A Comparative Analysis of *Qidian.com* and *Webnovel.com*: From the View of Digital Humanities

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Abstract:

Web Novel has become an integral part of contemporary recreation for people living in the world greatly changed by the revolution in information technology and consequent social upheaval. Chinese webnovels, benefitting from the fast-growing digital culture industry, have developed a successful industrial model represented by "qidian.com", a famous website for internet users to read and write original fiction, ranking 9087 in global internet traffic. The launch of its international version "webnovel.com" in 2017 marks a strong, well-tested, and sophisticated cyberliterature industrial model entering the global cultural market. By comparing these two websites from the view of digital humanities, this research is expected to analyze differences between their scale, functions, sorts of works, and two versions (original and translated) of a specific text existing on both websites. Based on data analysis, several conclusions will be inferred such as the advantages, limitations, and influences of "qidian-mode" facing unfamiliar and complicated international surroundings. In conclusion, though encountering several problems while launching the international version, "qidian-mode" with Chinese characteristics and standards provides a practical model for the development and industrialization of online literature around the world.

Keywords: Webnovels, Digital Humanities, Qidian.com, Webnovel.com

Introduction

Digital technology is witnessing a sharp change in contemporary entertainment for people living in a world controlled by mobile phones, computers and plentiful applications. Chinese webnovel, or "original fiction" mentioned by Bhaskar (2013), is a burgeoning fiction genre for internet users, especially those born after twenty-eighties to amuse themselves. Benefiting from fast-growing digital culture industry, Chinese webnovel has developed a successful industrial model represented by "qidian.com", a famous website for internet users to read and write online fiction, ranking 9087 in global internet traffic (Alexa Rank). According to Report on the Development of Chinese Online Literature 2021, there have been 502 million online fiction readers in China generating RMB20 billion revenue for 45 online literary websites, which with their overseas versions like Webnovel, Radish and Korean Webtoon platform together, "[are] rapidly offering alternatives to Western cultural products that historically have dominated traditional media sectors in the region" (Shim et al., 2020).

Webnovels and their spawning-ground literary websites entering the mainstream reading market are drawing attention from publishing for the speed and scale of digital storytelling modes. Bhaskar (2013) takes Chinese webnovels as "new ways of writing and a new end product" and believes that "digital delivery and content creates opportunities for innovative, skilled and agile entrants to the market." After discussing different book forms in the digital age (including Chinese webnovels and mobile fiction in Japan), Johnson (2022) further points out that "books are now social," which indicates the influence of digital technology upon traditional publishing. Qidian, and its international version Webnovel, are both representatives of digital technology changing publishing. In consideration of the incredible length and profits-oriented nature of Chinese webnovels (some of them are more than 1000 chapters), it is difficult to publish webnovels traditionally. By tracing and comparing Qidian and Webnovel's development, this study tries to figure out the mechanism of Qidian literary industry, problems it may face in overseas expansion and how to solve them.

Qidian Industry and its Abroad Expansion

Developing from the Chinese Chinese Magic Fantasy Union and being officially created in May 2002, Qidian is one of the most successful digital reading platforms in China (Qidian Introduction). It is also the pathfinder constructing a profitable pattern of webnovels on account of inaugurating a paid-for-content system only one year after its launch, which has become the cornerstone of Chinese literary industry. In addition, Qidian adapted several systems for a rapidly growing market. This innovation includes a writer-cultivation system, the construction of literary interactivity, a ranking and recommendation system etc., which together support the expansion of this website. In 2022, the first half profits of China Literature (the company running Qidian and Webnovel) have increased from RMB 4342.1 million to RMB 4087.2 million, which indicates the potential of the Chinese cultural industry (China Literature, 2022). In 2017, the launch of its international version "webnovel.com" marks a strong, well-tested, and sophisticated online literature industrial model entering the global cultural market. From 2017 to 2022, Webnovel has released about 2600 Chinese translated webnovels and 420 thousand original works created by overseas writers, which attracted a great deal of attention from English and non-English countries (Shim et al., 2020; Yoesoef, 2020; iResearch Inc, 2021; China Literature, 2022).

Attention should be paid to the extraordinary interactivity of Chinese webnovels, especially the interactivity between writers and readers. In a digital age, the option of readers could almost determine the cuisine of webnovels, which therefore have become a negotiation-like text swinging between writers, readers, kudos and profits (Ouyang & Zeng, 2020). Chinese webnovels, especially works listed in genres of Xuanhuan and Xianxia, have basically followed a writing pattern including a setting based on complex power-gaining system and a protagonist elevating his/her ranks following the system in the unfolding story, which with traditional Chinese cultural elements together, surprise overseas readers (Zhang, 2021). This kind of reader-oriented webnovels differentiated traditional Western fantasy from its storytelling ability and addictive attraction, which cater to the needs of readers who seek pleasure from online fiction (Ji & Li, 2017). Therefore, based on the special system of Chinese original fiction, Webnovel gained a foothold in the overseas market.

Webnovel and Qidian share a same paid-for-content system, within which their mechanics are similar. There are two systems running the

highly user-friendly website, one is reader-centered subgenres system, and another is a writer-centered ranking and recommendation system. Take "xuanhuan" as an example: Xuanhuan literally means imagination or illusion, in online literature, it refers to a large number of books based on magic and imagination. After getting into this genre's page, readers can choose books in many ways: First, subgenres are listed to classify specific works, including works based on Eastern settings; imaginary worlds; relating power struggles, and works involving martial arts; Second, readers can choose books according to their popularity which is clear in rankings; Third, rea-ders can also choose works depend on whether it is completed or whether it is accessible for free. To improve the interactivity between users and works (including writers-readers, writers-writers, readers-readers, texts-texts; texts-other media forms), Qidian allows readers to comment on paragraphs or even words, conducts platforms for followers of the same book to discuss and post literary pieces, and encourage readers to post their book lists and write down their comments so that other readers who have same tastes will find their interested books quickly, which inspire writers and readers to build community for creating, sharing and discussion (Ouyang, 2020).

Though Webnovel is the international version of Qidian, they vary in several aspects. First, Webnovel, adapting itself to the international market, seems more systematic and ambitious than Qidian. Integrating comics and fan-fic into browse, which are parallel to novels' genres (including xuanhuan, fantasy, wuxia, xianxia, urban, realistic, war, history, game, sports, sci-fi, horror, and ACG), Webnovel tries to conduct an inclusive platform for different users and prepare itself for transmedia adaptation. At the same time, male-lead works and female-lead works are put together, rather than listing female-lead works in an additional website in Qidian, whose female-lead works compare unfavorably with other literary platforms such as Jinjiang. Second, the sections of browse and rankings are not fixed on the page, which provides more space for recommendations. Third, the sections of create are listed together with browse and rankings. Besides, writing activities and three sections of writers including original stories, becoming an author and books of authors are colorful and listed on the home page. These last two variations indicate that Webnovel attaches importance to cultivating overseas writers and classic works, which have attracted numerous views such as *My Vampire System* (WSA 2020 Gold Prize) and *The Crown's Obsession*.

Generally speaking, Webnovel following Qidian, is a highly reader-friendly website in which readers are encouraged to choose books in different ways, including content, popularity, length, style or payments. It creates an organic forum around works, and at the same time, it objectively improves users' stickiness to the website. In 2021, about 83.4% overseas readers have become followers of Chinese webnovels more than six months; and 63.9% readers have read over 10 works, which demonstrates the grace of Chinese webnovels (iResearch Inc, 2021). The literary competition held by Webnovel has covered Bahasa Indonesia and Thai, the official languages of Indonesia and Thailand, which proves that though Webnovel cannot compete with qidian right now, it is walking upon the right way to develop.

Lord of Mysteries and its Translation

Lord of Mysteries is one of the most successful webnovel in Qidian, both commercially and literally. According to official data, Lord of Mysteries is highly rated by both Webnovel and Qidian, scoring 4.84 (full marks 5) and 9.20 (full marks 10) respectively (Qidiantu, n.d.; Webnovel, n.d.). Though it has been completed in 2020, there are still numerous new readers bookmarking this novel. In a Chinese social platform LOFTER, there have been 113 thousand users following the tag "*Lord of Mysteries*" which attracted 64.79million views. The followers of Lord of Mysteries, like those following *The King's Avatar*, generate a lot of excellent paintings and literary pieces to express their love and imagination to characters. Besides, there are also followers posting their works on Archive of Our Own, Twitter, and Tumblr. In 2020, the first book of *Lord of Mysteries* series was published.

Lord of Mysteries is set in an imaginary Victorian age. The main character Zhou Mingrui, selected by the mysterious "Tianzun," is reborn in a weird steampunk world in which superpower exists and becomes a college student named Klein who encounters a bizarre death. In order to return home and protect his friends, he became a member of the night Church, protecting ordinary people from extraordinary events. Unlike the normal Qidian protagonist who owns overwhelming power, Klein can only rely on his caution and wisdom to protect himself most of the time. Though *Lord of Mysteries* has been completed, the story continues in that world.

The translation of *Lord of Mysteries* remains the style of original texts. Take the first several chapters as examples, when Zhou Mingrui is suddenly reborn in the body of Klein. Lord of Mysteries is based on the protagonist Klein's ability to fight against the external gods. The first chapters describing the characters at the beginning are confused for readers who know nothing about the world setting and the background of the protagonist. From the perspective of verbs, the extensive existing of mental process verbs and behavioral process verbs helps to improve the readers' empathy, leads the readers to experience the dilemma faced by the protagonist and attracts readers to continue reading. As a cultural commodity, it echoes the nature of webnovels on internet traffic and payment rates.

From the perspective of sentence pattern, the text of *Lord of Mysteries* is mostly simple sentences, with fewer adjectives, simple structure, short sentence pattern and fast rhythm. Some sentences do not even have a complete grammatical structure, but a simple arrangement of noun phrases. For instance, The paragraph describing the appearance of the main character, Klein, is "black hair, brown eyes, a linen shirt, thinly built, average-looking features and a rather deep outline (Cuttlefish That Loves Diving 2018)…" This is a list of some noun phrases, which is consistent with the characteristics of simplifying narrative speech and decreasing the description of Chinese online novels (Zhang, 2020). Finally, in the form of the paragraph, the paragraph of *Lord of Mysteries* is very short, most of the paragraphs are composed of one or two sentences. Paragraphs in webnovels, closely linked with each other, always carry fragmen-ted information about story development. Besides, the pace of transmitting information is quick, which is in line with the reading habits of webnovels readers.

In a word, the writing style of Chinese webnovels is distinct and have adapted itself to readers for a long time and it remains in the translated version. This style is rooted in the need of internet traffic and readers' attention and also the core of the literary industry. In 2021, there have been 2100 Chinese webnovels being translated into other languages. However, it is obvious that languages barricades affect the translation of Chinese webnovels, causing a popularity-time gap between the domestic and abroad markets.

Problems Faced by Webnovel

As a burgeoning genre, Chinese webnovels have developed themselves in the market, but not yet in time. Because of the profit-oriented writing pattern, webnovels are criticized as spirit opium and meaningless cliche. Some readers are tired of Qidian MC (main character) who only knows slaughter and violence, instead, they appreciate elaborately designed stories, just like:

This novel is the best I've ever read on Qidian since the day my friend recommend the site (to help me learn Chinese). It's nothing similar to those trash out there which only include some boring stereotypes about the MC keeping "zhuangbi" and facesmacking...@flyingkoala

As a negotiation-like text, webnovel requires its creator to handle the relationship between readers, writers and profits, which seems difficult for writers seeking profits in the platform.

Online piracy is also a serious problems causing great financial loss. There are some websites that steal contents from Webnovel and release them for free to increase internet traffic including Novelfeast and Nove-larchive. It is easy to find the whole text of My Vampire System on website (Noveladd). Different from Wattpad, Fanfiction or Updatenovel which attract users by offering free contents, Chinese online literary websites make profits on the VIP system and paid-for-content mechanism. However, with the increasing number of paid-for-content users, there have been 56% readers complaining expensiveness of reading webnovels. Represented by Webnovel, Chinese online literary websites are affected seriously by online piracy which may cause troubles in cultivating user stickiness.

Language barricades affect the translation of Chinese works. By the end of 2021, Webnovel has translated about 2100 Chinese online works, which only occupy a small portion of Qidian IP resources. The limited translation causes a time gap which means that works popular overseas now are outdated in China. Besides, the similar fiction patterns cause aesthetic fatigue and the stereotype of main characters such as Long Aotian, who is always portrayed as money-oriented and dissolute.

Conclusion

In recent years, online literature has gradually moved to the center stage and become an integral part of the mainstream. Compared with the government publicity, the popularity of online literature works such as *Coiling Dragon*, *Lord of Mysteries* and *Master of Demonic Dao* shows that online literature as entertainment seems to play a more important role in spreading Chinese culture and telling Chinese stories well.

Due to its great difference from classic works and unique development, online literature represented by qidian was criticized as escapism and over-commercialization without literariness. It should be admitted that there are some problems in Qidian, but its values overweight the drawbacks. First, literature has the power to heal and comfort, and that is why utopia and the Peach Garden exist in human memory. Second, online literature allows everyone to speak for themselves no matter who they are. Literature is out of some circles, whatever the works would be, people can express their sufferings, happiness and trouble facing tough life. Third, online literature can be a bridge connecting different cultures. Xuanhuan, a Chinese webnovel genre, has Western blood which can be traced to the popularity of *Dungeons and Dragons*. There are also a lot of works imitating the settings of Western games, movies and TV series such as *The Sword of Dawn* and *Lord of Mysteries*. The curiosity and appreciation of different cultures in literature can be important in constructing a human community with a shared future.

In conclusion, despite encountering several problems while launching the international version, the "qidian-model" with Chinese characteristics and standards provides a practical model for the development and industrialization of online literature around the world. However, Chinese webnovels are also trapped in cliches and stereotypes which cause aesthetic fatigue. The popularity and expansion of online literature needs updating criteria and a complete evaluation system with the help of digital humanities.

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