



Why do women write? Exploring women's empowerment through online literature creation in China

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Abstract

As a crucial part of the booming Chinese cultural creative industries, online literature has stood out for its great economic benefit and broad social influence in recent decades. The prospering of online literature in China owes a great deal to the rise of Chinese women as writers in this huge industrial chain. This study explores the initiatives and implications of women's online literature creation in China under the framework of women's empowerment. Drawing on data collected through digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews, it mainly addresses whether online literature creation empowers Chinese women in the digital era. Overall, I conclude that online literature creation might dynamically empower women as writers at both individual and collective levels in both material and non-material forms, yet such creation is still faced with serious challenges stemming from the precarity of the platform economy, the prevalence of patriarchal values, and the rigor of nation-state censorship in contemporary China.

Keywords

autocracy, China, cultural creative industry, digital labour, digital publishing, online literature, patriarchy, platformization, women's empowerment

Since the early 1990s, electronic literature has arisen with traditional power relations broken by digital media, whose decentred nature has the potential to empower literary creators (Bolter, 2001; Svedjedal, 2000; Van Looy and Baetens, 2003) and expose

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literary works to a larger audience in a more interactive manner (Perloff, 2006). Electronic literature should exclude digitalized print literature: It is ‘digital born’, created and usually meant to be read on a computer. With the dissemination mechanisms of the internet, electronic literature has challenged traditions of literary writing and publishing to cause large-scale socio-cultural changes with the spread of digital culture (Hayles, 2008) and widespread concerns that the long-cherished notions of creativity in literary creation are under attack through appropriation, replication, plagiarism, piracy, etc. (Goldsmith, 2011).

Electronic literature, also known as ‘internet literature’, ‘network literature’, ‘web literature’, or ‘online literature’ in the internet era, refers to literary works that are written in established literary genres or in innovative literary forms and published in an online interactive context to be read on-screen (Hockx, 2015). As a form of digital storytelling, online literature creation is technology-decided: literary works are created by computer-based tools and circulated on internet-based networks (Robin and McNeil, 2019). With the upgrading of the internet and its platforms, the creative expression of both professional and amateur literary writers has been expanded, leading to a significant increase in the number of both literary writers and works (Shakargy, 2021).

As one of the four world’s ‘cultural wonders’, Chinese online literature has gained as wide recognition as American movies, Japanese anime, and South Korean TV dramas in the global cultural creative industries (Ren and Montgomery, 2012). In China, one third people read online literature and half of the internet users read online literature. By the end of 2021, the size of China’s online literature market had exceeded RMB 30 billion.¹ The total number of online literature users in China had reached 502 million, accounting for 48.6% of the total number of internet users (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2022).

Emerging as a grassroots alternative to state-controlled publishing businesses (Zhao, 2017), online literature in China has immensely lowered the publishing threshold of literary creation and liberated the literary productivity of the masses. Online literature created by women accounts for half of the industry, which has made remarkable contributions to cultural innovation in China (National Cultural Innovation Zone, 2022). From 2016 to 2021, more than 600 Chinese films and TV dramas were adapted from online literature, the majority of which were created by female writers (*Beijing Daily*, 2021a): famous intellectual properties (IPs)² of women’s online literature that have been adapted include *The Legend of Zhen Huan*, *The Journey of Flower*, *Nirvana in Fire*, and more were warmly welcomed by a large audience at home and abroad.

Despite the significant role of women as writers in the bonanza of Chinese online literature, limited attention has been paid to their writing and publishing practices. Does online literature creation empower women in China? As a piece of media archaeology of the ‘golden era’ of Chinese online literature, this study looks into women’s online literature creation through a gendered lens, which hopefully contributes to the knowledge domain of feminist media and cultural studies concerning women’s empowerment in the digital era in the Asian context.

Literature review

In the literature review, I first conceptualize ‘women’s empowerment’, after which I expound on the relationship between women’s empowerment and literary creation. I

then introduce women's literature creation in China through a historicized discussion, elaborating on the systemic factors affecting Chinese women's literature creation in the digital era, which is expected to offer appropriate contextualization to readers less familiar with women's status in literary and cultural practices in China.

Women's empowerment and literary creation

Empowerment is a construct that links individual strengths, capabilities, and proactive behaviours to social policies and social changes, which suggests both individual determination over one's own life and democratic participation in the life of one's community (Rappaport, 1987). The conceptualization of 'women's empowerment' dates back to the 1980s, when a feminist conception of power emphasizing energy and creativity emerged (Theberge, 1987). 'Women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace ...' (United Nations, 1995). In general, women's empowerment refers to a repeated process, affected by different social contexts in which women take action to gain power by drawing on evolving self-efficacy, knowledge, and competence (Cattaneo and Chapman, 2010).

Women's empowerment can be measured by three interrelated dimensions: resources (including current access and future claims to both material and human and social resources); agency (including primary processes of decision-making, as well as less measurable manifestations of 'agency' such as negotiation, deception, and manipulation); and achievements (well-being outcomes) (Kabeer, 2010). Cultural, economic, and political perspectives are used to examine women's empowerment. Culturally, two levers are essential in women's empowerment: the first is processes that produce shifts in consciousness, which include overturning limiting normative beliefs and expectations that keep women locked into situations of subordination and dependency, challenging restrictive cultural and social norms, and contesting the institutions of everyday life that sustain inequity. The second is engagement – with culturally embedded normative beliefs, understandings, and ideas about gender, power, and change – which takes the process of change beyond the level of the individual to address commonly held and taken-for-granted assumptions that undergird gendered inequalities in any cultural context (Cornwall, 2016). To discuss women's economic empowerment in employment, we can focus on their incorporation into the paid workforce, as well as intra-household relations and decision-making (Pearson, 2010). The political empowerment of women is a process of increasing capacity, leading to greater choice, agency, and participation in societal decision-making (Sundström et al., 2017).

Literary creation can be a solitary activity and a quest for personal consolation, as well as serving the interests of a community, which can be empowering at both individual and community levels (Christiansen, 2021). In 1929, Virginia Woolf claimed that male-dominated society had systematically prevented women from having education opportunities, private spaces, and economic independence in *A Room of One's Own*, which was considered a profound early example of cultural materialism that linked women's literary creation as art production to their material independence. Women's literary creation holds

out ‘visions of possibility’. Rooted in women’s efforts of self-definition in the face of change, women’s literature devises narrative strategies that capture the process of change and can thus play a part in transforming psychic and social structures, in raising the consciousness and expectations of a generation. Its formal innovations are also ideological critiques, and its critiques extend to more than gender; they are fundamentally concerned with the systems of which gender ideology is but a part (Greene, 1991). The original position and works of women’s literature have one thing in common: they ask people to deploy their imaginations and visualize ideal situations in which fairness is the norm (Eze, 2016). As a proven medium for proposing and evaluating social change, literary creation enables women to reimagine relationships, social structures, and gender roles. Through literary creation, women try to get involved in policy-making and push back against strict historical exclusion from the political sphere. Literary creation can serve as a guide for creating a workable future by giving women a platform where their voices can be heard, which means that women can have the ability to choose modes of sexual expression and reproduction, pursue personal creative and intellectual goals, vote and hold political offices, and so on (Imani Kasai, 2018).

Women’s literary creation in China: from premodern to modern

For thousands of years in premodern China, women lived under the patriarchal and patrilineal social order characterized by Confucian ideology (Li, 2000). Women were confined to the domestic sphere where they were treated as men’s property and ‘should obey their fathers before and their husbands after they got married’ (在家从父, 出嫁从夫 in Chinese). The literary field was traditionally a domain for men, and ‘lack of literary talent was a virtue for women’ (女子无才便是德).

The necessity of ‘becoming a modern person’ for the Chinese people originated from the chaotic period after the British Opium War in 1840 and the subsequent imperialist invasion (Yan, 2006), followed by the Hsinhai Revolution or Xinhai Revolution in 1911, which ended China’s last imperial dynasty, the Qing dynasty, and led to the establishment of the Republic of China. The New Culture Movement from the 1910s to 1920s witnessed the emergence of female writers, which marked the rise of women’s literature in modern China (Liu, 2005). As the feminist movement took hold, the beginning of the 20th century signified a period in which Chinese women were faced with the dilemma of either fighting against oppressive ideas rooted in Confucian ideology or sticking to traditional family values that treated men as superior to women (Schaffer and Xianlin, 2007).

In 1949, the foundation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was the start of a one-party dictatorship in socialist China. Mao Zedong (毛泽东), also known as Chairman Mao, famously said, ‘Women hold up half the sky’ (妇女能顶半边天). During the Mao era, many policies were introduced to promote women’s rights in China. However, in the literary field, women were forced to take a male-oriented perspective to depict ‘iron women’ and undermine feminine voices in their literary creation, which ignored true feminine identity in the male-dominated political and aesthetic arenas (Zai, 2009).

Since 1978, far-reaching market-economy reforms led by Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) have contributed mightily to economic reconstruction and ideological emancipation in China. The implementation of the Reform and Opening Policy has facilitated the establishment of the socialist market economy and a transformation in literary and cultural thought. Female writers in the 1980s and 1990s started to construct their own gender identity and to deconstruct the cultural disciplines of patriarchal societies through literary creation, which led to the emergence of female writing with prominent female subject consciousness. Female writers such as Zhang Jie (张洁), Zhang Xinxin (张辛欣), Chen Ran (陈染), and Lin Bai (林白) integrated women's life experience and emotional desire in their writing, showing unique female aesthetics and female subject consciousness that challenged the male-centred absolute authority (Yi, 2022).

The online publications of *The Story of Beauty* by Luosen (罗森) in 1997 and *The First Intimate Contact* by Pizicai (痞子蔡) in 1998 marked the arrival of the internet era in Chinese modern literary history. From 1997 to 1999, young writers with pennames such as Li Xunhuan (李寻欢), Ning Caishen (宁财神), Xing Yusen (邢育森), Anni Baobei (安妮宝贝) created and posted original stories on the bulletin board systems (BBSs), which later became popular among many online communities as the embryonic form of online literature in China (Chen, 2012).

The ecology of online literature has been fundamentally changed by the rise of women as writers (Wei, 2021). The year 2003 was a milestone in the history of Chinese women's online literature, which witnessed the historical birth of the paid-reading business model and the phenomenal popularity of women's original online literary works on literature websites. In the paid-reading business model, readers need to pay to read certain chapters of online literary works, and the revenues generated are shared by the websites and writers (Zhao, 2011). In 2003, the leading Chinese women's online literature website Jinjiang Literature City (hereafter referred to as Jinjiang) allowed users to upload and subscribe to original literary works. Mingxiaoxi (明晓溪) published her well-known novel *Trilogy of Moon River* and Guman (顾漫) started to serialize her masterpiece *My Sunshine* on Jinjiang, both of which received tens of millions of hits and were later adapted into films or TV dramas (Fan, 2021), illustrating how literature websites such as Jinjiang served to connect local website companies, traditional publishing companies, and the literary community in China (Hockx, 2004), as well as marking the beginning of the history of women's online literature.

From 2004 to 2008, under the influence of Hong Kong TVB's classic TV drama *War and Beauty* (金枝欲孽), a series of women's original online literary works describing women's power struggles in ancient China sprang up. In 2006, the publication of *The Legend of Zhen Huan* (甄嬛传) by Liulianzi (流潋紫) marked the climax of the prospering of women's online literature creation (Huang, 2016). However, the novel *The Legend of Zhen Huan* was accused of plagiarism after it was adapted into a hit TV drama (*Qianjiang Evening News*, 2017), exposing the plagiarism phenomenon in women's online literature creation to the public view.

Since 2008, women's online literature has become increasingly mature. Female writers began to pay more attention to women's status in social production rather than romantic relationships: examples include *So Young* by Xinyiwu (辛夷坞) and *The Lady in the Cubicle* by Shu Yi (舒仪). During this period, women's online literature

creation gradually entered the professional stage, during which the themes of women's online literature became more diverse (Liu, 2015).

In recent years, the cancellation of male and female areas, and the blurring of writer and reader boundaries in the creation and consumption of online literature in China have profoundly challenged traditional gender structure and social concepts (Feng and Nie, 2019). The changing themes of women's online literature are believed to reflect the promotion of women's self-efficacy and self-consciousness: through online literature creation, women start to strive for their voices and explore the new connotations of 'gender equality' in China (Ai, 2020). However, controversial topics such as copyright disputes (Montgomery and Fitzgerald, 2006), harmful content (Feng, 2015), and labour issues (Zhao, 2017), among others, have been constantly raising social concerns, which has caused women's online literature creation to be exposed to even stricter nation-state censorship in the legislative, executive, and judicial form: In 2020, the National News Publication Bureau released a 'Notice on further strengthening the management of online literature publishing', which required the standardization of the online literature industry and a strengthening of the management of online literature publishing (National News Publication Bureau, 2020), which threatens to limit the freedom of expression in women's online literature (Tang et al., 2022).

Methodology

I employed digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews in the collection of data. Digital ethnography is a method used to address questions in digitized spaces. In other words, it encompasses ethnography of virtual spaces (virtual ethnography), cyberspace ethnography, ethnography of new media, online ethnography, and social media/new media ethnography (Kaur-Gill and Dutta, 2020). Digital ethnography requires the researcher to use embodied experiences in the digital environment as a primary means of discovery. It provides a distinctive and very useful way of examining the internet, which allows us to develop an in-depth understanding of the textures of social experience that arise as people engage with the various technologies that comprise the contemporary internet (Hine, 2015). I spent seven months from 5 March to 5 October 2022 observing and recording the creative activities and daily interactions of female online literature writers on major Chinese literature websites including Qidian, Jinjiang, Hongxiutianxiang, Xiaoxiangshuyuan, Lofter, 17 K, etc.

The use of semi-structured interviews is common in qualitative research, as it is both versatile and flexible. A semi-structured interview consists of two levels of questions: main themes and follow-up questions. The main themes covers the main content of the research subject. Within these themes, participants are encouraged to speak freely about their perceptions and experiences. Follow-up questions are used to make the main themes easier for the participant to understand and to direct the conversation toward the study subject (Kallio et al., 2016). In data collection, close attention should be paid to any indication of inconvenience or withdrawal of the participants. All interviewees should be assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their interviews, whose personal information should also be kept confidential. Interviewees' names should be replaced with English letters in the data presentation (Mazaheri et al., 2013). I invited

participation of female online literature writers through formal and informal networks, including releasing recruitment information on literature websites and asking my personal friends who publish online literary works for help. In all, I completed 32 interviews in two phases: 22 interviews were conducted from 5 March to 5 October 2022, and 10 interviews were conducted from 5 December to 5 February 2023. The interviewees were female online literature writers aged 17 to 35 years old from different backgrounds. In the semi-structured interviews lasting 15 to 25 minutes, I first briefly explained the concept of empowerment to the interviewees, then asked them to share their opinions and experiences concerning empowerment in online literature creation. The interviews were conducted in Chinese, and I transcribed them into English.

Discussion

In the discussion, I interpret women's initiatives of online literature creation within the framework of women's empowerment through literary creation from cultural, economic, and political perspectives, concentrating on how systemic factors, such as cultural atmosphere, economic mechanisms, and political intervention affect their writing and publishing practices.

Female-friendly cultural atmosphere against patriarchy

Ellen (aged 26) returned to China to join a transnational e-commerce company in Shanghai after she graduated from a top university in the United Kingdom with a Master's degree. She is also a contracted writer on Qidian. When asked whether she felt empowered in her amateur writing career on the literature website, Ellen did not rush to the answer, instead, she started with the patriarchal atmosphere in the e-commerce company from a cultural perspective:

Competitions in internet companies in the first-tier cities ... are extremely fierce.... When you are working in an environment where men are the majority, you have to make much more effort to compete with them for the same position or opportunity. I work hard for promotion but the leaders who are also men do not really recognize my efforts. They just tell me tactfully that they will assign some not-so-important work to me because I am female, and I am not expected to work as hard as male colleagues. The overall atmosphere is misogynistic.... They don't say it, but they do it ...

China has a long patriarchal tradition of excluding women from the relations between production and consumption and repressing women in gender confrontations between men and women (Dai, 2023). Although it has been reported that the labour participation rate of Chinese women (aged 15 and above) has exceeded 60%, more than half of working women have perceived gender inequality in the working environment (*Beijing Daily*, 2021b). For Ellen, online literature creation as a part-time career has created a cultural atmosphere friendly to women that empowers her and other female writers in a non-material form:

I think that writing novels on Qidian rescues me from the stifling and stressful environment.... I was invited ... to the QQ³ and WeChat⁴ (微信) groups consisting of female writers of Qidian....

I have tens of thousands of readers who appreciate my novels and some of them even become loyal followers. My efforts made here [on Qidian] can pay off and get recognized, which gives me not only self-satisfaction but also spiritual support. What's more, I meet other women who share common interests with me in online literature. The overall atmosphere is relaxing and friendly.... I feel empowered whenever I think of my new identity and new family in the virtual world ...

Empirical research has shown that cultural capital such as knowledge sharing, affective connection, and experiences of pleasure motivate people to participate in the creation of online literature (Lin and Fung, 2019). Twenty-six interviewees explicitly stated that their perceived self-worth or self-satisfaction increased through online literature creation. In addition, in one accord they used the term 'sense of belonging' when it came to empowerment at a community level. The formation of online communities enhances writers' and readers' experience in the creation and consumption of Chinese online literature (Tse and Gong, 2012). On literature websites, writers can interact with other users in virtual forums, private letters, and comment zones. Writers can also communicate with readers or other writers in other online or offline channels. Some interviewees included details in their answers uncovering how their self-awareness was strengthened and how cultural capital was gained through the communities: 'We (writers) not only vote for the novels of other writers but also encourage our readers to vote for them so that our novels all achieve more visibility', 'If they [readers] thought that I'd done a good job, they voted for me, gave me virtual gifts, and commented on my chapters with warm and encouraging words', 'We [writers] together strived for more rights for us writers in negotiations with editors of the platform', 'I am obsessed with the warmth when surrounded by the friends that I made as a writer'... Although most interviewees admitted that online literary creation can be laborious and even painful, none of them denied the affective and emotional support that they gain from it. For women who have long been hovering on the margins of the labour market in China, affect and affective labour become a currency through which they acquired a sense of belonging and social utility (Muehlebach, 2011). Women passionately defend their work, finding in it a path to the kind of social belonging that used to be guaranteed by full employment (Tatro, 2014). At the individual level, online literature creation awakens women's self-awareness to break patriarchal norms that oppress them in the offline working environment. At the community level, online literature creation connects women with common interests to generate collective identities that reinforce their bonds, which holds them together as a homogeneous cultural group to strive for gender equality in cyberspace (Barker and Emma, 2016).

Platformized creative economy with precarity

Lu (aged 27) has been publishing original novels on Jinjiang for more than seven years. When asked what motivated her to create online literary works, she talked about how she felt empowerment in a material form:

But if now you ask when I feel most powerful in writing on Jinjiang, I have to say that it is less idealistic and more realistic: when I earned more than 200,000 RMB in 2020 from my

publications on the platform. I live in a small town where the average salary of young people under 30 years old is about 100,000 RMB a year. I felt the most powerful when I bought a dishwasher for my parents and put a down payment on a small house with the money that I made by publishing online novels ...

Online literature platforms like Jinjiang adopt a paid-reading business model and cooperate with media companies to generate profits. Writers can make money through literary works and IP adaptations by sharing revenues with the platforms. Twenty-four interviewees perceived empowerment when they received economic incomes for digital publishing: 'I received 300 to 400 RMB per day from the paid reading.... I also sold the copyright of a boy-love novel adapted into an audiobook for 25,000 RMB. It felt awesome!' 'I averagely make 10,000 RMB to 12,000 RMB per month and I am very grateful for the online publishing career.' 'I am a lazy writer who does not update works very frequently, but I think the 3000 RMB income per month that I get from my online time-travel novels has encouraged me a lot.' In the platformized creative labour of online literature creation, gender boundaries in mastering internet technologies are blurred (Wajcman, 2006) since female and male writers indiscriminately achieve financial gains through creative work.

However, eight interviewees gave a different picture, which drew my attention to the precarity of the platformized creative economy. Twenty-four-year-old Xinxin has been a writer on 17 K for about two years and is also a staff member of a cultural institution in a second-tier city in southeastern China. In Xinxin's opinion, the payment mechanism of the platform is unfair to writers:

On 17 K, most writers do not make much money.... For most of us, if we sign a contract with the platform in the old track, we must write 4000 words per day to earn 1500 RMB per month or 8000 words per day to earn 2500 RMB per month for full attendance. In the new track, we are not paid for full attendance. For the VIP chapters that the readers pay to read, the platform takes 50% of the economic profits generated.... I believe that all the writers are ambitious at the very beginning.... But I was not expecting that the platform would be so exploitative that it took so much time and energy from me but gave so little money to me.... It's a winner-take-all market but I think winners are after all the overwhelming minority ...

Twenty-eight interviewees agreed that not all writers are well-paid in online literature creation. They pointed out that even fewer writers benefit from IP economies. Interviewees used expressions such as 'a world of differences', 'after ten years' hard work noticed by none, his fame fills the land once honors are won', 'it's a world of fairy tales for some but a land of cruel realities for the others', 'I earned very slim salaries on Jinjiang: only getting 30% of the profits generated by my works', 'readers' tastes are changing all the time, making me always anxious about the stories failing to live up to their expectations' to describe the current market of online literature creation.

Precarity has been a prominent feature of the creative economy (Hardt and Negri, 2009). Creative workers are self-employed independent workers who do not belong to the traditional employment set-up organized around firms (Kong, 2011). Creative labour markets have been known for being unstable, insecure, and very unequal (Oakley et al., 2017). The precarity of platformized creative labour is embedded in the

essence of the digital economy, which is highly affected by erratic audiences' tastes and the hyper-competitive ecology of the platforms (Duffy et al., 2021): the commercialized production of online literature involves dynamic and lasting interactions between writers and readers. Writers have to negotiate with readers in many respects to increase the visibility and profitability of their works (Tian and Adorjan, 2016). What's more, writers are faced with intensely fierce peer competition and extremely sharp income gaps when they publish literary works on online literature websites that have adopted unfair and exploitative payment mechanisms.

Nation-state political intervention on expression

Luowei (who is 29) is now pursuing a doctoral degree in Hong Kong. In the meantime, she has been publishing kung-fu novels on Xiaoxiangshuyuan for over a decade. Her kung-fu novels feature women, with a focus on women's power and independence:

I became keen on kung-fu novels when I was a middle school student who was indulged in Jin Yong's⁵ (金庸) kung-fu novels.... However, all these kung-fu novels feature men, and women are men's followers. No matter how smart, independent, and excellent in martial arts these women are, they are still under the male gaze, with little recognition of their distinctive personalities.... So here I am, writing my own female kung-fu novels. I feel empowered when I create a utopia where women can lead a life that ignores the male gaze. I dream the wildest dreams that ... women can pursue what they truly want. Women can be themselves without catering to men's desires ...

Coined by Thomas More for his 1516 book *Utopia*, the word 'utopia' describes an imaginary community or society that possesses highly desirable or nearly perfect qualities for its members (Giroux, 2003). Luowei pointed out that the utopia in her kung-fu novels is ruled by women who dominate their fates. Women's online literature, particularly with utopian themes, can be weaponized to redefine the political sphere by making claims to reconstruct gender roles, political systems, and social structures, which reflects and spreads women's desire to get involved in policymaking (Imani Kasai, 2018).

Maoran (aged 22) works as a supermarket cashier in the daytime but writes online novels themed on boy love during the night-time. When asked what empowerment meant to her as an online literature writer, Maoran answered that she wanted to give a happy ending to the forbidden love between boys in her novels:

I am a rotten girl⁶ and I am extremely enthusiastic about boy love.... I have consumed many cultural products on boy love: novels, anime, films, and TV dramas. I love the male characters in them.... I started to publish boy-love novels on Lofter since I want to give the boys who fall in love with other boys ... happiness and blessings that they are unlikely to get in real life.... I feel empowered ...

In the Chinese mainland, even though the LGBTQ communities have been attracting more public attention after landmark events such as the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1997 and the de-pathologization of homosexuality in 2001, homosexuality is still officially illegal. LGBTQ communities are still under much pressure in a heteronormative

society where the government has not formally recognized their rights (Bao, 2020). Maoran and another seven interviewees who have been publishing novels themed on LGBTQ communities stated that they support sexual minorities and the legitimization of same-sex marriage in China. Online literature creation with a lower publishing threshold has enabled some female writers to express and promote political opinions unlikely to be accepted by governmental institutions or the social mainstream in China.

However, the future of women's political empowerment through online literature creation is unclear with the implementation of nation-state censorship on digital publishing. Thirty-three-year-old Tiya has been publishing online literature on Jinjiang for more than ten years, and she held a pessimistic attitude towards the freedom of expression in online literature creation:

I used to feel empowered by writing novels on Jinjiang. Now I don't feel empowered any longer. In the past decade, things have been changing a lot. Jinjiang used to be open. The atmosphere was free. I could read and write novels with bold themes. The literary works in the past were full of vivid imagination and sheer exuberance. Look at those works I don't even want to call novels produced on the writing assembly line nowadays. I missed the old times when I could write, read, and talk freely. Thanks to the restrictions imposed on creations by the platform, those days are gone ...

Jinjiang used to be well-known for encouraging its writers to be audacious in literary creation. However, under the 2018 Internet Literature Special Remediation Action, from May to August, jointly deployed by the National News Publication Bureau and the National 'Anti-pornography and Anti-illegal' Office of China (Xinhua News Agency, 2018), Jinjiang was subject to administrative punishment due to incorrect orientation and vulgar content, obscene and pornographic information, and infringement and piracy of online literary works in June 2018 (Renminwang, 2022). A year later, Jinjiang was again required to rectify the problems of spreading pornographic publications on the internet and ordered to stop updating and operating the business for 15 days with relevant administrative penalties (Interface News, 2019). The intervention of political forces has led Jinjiang to implement more rigorous censorship that strictly limits the free expression of literary works on the platform. In addition to Jinjiang, other popular online literature websites in China have all responded to the national remediation action in recent years. According to the interviewees: 'Writers are trapped, and readers have nothing interesting to read', 'The prospering of online literature is gone. I cherish the classic works forbidden today', 'The standard for "what is publishable" is tricky ... but the punishment of crossing the line is serious. In romances, you can't write about sex ... at least, not in a direct and explicit form.... These are not "positive energy".' By limiting or even banning women from expressing themselves freely in their online literature creation, increasingly severe political interference has become a serious obstacle to women's political empowerment through online literature creation in China: although some female online literature writers have started to consciously or unconsciously embed their political appeals in literary creation, their attempt to strive for more rights in political decision-making is now threatened by increasingly rigorous nation-state censorship.

Conclusion

This study employs a gendered lens to explore women's initiatives to publish online literature and its implications in China under the framework of women's empowerment through literary creation. Does online literature creation truly empower Chinese women? Online literature creation might dynamically empower women as writers at both individual and collective levels in both material and non-material forms, but given the specific context of today's China, women's empowerment through online literature creation still faces serious challenges.

Women perceive empowerment culturally when they acquire increased self-worth and self-satisfaction as well as a sense of belonging through the creation of online literature, which leads to the formation of new identities and communities in a female-friendly environment, in contrast to the patriarchal mainstream culture of Chinese society. Women perceive economic empowerment when they achieve financial gains from online literature creation as creative work, with no obvious gender difference at the material level. Yet women still face a precarious creative economy characterized by structural inequality: unequal payment systems, fierce peer competition, erratic reader tastes, and so on, all of which contribute to platforms exploiting their creativity. From a political angle, women feel empowered when they can express political appeals, such as striving for gender equality and human rights through online literature creation in a more covert and alternative way. However, the living space of women's online literature creation is now squeezed by political interference. There is a long way to go if women are to rise above the political oppression that is still deemed authoritative in today's China as they straddle the line between free expression and rigorous nation-state censorship (Chew, 2023).

China has a long patriarchal and authoritarian history in which women were oppressed, marginalized, and deprived of the right to get educated or participate in social production. Through media cultural practices such as the creation of online literature, women have been given new opportunities to engage in broader economic, cultural, and socio-political discourses as a result of the rapid development of internet technologies in China. According to the analyses, online literature creation empowers women in China to some extent by giving them a way to overcome gender inequality in society. However, I still argue that we should not assume that women are indiscriminately empowered by online literature creation: Women may perceive themselves as empowered by creating online literature, but their perceptions are subjective and context-specific.

Even though online literature creation might contribute to breaking gender barriers in creative work, women still face the precarity of the capitalist market, the misogyny of the patriarchal environment, and the censorship of the rigorous nation-state that together hinder their empowerment through media and cultural practices in the digital era. What is worth more attention is that women might begin to believe in the hallucination that literary creation facilitated by internet technologies is a more effective way than it is in reality to achieve empowerment since it has a broader audience and a lower publishing threshold. However, women's struggles for empowerment through online literature creation are still in the early stage of expressing intentions and forging loose alliances, the implications of which remain largely unknown due to a series of practical factors in China.

Overall, this study is significant in the following aspects: first, it confirms that literature creation has the potential to dynamically empower women from various perspectives in the digital era; second, it shows how gender structures might be reshaped through women's media cultural practices in a patriarchal and authoritarian society that has been going through tremendous changes brought about by marketization, digitalization, and globalization; third, it examines the role of women in creative labour through the lens of media studies, which provides more empirical insights on the golden era of Chinese online literature as a piece of media archaeology; finally, it shows that digital culture and its infrastructure play a vital part in boosting women's creativity and productivity, and calls for more nuanced research from diverse dimensions and with triangulated methods to further explore what culture means, and what culture does, in transforming social structures, particularly in less developed parts of today's world.

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Notes

1. RMB 1 is approximately equal to US\$ 0.1455.
2. IPs on the internet can be understood as all well-known cultural and creative works (literature, film and television, animation, games, etc.).
3. QQ is a web-based instant messaging app developed by Chinese internet company Tencent.
4. WeChat is an app produced by Chinese internet company Tencent that provides instant messaging services for digital devices such as phones, ipads, laptops, computers.
5. Jin Yong is the pen name of the famous Chinese kung-fu novelist and essayist Louis Cha Leung-yung, who co-founded the Hong Kong daily newspaper *Ming Pao* in 1959 and served as its first editor-in-chief.
6. The term 'rotten girl' originated from the Japanese word '*fujoshi*', which refers to women who enjoy fictional gay content.
7. 'Positive energy' refers to all the positive news and information that conforms to the core values of socialism that influence human nature and promote a healthy political and economic order.

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