

A Cultural and Economic Analysis of Chinese Webnovel's Overseas Expansion in the Digital Age

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i2/24749> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i2/24749

Published Date: 23 February 2025

Abstract

In recent years, Chinese webnovels have achieved remarkable success in overseas markets, which not only drives the international dissemination of Chinese culture but also provides a new research paradigm for the cross-cultural dissemination of digital literature. This paper adopts the literature analysis method and case study method to systematically sort out the development history of Chinese webnovels going overseas, the current characteristics and the challenges they face. It is found that the overseas dissemination of Chinese webnovels presents the following characteristics: first, the mode of going overseas is becoming more and more diversified, which has developed from the early spontaneous translation by the private sector to the current systematic operation led by enterprises and parallel operation through multiple channels; second, in terms of the content characteristics, the subjects with Chinese cultural characteristics such as immoralism and metaphysical fantasies are the most popular, but at the same time they also face the challenge of cultural discounts; and third, in terms of the dissemination effect, it has formed a stable overseas fan base, which promotes the international recognition of Chinese culture. This study concludes that to promote Chinese webnovels to go better to the world, we need to make continuous efforts in improving translation quality, strengthening copyright protection, and innovating marketing models. This is not only of great significance for promoting the internationalization of Chinese cultural industry but also provides a new theoretical perspective for exploring the cross-cultural communication of literary works in the digital era.

Keywords: Chinese Webnovels, Cross-Cultural Communication, Cultural Discount, Localization Strategy

Introduction

With the rapid development of Internet technology and the globalization and popularization of digital reading habits, Chinese webnovels have shown strong momentum in overseas markets (Chen et al., 2024a; Ipsos, 2020; Navigator Network, 2021; Xiao et al., 2022). By the end of 2023, The number of overseas users has exceeded 150 million, covering more than 200 countries and regions, with a market size of more than \$4 billion (Lan, 2024). Among them, works such as “Doo Breaking Cang Dome”, “Lord of the Mysteries” and “Qing Yu Nian” have continued to become popular on overseas platforms (J. Zhang, 2023), not only bringing considerable economic benefits, but also promoting the global dissemination of Chinese stories and Chinese culture (Li, 2024; Ren, 2024c).

From the perspective of industrial development, the export of Chinese webnovels has evolved from spontaneous translation by fans in the early days to the current systematic operation mode led by professional organizations and coordinated by multiple parties (Chen, 2024; Zhu, 2022). Represented by mainstream platforms such as Qidian International and Webnovel, Chinese webnovels have formed a complete industrial chain integrating content creation, translation and localization, copyright operation, and fan interaction in overseas markets (Lan, 2024; Ren, 2024a). As figure 1, in key markets such as Southeast Asia and Japanese and Korean, the influence of Chinese webnovels has continued to expand (Cheng, 2020), not only cultivating a stable readership, but also driving the development of IP adaptations in film, TV, games, animation and other fields (Parinyanat, 2022; Ren, 2024a; Wu, 2023; D. Zhao, 2023).

■ Users From Japanese and Korean users and Southeast Asian
■ Foreign Users From Other Area

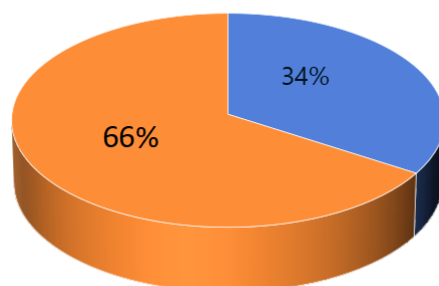


Figure 1 The proportion of Chinese Webnovel Sites users in the world (Source from : "2020 White Paper on the Development of Webnovels Overseas")

The theoretical significance of this study, which focuses on the phenomenon of Chinese webnovels going overseas, is mainly reflected in the following aspects: it expands the vision of cross-cultural communication research in the digital era and provides new cases for exploring the globalized communication of literary works; it deepens the application of the theory of cultural discounts in the field of digital literature, which is helpful for understanding the specificity of cross-cultural communication of webnovels; it also enriches the internationalization of the cultural industry. Secondly, it deepens the application of cultural discount theory in the field of digital literature, which helps to understand the special characteristics of cross-cultural communication of webnovels.

In terms of practical significance, the findings of this study can provide reference for the internationalization strategy of Chinese cultural industry, especially in the summarization of experiences in content creation, translation strategy, market operation, etc., which can help more Chinese cultural products to better develop overseas markets. At the same time, it also has important practical value for enhancing Chinese cultural soft power and promoting cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries.

In terms of research methodology, this paper mainly adopts the literature analysis method and case study method. By systematically combing the relevant research literature at home and abroad, this paper grasps the current situation and main viewpoints of academic research on the cross-cultural communication of network literature; by selecting representative cases of network novels going to the sea for in-depth analysis and exploring their successful experiences and challenges, to summarize the universal laws and characteristics.

Current Situation of Chinese Webnovels Going Overseas

The History of Overseas Expansion

The overseas dissemination of Chinese webnovels has roughly gone through three stages of development (Chen, 2024). The first stage (2010-2015) is the period of spontaneous dissemination, with overseas Chinese readership and private translation organizations as the main drivers. During this period, Chinese webnovels represented by classics such as *Ghost Blown Light* and *Immortal Punisher* spread overseas through unofficial channels, forming an initial readership base within overseas Chinese-speaking communities.

The second stage (2016-2019) is the period of platform layout. In 2016, ReadWrite Group launched the Webnovel international platform, opening a new chapter in the systematization of Chinese webnovels going overseas. The landmark events in this phase include: the launch of the Starting Point international platform, the acquisition of the Southeast Asian digital reading platform by Palm Reading Technology, and the development of the Japanese and Korean markets by NetEase Cloud Reading. The establishment of professional translation teams and the implementation of localized operation strategies have promoted the rapid development of Chinese webnovels in overseas markets.

The third stage (2020 to present) is the period of diversified development. In this stage, Chinese webnovels going overseas are characterized by diversified contents, diversified channels and innovative business models. Especially during the epidemic, the global demand for digital reading surged, providing new opportunities for the overseas dissemination of Chinese webnovels.

Development Status of Overseas

In terms of the scale of the industry, according to the 2022 Blue Book of Chinese Online Literature, "China's online literature has been expanding its scale of overseas dissemination, with 150 million overseas users, more than 16,000 online literature works exported, and revenue growing from less than 100 million yuan at the beginning to more than 3 billion yuan (Chen, 2024; China Writers' Association Network Literature Center, 2023). There are more than 100 million website subscribers and reading APP users, covering most countries and regions in the world. Among the output networks, more than 5,000 works have been authorized as physical books, and more than 9,000 works have been translated and put

online. The huge number of works has attracted the attention of more than 100 million readers worldwide (Chen, 2024; China Writers' Association Network Literature Center, 2023; IResearch, 2022). Overseas users are mainly young groups aged 18-35, with female readers accounting for 67.8%. In terms of geographical distribution, the Southeast Asian market and the Japanese and Korean markets occupy the largest share (about 34%)(Chen, 2024; China Writers' Association Network Literature Center, 2023; IResearch, 2022; Zhang, 2023).

In terms of operation mode, Chinese webnovels mainly expand overseas markets through three ways: first, the platform direct mode represented by Webnovel, which directly serves overseas readers through self-built platforms (Chen, 2025); second, the cooperative operation with local platforms to achieve market localization; and third, the in-depth cooperation with overseas publishers, film and television companies through IP authorization. It is worth noting that IP adaptation has become an important path to go overseas(Chen et al., 2024a). Works such as "Full-time Master" and "Qing Yu Nian" have achieved remarkable success overseas through animation, film and television adaptation, driving the spread of the original novels. Several platforms have also entered into cooperation with international streaming platforms such as Netflix and Disney+ to promote the globalization and development of Chinese webnovels IP (IResearch, 2022).

In terms of content characteristics, genres with Chinese characteristics such as immortal, fantasy and urban are the most popular, accounting for more than 60% of the overseas market share (*Research Report on the Value of Online Literature Reading Platforms in China, 2023-2024*, 2024). These works are generally characterized by dramatic plots, short chapters and grand worldviews, which are easy to read in a fragmented manner and provide a unique cultural experience (IResearch, 2022). In particular, the traditional Chinese cultural elements contained in the works, such as the cultivation system, Jianghu culture, and Taoist thoughts, have been skillfully localized and adapted to enhance the acceptance of overseas readers while retaining cultural characteristics. In addition, the rise of modern themes such as science fiction and game competition also show that Chinese webnovels are diversifying their themes in overseas markets (Chen, 2024).

Challenges Facing Chinese Webnovels Going Overseas

Despite the remarkable success of Chinese webnovels in overseas markets, they still face multiple challenges in the process of cross-cultural communication(Chen, 2024; Lin & Wang, 2024). These challenges include both the common problems of traditional cultural products going overseas and the unique dilemmas of webnovels. In the face of these challenges, Chinese webnovels going overseas need to pay more attention to the adaptive strategy of cross-cultural communication while maintaining cultural characteristics, establish a sound copyright protection mechanism, and improve the quality of content and translation level, so that they can maintain sustained competitiveness in the international market.

Cultural Discount

Cultural discounts refer to the loss of value of cultural products due to the differences in the cultural background of the audience when they are spreading across regions (Colin & Mirus, 1988). For Chinese webnovels, this cultural discount is mainly manifested in the following aspects: firstly, the cultural imagery and values in Chinese themes such as immortality cultivation and martial arts, such as the concepts of "heavenly way", "qi luck", "face", etc.,

are often difficult to be accurately understood by Western readers (Peng et al., 2024); secondly, the social relationships and interpersonal interaction modes depicted in the novels such as master-disciple relationship and sect inheritance are quite different from the life experiences of overseas readers (Zhao et al., 2022); thirdly, the social relations and interpersonal interaction modes depicted in the novels such as master-disciple relationship and sect inheritance are quite different from the life experiences of overseas readers (L. Y. Liu, 2020).

Constraints on Translation Quality

Translation quality directly affects the acceptance of works by overseas readers (Wan, 2019). The current translation of Chinese webnovels faces three main problems: first, the contradiction between translation speed and quality. The fast updating and long length of network novels lead to the fact that translators often pursue speed and neglect quality (You, 2021); second, the dilemma of translating cultural imagery. Many traditional Chinese cultural concepts lack accurate foreign language equivalents and are easily distorted or misunderstood in translation (Liu, 2020; Peng et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2022); third, the shortage of translation talents. There is a relative lack of professional translators who are proficient in foreign languages and understand the characteristics of Internet literature, which affects the improvement of the overall translation quality (He & Xu, 2019).

Market Competition Pressure

With the development of the global digital reading market, Chinese webnovels are facing increasingly fierce competition. There is competition from Asian cultural products such as Japanese light novels and Korean web comics, which have a large overlap with Chinese webnovels in terms of market positioning and audience groups (Wang & Yecies, 2023). At same time, the mainstream publishers in Europe and the United States have started to enter the digital reading market, and with their mature industrial chain and brand advantages, they pose strong competition (Fang, 2024; Thompson, 2021). In addition, the rise of local online literary creation has also challenged the market share of Chinese works, especially in key markets such as Southeast Asia, where imitation works created by local authors have begun to gain readers' recognition (Liu, 2025).

Opportunities and Strategies for Chinese Webnovels Going Oversea

Driven by Fan Power

The formation and development of overseas fan communities has become an important force driving Chinese webnovels to go overseas. This fan effect is mainly reflected at three levels: firstly, fan communities have formed a benign interactive ecology through social media platforms (such as Reddit, Discord, etc.) by spontaneously organizing discussions, creating homoerotic works, and sharing reading experiences (He et al., 2020); secondly, some senior readers actively participate in the translation of the works and localization and promotion, which provide important support for the dissemination of the works (Terpstra, 2012); thirdly, word-of-mouth dissemination and recommendation behavior of the fan groups effectively reduces the threshold for the works to enter the new market and creates a sizable "tap water" effect (Benatti, 2024; Ren, 2024b; Zhu, 2019). Taking "Lord of Mysteries" as an example, its English translation is serialized on Webnovel, the international site of Starting Point, and has had 50 million views to date, and the derivative works such as novels and illustrations created by community members have greatly enhanced the influence of the original work.

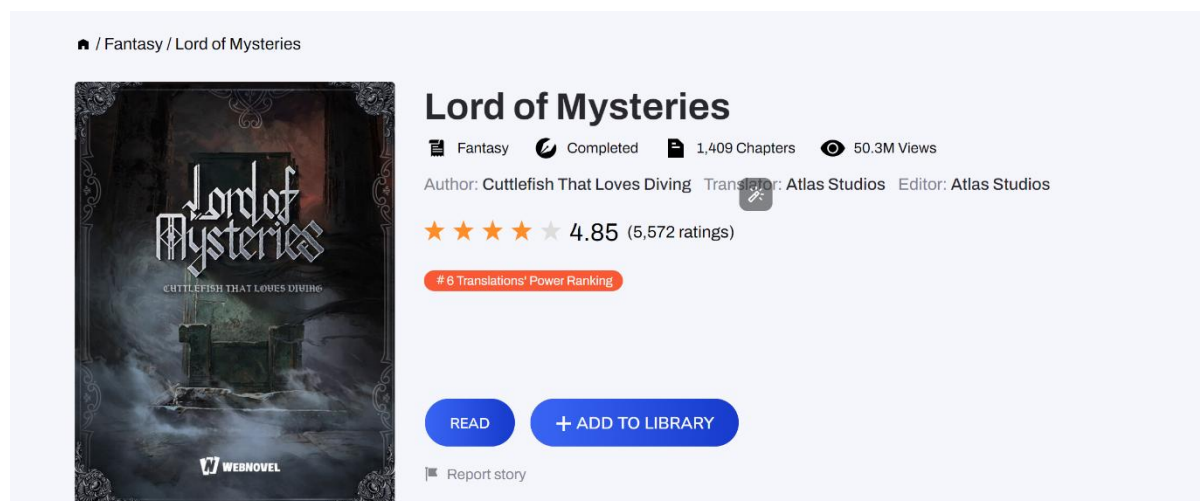


Figure 2 Information Page of Lord of Mysteries at Webnovel

Policy Support

In recent years, the State's support for the cultural industry's "going out" has been increasing, creating a favorable policy environment for network novels to go overseas (Lai & Zhang, 2016). In 2017, Chinese investment in fixed assets in the cultural industry amounted to 3,828 billion yuan, an increase of 354.84 billion yuan over 2005, an increase of 12.7 times, with an average annual growth rate of 24.4% from 2006 to 2017; the proportion of investment in fixed assets in the cultural industry in the total investment in fixed assets of the whole society was 6.1%, an increase of 2.8 percentage points compared with 2005 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2018). The State has set up special funds to support the translation and overseas promotion of high-quality online literary works, improved intellectual property protection mechanisms, strengthened international copyright cooperation, and set up cultural exchange platforms to promote Sino-foreign literary exchanges, encourage cultural enterprises to go global, and support platforms to develop overseas markets ("Building Bridges for International Cooperation on Intellectual Property Protection," 2021; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2018). For example, the implementation of the Silk Road Book Scent Project has directly promoted the translation and publication of many online literary works (State Press and Publication Administration, 2021; Zhang, 2021).

The Impact and Inspiration of Chinese Webnovels Going Oversea

Cultural Influence Level

The overseas dissemination of Chinese Web Novels has had a profound impact on the cultural cognition of overseas readers. Through the cultural symbols and values in Web Novels, overseas readers can understand the rich connotation of traditional Chinese culture (Chen, 2024). For example, the Taoist concept of "cultivating one's body and nurturing one's character" and the Confucian concept of "peace is precious" resonate with overseas readers through storylines. Modern urban novels and metaphysical novels show the social changes and values of contemporary China, helping to eliminate the stereotypes of overseas readers about China (Wang & Wang, 2020). The oriental aesthetics and narrative traditions of Web Novels provide a new source of inspiration for global literary creation (Xu & Sun, 2023).

Industry Influence Level

The success of Chinese Web Novels going overseas has provided important experience for the development of the domestic cultural industry (Chen et al., 2024b). On the one hand, it has promoted the upgrading and transformation of the digital culture industry and the professional development of copyright operation, content production, platform operation, etc. On the other hand, it has driven the synergistic development of the upstream and downstream industrial chain, especially in the fields of IP adaptation and cultural and creative development, which have formed new growth points (Li, 2024; Zang & Xie, 2024).

Theoretical Implications

The practice of Chinese Web Novels going to overseas has put forward new thoughts on the theory of cross-cultural communication: it breaks through the limitations of the traditional theory of cultural discounts and proves that contents with distinctive cultural characteristics can also obtain cross-cultural recognition (Hou et al., 2021); it deepens the study of the theory of cultural communication in the digital era, especially in the areas of user participation and platform empowerment, and provides a new perspective (Chen, 2025); and it provides a new way to build a theoretical system of “going out” for culture with Chinese characteristics. It also provides new perspectives for the construction of the theoretical system of “going out” of culture with Chinese characteristics (Jihua & Ocón, 2024); deepens the theoretical research on cultural communication in the digital era, especially in the aspects of user participation and platform empowerment, etc. It also provides new perspectives for the construction of the theoretical system of “going out” of culture with Chinese characteristics (Li & Li, 2021; Li, 2024)

Conclusion and Outlook

Research Conclusion

The overseas dissemination of Chinese Web Novels has become an important phenomenon of cross-cultural communication in the digital age. Through systematic literature review and case study analysis, this study explores the development mode of Chinese Web Novels in the global market, the challenges of cultural adaptation, and their economic impact. The study finds that the overseas dissemination of Web Novels has gone through a transformation from spontaneous translation by fans to enterprise-led operation, and has gradually formed an internationalization development model centered on digital publishing platforms, relying on social media marketing and diversified IP development. This model not only promotes the globalization of Chinese online literature, but also provides a new path for Chinese culture to “go out”. However, in the process of globalization, Web Novels still face challenges such as cultural discount, uneven translation quality, and intensified competition in the market, which call for further exploration of optimization strategies for cross-cultural communication.

The Internationalization Path of Chinese Web Novels Reflects the New Trend of the Development of Digital Culture Industry

From the perspective of industrial development, the global dissemination of Web Novels has gradually evolved from the early folk translation communities (e.g., Wuxiaworld, Gravity Tales) to enterprise-led platform operation, with enterprises such as Webnovel Group (Webnovel) and PalmReader (iReader) increasingly perfecting the layout of the international market. This paradigm shift not only enhances the legitimacy and standardization of content, but also strengthens its market competitiveness. At the same time, the overseas

dissemination of network novels has been deeply integrated with the cross-media industry chain, and many works have expanded their influence through film, television, animation, games and other forms, promoting the globalization and development of IP value. For example, the successful adaptations of works such as “Master of All Trades” and “Qing Yu Nian” in the international market have further promoted the dissemination of the original novels. Advances in digital publishing technology (e.g., AI translation, intelligent recommendation systems) have also accelerated the internationalization of Web Novels, making it easier for non-native Chinese readers to access and understand these works.

The Contradiction between Cultural Identity and Cross-Cultural Adaptation has become an Important Challenge for Web Novels Going Overseas

Studies have found that although the themes of Chinese Web Novels, such as immortality, metaphysical fantasy, and urbanism, dominate in overseas markets, these works are often subject to Cultural Discount due to differences in cultural backgrounds and values. For example, the concepts of “qi”, “dao” and “clan” in the immortal cultivation system lack direct counterparts in Western culture, making them difficult for some readers to understand. At the same time, there are significant differences between the patterns of interpersonal relationships in Chinese society (such as master-disciple relationships and clan concepts) and the cultural logic of Western society, which emphasizes individualism, affecting the acceptability of the work. Therefore, how to enhance cross-cultural adaptability while maintaining cultural characteristics has become the key to the long-term success of Chinese Web Novels in the international market. Some works have enhanced their international dissemination through the Localization Strategy, such as the promotion of *The Grandmaster of the Magic Path* in the English-speaking world, which has improved the acceptance of Western readers by adjusting the names of the characters and simplifying the description of the cultural background. However, excessive localization may weaken the cultural uniqueness of the work, so how to balance “cultural fidelity” and “market adaptability” in globalization is still an issue that deserves further discussion.

Inadequate Translation Quality and Copyright Protection Limit the Global Competitiveness of Chinese Web Novels

At present, the translation of Web Novels mainly relies on the model of human translation + machine assistance, but due to the high update frequency and long length of Web Novels, there is a contradiction between speed and quality in the translation process of many works. Some platforms adopt low-cost and fast translation strategies in order to ensure the update frequency, which leads to a decline in translation quality and affects the reader experience. At the same time, the choice of translation strategy (direct vs. intentional translation) also affects readers' acceptance. For example, some translations have chosen to rewrite oriental fantasy works in a “Western Fantasy” framework in order to cater to native English-speaking readers and make them more in line with the logic of Western narratives, but this has also triggered controversy over cultural fidelity. In addition to translation issues, piracy and intellectual property protection are also important factors hindering the internationalization of Web Novels. As digital content is easy to copy and distribute, many online works have been illegally reprinted or translated without authorization, which not only affects the profitability of legitimate platforms, but also reduces the earnings of content creators. Therefore, in the future, it is necessary to further strengthen international copyright cooperation and improve

the intellectual property protection mechanism of digital publishing platforms in order to maintain the competitiveness of Chinese Web Novels in the global market.

Innovations in Digital Technology Provide New Opportunities for Global Distribution of Web Novels

In recent years, the application of AI machine translation (e.g. DeepL, ChatGPT) in the translation of online novels has gradually matured, enabling works to enter overseas markets more quickly. Meanwhile, the rise of social media platforms and fan communities has also accelerated the international dissemination of online novels, with communities such as Reddit, Discord, and Twitter becoming important platforms for online novel readers to interact with each other, and fans promoting the viral marketing of their works by sharing book reviews, making homage works, and creating secondary works. For example, after the serialization of *The Lord of Mysteries* on the Webnovel platform, its influence was rapidly expanded to a wider English-speaking market due to the active promotion by the fan community. This Community-Driven Promotion model shows that the future internationalization of online novels will not only depend on official marketing strategies, but also rely on users' spontaneous dissemination to enhance their influence. Therefore, enterprises should actively use social media to build a globalized fan ecosystem in order to enhance the brand value and market recognition of Chinese online novels.

Future Research Directions

This study has explored the global dissemination mode of Chinese online novels, the challenges of cultural adaptation and its economic impact, but there are still the following research directions that deserve further exploration. First, future research can focus on the acceptance and reading experience of overseas readers, and through questionnaire surveys and focus group interviews, analyze in depth how readers from different cultural backgrounds understand and interpret Chinese online novels. Second, cross-cultural comparative research can be conducted to analyze the similarities and differences among Chinese online novels, Japanese light novels, and Korean Webtoon in the global market, and to explore the globalization mode of East Asian digital culture industry. In addition, how digital technology affects the dissemination mode of online novels is also a topic of concern, especially how technologies such as AI-generated content (AIGC) and big data recommendation algorithms shape the global literary market, which will be an important direction for future research. Finally, as an important carrier of China's cultural "soft power" export, the long-term impact of online novels on international cultural identity also deserves further study.

Overall, the overseas dissemination of Chinese online novels is not only a result of the convergence of cultural globalization and digital technological change, but also a reflection of the opportunities and challenges of cross-cultural communication. With the advancement of technology and the maturity of the market, Chinese online novels will play a more important role in the global cultural industry. This study hopes to provide theoretical support for the future internationalization of online novels and offer new perspectives for global cultural communication.

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