girls' Selection List" to better

cater to diverse reader preferences and provide more visibility to innovative works. Although popular titles continue to dominate the mainstream charts, these new classifications help smaller or more experimental works gain exposure.

In the digital labour ecosystem, content creators often follow market trends, producing works that attract traffic on the platform. This is especially prevalent in online literature, where popular genres like fantasy, urban, and time-travel novels dominate, leading to significant content homogenization. Following the "May 5th Update Strike," *Qidian* and Jinjiang Literature City began gradually improving their algorithmic recommendation systems. They introduced more classified lists to improve visibility for smaller works and relaxed contract terms, allowing authors more flexible update schedules. This classified list strategy represents the platform's attempt to counteract content homogenization. Although the algorithm still emphasizes click rates and reading volumes, these classifications offer greater exposure to works with diverse themes, thereby promoting aesthetic diversity in literature.

Prominent authors like Fennude Xiangjiao have explored ways to balance market demands with creative autonomy, despite the dual pressures from platforms and readers. While they adhere to popular trends and maintain regular updates, they also pursue their literary ideals through thoughtful story design and unique themes. For example, the serialized novel *Son-in-Law* successfully balances market demand with creative freedom. Initially, the novel attracted readers by fulfilling their desire for the development of an exciting protagonist, but as the story progressed, Fennude Xiangjiao incorporated deeper social, political, and historical elements. This approach satisfied market demands for fast-paced, engaging plots, while also offering profound social commentary through the author's unique perspective, resulting in a richer literary aesthetic.

In the digital labour ecosystem, many content creators are pressured by platforms to focus on click-through rates and popular trends, resulting in "task-oriented" production rather than genuine creative freedom. Li argues that in the context of the slowing growth of mainstream genres, recent "blockbuster" online literature has displayed numerous characteristics that disregard conventional genre tropes, even deliberately "subverting" them and seeking "variations" (2023). Authors like Fennude Xiangjiao gradually embed personal creative intentions into market-driven works, reflecting this trend. *Heaven Under the Sky* (天之下) by Sanxian (三弦) and *The Dead Book* (死人经) by Binglin Shenxia(兵临神下) illustrate how online literature authors balance creative autonomy with market demands. *Heaven Under the Sky*



transcends traditional wuxia tropes like "revenge" and "treasure hunting" by introducing the "infinite flow" variant. The novel moves away from typical themes of vengeance to challenge established, game-like rules amid hidden power struggles within the Nine Great Sects, offering a deeper reflection on civilization. This transformation revitalizes the wuxia genre by blending game theory with social and philosophical exploration. *The Dead Book* by Binglin Shenxia demonstrates a similar commitment to creative independence. Binglin Shenxia focused on his personal vision of the wuxia world, not on appeasing mainstream readers, resulting in the book's recognition as a classic. Some literary critics have pointed out that, in order to preserve a pure creative mindset, he deliberately refrained from participating in the online literature community after gaining fame (Chen Xinbang, 2019). Furthermore, to maintain his creative freedom and avoid being constrained by the wordcount requirements outlined in contracts, he declined to sign with the platform's 'top-tier' writers. These examples show how online literature authors balance creative freedom with market pressures. Both Sanxian and Binglin Shenxia exemplify how authors can maintain creative autonomy while responding to market dynamics.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the development of Chinese online literature within the platform economy, exemplified by *Qidian*, presents a transformative shift in the dynamics of literary production. The intersection of algorithmic mediation, commercialization, and reader interaction has not only redefined the role of authors as digital labourers but also brought forth new aesthetic values that reflect the complex interplay between creators and consumers. While much of the discourse has focused on the exploitation of writers within this ecosystem, this paper offers an alternative perspective, suggesting that the platform economy, rather than stifling creativity, has in fact provided fertile ground for the evolution of new narrative forms and aesthetic standards. The algorithm-driven model fosters a reciprocal relationship between writers and readers, where creativity is both incentivised and shaped by audience preferences. In this sense, the influence of platforms like *Qidian* goes beyond mere economic factors, playing a pivotal role in reshaping the cultural and aesthetic contours of Chinese literature. As this phenomenon continues to evolve, further exploration is needed to fully understand how these digital mechanisms can be leveraged to support creative innovation, while also ensuring that the rights and well-being of digital labourers are protected. The future of online literature is not only about profit

maximisation but also about cultivating a vibrant, sustainable, and dynamic literary ecosystem that values both aesthetic and ethical considerations.

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