從使用者到勞動者：網路寫手在中國大陸網路小說市場中的轉變

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摘　要

　　隨著 Web 2.0 的網路社群興起，各種使用者生產平台快速吸引網民參與內容生產，但是當網路平台進入商業化經營之後，使用者社群大量也被平台收編成為非正式勞動力來源。相關研究已指出，雖然網路平台十分仰賴使用者社群的非正式勞動，但對於非正式勞動者提供的福利與權益保障卻相對不足。本文認為，這種情況也發生在中國大陸的網路小說社群網站。透過歷史與文獻分析法以及深度訪談法，本文發現，中國大陸的網路小說平台利用按字付費的分潤模式，將大批網路小說社群成員，轉變成一支講求生產效能的創作大軍，然而平台對兼職創作的多數寫手僅提供最低程度的權益保障，造成底層寫手人雖然龐大，但創作壓力高且收入普遍很低，甚至其創作內容的所有權及其利用方式也受到平台限制。

關鍵詞：起點中文網、使用者生產內容、網路寫手、非正式勞動、勞動關係

From Users to Labors: The Transformation of Online Writers in Chinese Online Fiction Market

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Abstract

With the rise of Web2.0 internet economy, the user-generated content platforms have attracted user communities to join the production of online content. When entering the commercialization stage, UGC platforms have become increasingly focused on capital accumulation through generating revenue. The result was that user communities have been incorporated into the production of content platforms in the form of informal labor. However, researchers have found the exploitation of informal labor in internet economy. Using the history and literature review and in-depth interview, this study examined the transformation of online fiction writers in field of Chinese online fiction market. The study found that Qidian has established a system whereby large numbers of informal, freelance writers are recruited as outsourced authors. Qidian employs factory style, high-speed, streamlined models of production and commercialization, scaling and standardizing its product creation. Most writers in this system still carry heavy workloads with little or no remuneration and also lack control over their labor process and its outcomes.

Keywords: Qidian; User-Generated Content; Online Writers; Informal Labor; Labor Relations

The Emergence of Chinese Online Fiction

Web 2.0 sites offer a number of advantages: they are user-centric, promote active participation in content creation, emphasize the importance of sharing over monopolization, and encourage users to contribute to collective wisdom rather than individual knowledge. They also facilitate growth of user networks and create decentralized models through providing services (O'Reilly, 2007). Although they promote a more direct relationship between content creators and consumers, Web 2.0 sites do not necessarily do away with all intermediation. In fact, to the contrary, Web 2.0 sites practically guarantee the development of new intermediaries (Farchy, 2009). New intermediaries such as YouTube, Facebook, Wikipedia, and Flickr have emerged in the 21st century. These user-generated content (UGC) platforms have built a new archetype of the digital economy (Tapscott & Williams, 2006).

In East Asia, particularly in Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and China, Web 2.0 has given rise to a unique type of UGC platform, known as online fiction websites. The stated mission of these websites is to stimulate users' potential (Magic Island, Japan) or create a friendly environment in which user can freely express themselves (Joara, Korea) and share their creative works (Bookpal, Korea) without being ill-treated by commercial publishing houses (Munpia, Korea) (Hsieh, 2016). By cultivating open, tolerant spaces where users can either read or publish literature, website owners have created a commercial model based on writer earnings, reader engagement, and content originality (Lugg, 2011; Tse & Gong, 2012).

Chinese online fiction first emerged in 1990s. It was based mainly on Web 1.0 sites such as Bulletin Board System (BBS) and online forums. During the Web 1.0 era, online novels in China, not unlike Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, were mainly created by students or work colleagues who had shared interests and wrote to amuse themselves in their spare time. Writing on College BBS and online forums soon attracted increasing numbers of users because it features a low creativity threshold, minimal style and content guidelines, and simple publishing and access methods (Ouyang, 2004). The meteoric rise of online fiction in China during this time was contributed to two main drivers: First, literary publishing was either monopolized by the Chinese Writer's Association (CWA) or strictly controlled by publishers. Aspiring writers were required to attain membership in the rigorous CWA and to write for the purposes of the

Communist party or the state. The constraints of the CWA as well as the control of publishers meant that traditional literature did not attract young readers in China (Hickey, 2015; Hockx, 2015). Second, the Internet provided all users with equal opportunity to freely share their individual experiences and feelings. Online fiction writers could create their own narratives and express themselves as they pleased, creating a sort of literary carnival (Gao, 2014).

The emergence of Web 2.0 brought Chinese online fiction into a new phase. According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2016), the online fiction user community reached 297 million in December 2015. This is an increase of 2.89 million from 2014 and accounts for 43.1% of all Internet users. The fast growth of online fiction was mostly contributed to the emergence of online fiction publishers since they created an ecosphere completely different to conventional publishing. In order to manage market risk, the conventional publishers usually follow strict procedures and controls, from writer contracts and editorial reviews, to printing, distribution, retail sales and exhibitions. But online fiction websites can bypass most of these steps and provide a platform where writers can immediately publish and share their work with readers, who in turn play the role of editors to some extent by proofreading and providing feedback. Reader evaluation therefore becomes the basis to judge the quality of novels (Chen, 2012). Websites can filter works based on reader feedback. The prerequisite to the success of this ecosphere is to first attract an adequate number of passionate, creative writers who can generate a never-ending stream of engaging content.

The most popular online fiction website in China is Qidian (Huang, 2011), which was established in 2003. Although Qidian was not the first website of its kind in China, it was the first to build the commercial model that fostered the rapid growth of online fiction business. As published on its official website, Qidian's vision is to support the growth and expansion of the emerging online fiction industry and cultivate cutting-edge, professional online writers through an expert content team. One of the highlights of the online fiction business in China is the emergence and proliferation of career online fiction writers. Using Qidian as a case, this study will examine the relationship between online writers and online fiction platforms in China from the viewpoint of labor relations (McGuigan, 2010; Van Dijck, 2009; Van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009).

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Online Fiction Writing as a Form of Labor

Academics currently have three different perspectives on the role and function of user-turned-producers in cultural industries (Van Dijck, 2009). The first discourse relates to cultural theory (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Hartley, 2009). According to scholars in this camp, consumers are no longer seen as passive recipients or readers; rather, they are creators who can build and share their own content, and who have opportunities to argue, comment on, and respond to feedback. Participatory culture emphasizes power to the people. Changes in production paradigms have enabled consumers to participate in the production of Internet content.

In *The Wealth of Networks*, Benkler (2006) explains how in the new information economy, heterogonous groups of individuals with different motivations produce creative works through independent channels, uninhibited by the top-down model of organized industrial production. The new grassroots Internet culture signals a bottom-up shift in production paradigms. The Internet has lowered the cultural production threshold, creating greater willingness to participate. The model of peer production has evolved beyond peripheral activities to become the center of the contemporary economy, reshaping the economic relationships of cultural exchange.

According to Jenkins (2006), individuals are playing more active roles in the production, circulation, and interpretation of cultural products, rather than simply acting as passive consumers in a capital society. More precisely, participatory culture evokes democratic ideals of equality, expression, and representation. As discussed by Hartley (2009), people can search for and disseminate information on any event through any media, particularly the Internet, and even contribute their insights or opinions on the event. The public are not just content consumers but also content creators. Put simply, as digital media and personal devices have become increasingly commonplace, interactive media technology has also advanced. Each platform has developed a user-oriented content model and reduced participation barriers. The emergence of participatory culture has given rise to a critical, self-reflecting public. Toffler (1981) first identified this role as the 'prosumer'. As the roles of producer and consumer intersected, other terms such as inspirational consumers, connectors, and influencers began to appear.

The second discourse is founded on economics (Tapscott & Williams, 2006) and represents how the mainstream capitalist market sees the role of the user-turned-

producer. Due to the severe impact of the dot-com bubble around 2000, the capital market insists that innovative services or emerging applications must be underpinned by a comprehensive business model, in order to ensure the stable growth and profit of digital media companies. The high number of users-turned producers represent a resource that can be utilized by emerging Internet industries looking for new business models. In the process of cultural production, users-turned-producers can satisfy each other's needs. This is the highest form of customized production, and represents an excellent opportunity for the cultural media market on its road to demassification. The economic discourse focuses more on users as producers rather than consumers, and uses terms like communities, co-creation, and produsage in place of consumption and customization (Prahalad & Ramswamy, 2004). From a capitalist perspective, the manpower generated from Web 1.0 will be ultimately wasted if it is not actively utilized (Tapscott & Williams, 2006). In other words, users are no longer seen as mere consumers but as content providers, accessible human resources (Van Dijck, 2009), or consumer data providers (Hearn, 2010). Considered to be key value contributors in the digital economy, user resources must be effectively managed and utilized. An assumption made by proponents of the economic viewpoint is that all users have equal creative capacity and the same expressive desire (Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009).

The third viewpoint is based on labor relations and analyzes consumer participation as a form of labor. This perspective has its roots in the audience commodity concept of Dallas Smythe. According to McGuigan (2010), we must see users as a form of labor in the evolution of capitalism. He identified three stages in the development of capitalism over the past one hundred years: liberal capitalism, organized capitalism (or Fordism), and neoliberal capitalism (or Post-Fordism). The transition from liberal to organized capitalism occurred in response to the economic crisis of the 1930's and the threat of socialism and communism. The shift from organized to neoliberal capitalism can be attributed to the oil crisis of the 1970's and industry pressure from increasing labor costs and inefficiencies. By the neoliberal era of capitalism, large corporations were no longer reliant on vertical integration; instead, they were able to utilize outsourcing strategy to slash their social costs. The advancement of computerized information systems also enabled them to quickly respond to consumer demands. However, this flexible accumulation strategy means that the balance of power between employer and laborer is even more skewed, leaving workers in a less secure and more precarious position.

Researchers have suggested that this new form of production should be examined from the angle of changing labor relations, in order to evaluate whether the digital economy has given rise to a new dominant form of relationship. Other academics have noted that as consumer participation in the digital economy increases, outsourced labor has gradually become a more attractive option compared to in-house resources. Cultural producers have begun systematically outsourcing knowledge-intensive jobs with high entry barriers to the digital labor market (McGuigan, 2010). As a result, content production, originally the responsibility of paid staff, has now been shifted to users. Critical scholars have expressed that this type of crowdsourcing strategy not only fails to improve user agency but also allows companies to extract economic value from large numbers of hobbyists, amateurs, and unpaid laborers. Van Dijck and Nieborg (2009, p.870) criticized Web 2.0 platforms for being a type of rhetorical ploy, meant to disguise the new static framework of consumer culture in the digital economy. The real objective of Web 2.0 manifestos such as Wikinomics is to match the interests of consumers with producers, and turn our attention from production to online communities that purportedly co-create value. According to De Kosnik (n.d.), the digital economy provides a platform to experiment with users as free cultural workers who may eventually become paid labor.

Studies on labor relations in the digital economy have already discovered that exploitation of labor is not uncommon in the UGC space. De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford (2005) pointed out that young people are extremely attracted to game development companies, because they believe that this would be a "work as play" environment where they would enjoy personal autonomy and flexible working hours. The reality, however, is very different for young game developers, who find that they are subject to long work hours and no overtime pay. They are paid only on completion of a project and are under extreme stress to meet release dates that have already been publicly announced by gaming companies. Work contracts also specify that the company owns the intellectual property rights to games developed. Game developers are a sort of immaterial labor in the industry. Studying the broadcasting industry in the UK, McGuigan (2010, p.330) found that the two key features of neo-Fordism are to outsource production to independent small and medium enterprises, or to directly transfer risk to laborers. This greatly reduces costs but imposes extreme stress on labor and wages.

Cohen (2012) discussed how media companies extract value from freelance

writers by exploiting either unpaid work time or intellectual property rights through an aggressive copyright system. The first type of exploitation appears to exclude freelance writers from the capitalist labor process, because they are legally classified as independent contractors who are hired for short-term projects or produce one-off works for a number of different clients. This type of laborer-capitalist relationship is often ambiguous, because freelancers are not formally hired as staff and are not paid salaries. They are paid for the piece of work that they produce, rather than for the time they spend working at the company. But Marx pointed out earlier that piece wages are essentially time-based wages. In reality, labor relations at the core of freelance cultural production are often exploitative in nature. The second type of exploitation is through the control of freelancers' work. Freelance writers own their works because they are not salaried workers. Therefore they are free to publish their work on any platform they choose. However, many media companies have begun to set up limitations on the usage of these freelance works, and thereby undermine the writers' opportunities to resell their works. Under the capitalist mode of production, capitalists are only concerned with how to recycle works into new profit, i.e., to extract surplus value from a single work. They are not concerned with how the works are created, but merely who owns and controls them.

The Institutionalization of Online Writers

To become an online fiction factory, Qidian realized its first task was to attract a large number of online writers as a reserve army of cultural workers. In doing so, the website would need to offer adequate economic incentives to attract writers who could be retained over the long term. The business model of most Web 2.0 sites is to generate enough traffic to attract companies to pay for advertising placements (Farchy, 2009). Online writers of early days were literally free labor. However, commercial literature websites found that if writers did not get paid, they tend to lose them and consequently the websites will lose traffic.

Qidian decided to take a different path, and established an online pay-to-read system. Each piece of work on Qidian has free-to-read chapters and VIP chapters, the latter of which are only available to fee-paying users. In the VIP system, premium VIPs pay 2 yuan/1,000 words, while standard VIPs pay 3 yuan/1,000 words. Users can read the first part of an online novel for free, and then pay in accordance with their VIP status

to read the remainder. For a standard VIP, the cost to finish reading a novel is (total word count minus free-to-read word count) ÷ 1000 × 0.03 yuan. Writers make 1.4 yuan/1,000 words, regardless of whether readers are standard or premium VIPs.

The VIP system was very successful at attracting online writers. Qidian needed another mechanism to evaluate the performance of the huge numbers of writers. Qidian has designed a ranking system for online writers, dividing them into three categories: Freelance writers, contract writers, and platinum writers. Anyone can register on the website as a freelance writer, but will not gain the status of a contract or platinum writer until he/she has a strong performance record. Once they have written a cumulative total of 200,000 – 300,000 words, freelance writers can apply to have their works tagged as recommended by the website. This can be a method of popularizing their work. Later, these works will be reviewed in a second selection round, and if they are popular enough (for example, more than 5,000 downloads), the website may consider classifying them as VIP products (Zeng, 2011, p.50). At this point, the website may also consider signing the freelance writer on as a contract writer. If contract writers continue to produce well-received work, they have the opportunity to be upgraded to platinum writers.

Writers are paid in accordance with the ranking system. Many urbanized Chinese Millennials (born after 1980 or 1990) are engaged in freelance writing, with the aim of becoming a career online writer (Jiang, X. H., 2009). As they climb up the ranking system, some have gradually become full-time writers. In 2013, there were 2 million registered online writers in China, of which over 30,000 were part-time or full-time writers (Zhou & Hu, 2013). As far as the number of income-earning writers in Qidian, Luo (2013, p.25) has estimated approximately 1,300 freelance writers, 460 contract writers, 280 advanced writers, and 30 platinum writers.

Platinum writers are the smallest but highest-earning group. In 2012, the annual Chinese Writers Rich List, published by the Western China Metropolis Daily, included an online writers Rich List for the first time. The top three were Qidian writers Tang Jia San Shao (唐家三少), I Eat Tomatoes (我吃西紅柿), and Tian Can Tu Dou (天蠶土豆), reporting royalty earnings of 33 million yuan , 21 million yuan, and 18 million yuan, respectively (Yang & Yang, 2012). The highest earning online writers in 2013 were Tang Jia San Sha, Tian Can Tu Dou, and Blood Red (血紅), reporting royalty incomes of 26.5 million yuan, 20 million yuan, and 14.5 million yuan, respectively (Zhang, 2013). The richest online writers of 2014 were Tang Jia San Shao, Chen Dong (辰東), and Tian Can Tu Dou, reporting royalty earnings of 50 million yuan, 28 million

yuan, and 25.5 million yuan, respectively (Han, 2015).

Mid-level contract writers, earning between 50,000 yuan and 100,000 yuan annually, are the backbone of online fiction writing. Low-level freelance writers (without contracts) make up the largest group but only earn casual wages and sometimes work practically for free. Online writer Sun between my Fingers (指縫間的陽光) explained in an interview (ibid., pp.33-34):

I wanted to be an online writer because I thought I'd have flexible working hours and a reasonable income. The reality, though, was that I had to churn out at least 100,000 words a month while earning as little as 1,000+ yuan, although most of the time I earned 2,000-3,000 yuan/per month. But my pay was disproportionate to the hours I worked. I'm pretty confident in saying that at least 90 out of 100 online writers don't make any money. That leaves only ten people earning some form of income. Some earn a few pennies, three to five earn a wage comparable to an average white collar job, and only one earns the income everyone dreams about.

Some contract writers even have to depend on handouts from the Internet platform employing them. For example, in 2010, Qidian offered short-term financial assistance to writers who earned less than 1,200 yuan per month. Five hundred writers applied for and were granted financial aid (Wei, 2011). The divide between ordinary and extraordinary online writers continues to grow. Platinum writers are heralded as the successes that unknown writers should aspire to; however, these writers can also be seen as bound by "golden handcuffs". They may feel enslaved to the demands of content production, and yet they are handsomely remunerated (Ouyang, 2014). As for the large numbers of low-level, poorly paid writers, their labor process is a long struggle with little reward. The ranking system established by online fiction websites has seriously detracted from the original intent of literary democratization. New writers, enamored with the idea of success, labor tirelessly as the cycles of production, distribution, and consumption accelerate at a dizzying pace. Although Internet writing presents a low entry threshold, the probability of upward mobility is also increasingly low. A labor outsourcing system has gradually been established in the highly competitive online fiction market of China.

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The Exploitation of Online Writers' Unpaid Labor

Online writers must boost their profiles in order to move up the ranks. There are two basic methods of accomplishing this: write more or write faster. Volume is directly correlated with earnings, because when chapters eventually become ranked as pay-to-read VIP products, a higher word count means greater earnings. Because of this relationship, the writings posted on online fiction sites are invariably of the web fiction variety. As of 2010, Qidian had published more than 250,000 pieces of online fiction, totaling more than 24 billion words. New works comprising at least 35 million words were posted every day. The business had also published up to 3,000 hardcopy novels (Yu, 2011, p.41). Some works are astonishingly long, with a single novel reaching a word count of two to three million, or even ten million. Another method of improving performance is to produce content faster. On highly competitive websites where the content and quality of writing are comparable, speed is another key decider in whether a writer can get himself/herself noticed over others producing the same genre of work (Zeng, 2011, p.54).

Online writers earn money based on word count and not on time spent writing. Many writers frequently update their work in order to attract more readers. Therefore, they are required to work extremely hard, even sacrificing their youth and health, in pursuit of a steady income. Hard work and diligence are key to the survival of contract writers in the industry. Under pressure to produce five to ten thousand words a day, many online writers have traded the freedom of conventional writers for monotonous, tedious lifestyles. It is not uncommon for contract writers to spend ten or more hours a day at their computers. Although the amount of work they produce is impressive, high volume writing is mentally and physically stressful, and can lead to health issues over time. In April 2013, it was revealed that Nan Pai San Shu (南派三叔), an Online writer who shot to fame through the series Grave Robbers' Chronicles (盜墓筆記), was suffering from mental illness, and shortly thereafter announced his retirement from writing (Ceng & Ouyang, 2014). In April 2012, Qing Yun (青鋆), an A-level writer on the Hongxiu.com, passed away at only age 25 from illness exacerbated by her long working hours. Friends described how she would work for several days and nights at a time without leaving her home (Shen & Wang, 2012). In June 2013, VIP contract writer Ten Years of Snowfall suddenly died at home after updating his work. His premature death was especially tragic as he was only 23 years old (Li, 2013).

The per-word form of payment system does not pay for time spent developing stories, researching ideas, editing and rewriting chapters, and therefore obscures a large portion of the labor that goes into the production of fiction works. Concerned that writers will give up writing partway through a story or be poached by other platforms, online fiction websites have established many factory-style incentives to promote the continuity of literature and link volume to earnings. But regardless of how websites improve their labor conditions, these incentives are only temporary measures and do not provide long-term security. Unlike internal staff who are protected by employment contracts, online writers are almost always employed on a freelance basis, with the exception of a few full-time writers. They do not belong to any company or organization and have no formal labor relations with the literature website. This is particularly true for non-contracted writers, who are not only ineligible for low income subsidies and healthcare benefits, but also have no social benefits. Their work situation is unstable and worrisome. Although some writers do have contracts in place with websites or screenwriting agencies, these cover royalties, copyright or licensing agreements and are not formal employment contracts.

Consequently, these companies are under no obligation to provide contractors with low income or healthcare subsidies. As for online fiction platforms, flexible labor relations enable them to quickly recruit large numbers of writers without responsibility for basic security costs, significantly reducing labor expenses. Some online writers also invest additional time into cultivating online communities in order to increase their presence and visibility, essentially reducing the marketing costs of the host website. The social and labor cost savings are ultimately passed onto online writers. But the cruel reality is that hard work and diligence does not always generate return. Because although everyone has the opportunity to become an online writer, not everyone is equally talented.

The Exploitation of Online Writers' Rights and Reputation

Online fiction is not just a form of popular literature but a valuable asset to content platforms. Thanks to copyright laws, this asset is now a commodity with transactional value. Once in control of copyright, literature websites can decide where and when to distribute online fiction, maximizing their commercial benefit. The original authors (mostly online writers) have relatively limited opportunity to direct how their work is

edited, published, and distributed.

Qidian uses one of two types of contract to upgrade freelance writers to contract or platinum writers: publication contract or full contract. A publication contract means that the Qidian will act as agent for the author to seek opportunities to have content published in print. The author earns royalties for both online and hardcopy publishing, while the website also earns a corresponding agency fee. During the contract signing process, Qidian uses incentives to motivate authors to transfer copyright. Writers who grant the website copyright to their works are paid a portion of the VIP pay-to-read fee. Writers contracted for specific projects may also have the opportunity to publish hardcopy books. A full contract means that for the following five years, Qidian will manage the development of all derivative products, such as games, TV series, and comics, on behalf of the author. Contracts between Qidian and online writers often require these writers to grant the company exclusive rights (except for writership, editing, and completion rights) to all work produced within the scope of the contract. This essentially grants Qidian exclusive rights to utilize these writings in any way it sees fit (Du, 2010).

Despite criticizing these contract clauses as opportunistic and unfair, many online writers feel they have no alternative but to agree, particularly if they inexperienced and unknown, and have not been offered any better agreement. Some have even stated that Qidian's contract clauses leave new writers with almost no rights to speak of, essentially granting Qidian copyright to their work. This is a method of exploiting the rights of writers. Writers often find that signing these contracts has significantly reduced the extent of control they have over their own work (Ye, 2014). This aggressive and questionable method of obtaining copyright has led to Cloudary Corporation (owner of the Qidian platform by 2015) being criticized for unethical exploitation of young writers (Jiang, Y., 2009).

In recent years, however, online fiction sites have begun to ease their copyright controls somewhat in order to retain writers in an increasingly competitive market. As online fiction in China is constantly in a state of over-production, the life cycle of online content is even shorter than regular literary works. Even the excitement around hugely popular series dissipates quickly once the story has reached its end. Therefore, the priority for online fiction websites is to determine how to monetize derivative products while the story is still popular.

The new challenge now facing e-literature platforms is how to effectively achieve

the so-called "cross-side network effect" (Chen & Yu, 2013). The fan groups of online fiction have access to many other popular products and information channels. Their spending power can be potentially harnessed to attract greater return than just the number of clicks on a story (i Research, 2015). The cross-side network effect for online fiction would mean converting click through rate (CTR) into TV ratings, box office results, and game users. In other words, Internet fiction fans can be used as a basis to influence other consumer groups to purchase complementary or related products (Farchy, 2009, p. 362). During its creation phase, online literature attracts large numbers of loyal fans. So if the film, television, gaming, and animation industries develop a product based on a popular piece of Internet fiction, then logically speaking, the return on their investment is secured to some extent by the original following of fan readers.

In order to maximize the value of labor and ensure that the commercial benefits of online fiction are realized, host platforms must ensure that they work together with popular writers to meet the timeline for derivative products. The first step is to begin producing games adapted from the story, four to six months before its publication. The second step, which is also the most influential step in the process, is to make the literature accessible on the Internet as well as mobile reading devices. Even providing the online content free of charge can be worthwhile, because returns are maximized later from derivative products. The third step is to publish the content in hard copy, slightly ahead of online instalments. Once the story has been published in online instalments for six to seven weeks, the games should be ready for release as they would have now been in development for more than five months. Readers can then be guided to experience the games alongside reading the literature. In the second or third month of online publishing, businesses can start creating comic books adapted from the online fiction. The advantage of comic books is that they can appeal to a wider audience, as young as four to five years old. The first comic book can be released after six months of publishing by online instalment. Once the physical appearance of characters has been visualized through comic book illustrations, toys can also be developed as another form of merchandise. The final step is films and television series. This phase has the longest cycle but also the greatest potential impact. The full process as described above comprises at least six key phases, and in each phase the original fan following of the online writer is fundamental to success. In the case of Tang Meng (唐門世界), for example, writer Tang Jia San Shao himself was the most effective marketing channel,

influencing his fans through social media such as Wechat and Weibo. Readers actively participated in games, comics and animation as long as he promoted them. The impact of his personal marketing was greater than that of mainstream media (Li, 2014).

Online fiction websites now have come to the realization that the key to success is not to gain short-term control of the golden egg; it is to control the hen that lays the golden eggs and to produce content while the egg is in incubation. Writers are the true source of commercial value to these platforms, because readers will read and buy whatever their favorite writers write (Ouyang, 2013). The way to maximize the commercial value of online writers is to effectively involve them at each step of the marketing process for derivative products. This means that online writers have fewer opportunities to control their own work or develop derivative products. In fact, such hopes may even be considered unrealistic expectations.

Discussion

Thanks to Web 2.0 platforms, our media scape is filled with content on all topics from literature, art, news, and advertisements, to movies, television, music, fashion, and games. This content is produced by both amateurs and professionals, volunteers and paid employees, anonymous users and celebrities, all in the name of mass creativity, peer production, and co-creation. Cultural theory celebrates this phenomenon as empowerment of users. Economic theorists are searching for the optimal user model in this new era of human resource management. And finally, academics studying labor relations question whether users have been incorporated into a capitalist production, distribution and consumption system, institutionalizing writers under the control of media groups.

This study found that due to the intermediation of Web 2.0 online fiction platforms, online literature has shifted from a cultural to an economic context. The model of literature production employed by Qidian has made online content a commodity, rather than the spontaneous outcome of creativity and freedom of expression. Qidian has also created economic labor relations with online writers through its pay-to-read and contract systems. The labor structure resembles a pyramid: At the apex are the few platinum writers who write full-time, while more than 90% of writers are at the lower levels, working as freelance writers for little or no pay.

According Nie (2014), most of the first and second generation online writers in

China did not have formal literary training and tended to write in a humorous, sarcastic or satirical style. They produced literature not for economic purposes but because they lived to write and wanted to enjoy their freedom of creative expression (Zhou, 2009). Third and fourth generation writers, however, have been shaped by online fiction websites. Unlike their predecessors, they write to live, laboring at their keyboards in the "sweatshop" of online fiction (Wang & Zhu, 2010). As they struggle to accumulate social and economic capital in the form of status and royalties, their creativity and freedom of expression become dominated by commercial reasoning. Their enthusiasm for expressing themselves as individuals is eventually lost.

As its parent company has always aimed to build Qidian into a global fiction factory, the website employs high-speed, streamlined models of production and commercialization, scaling and standardizing its product creation. Qidian is presented as a community-driven platform but is in reality a profit-driven labor machine. Studying the labor process of career online writers, we discovered a microcosm of a digital media empire in a neo-liberal capitalist society, one which still exploits labor and the fruits of labor. This environment has given rise to a new type of dominant capitalist-laborer relationship. Our study, of course, does not provide a complete picture of all labor relations in the still-evolving world of digital media. Our objective was not to identify new norms for labor relations in digital media, but to demonstrate through our case study how user-generated production activities in a Web 2.0 environment are often based on unequal relationships of dependence. Online writers have become a group of digital laborers suffering the endless demands of a very small group of employers.

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