

Innovations

Comparison of Development Paths of Popular Literature in China and South Korea against the Background of the Rise of Online Literature

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Abstract: *Against the backdrop of the global rise of online literature, popular literature in China and South Korea—two major cultural entities in East Asia—has undergone profound transformations in its development trajectory. This study aims to conduct a systematic comparison of the development paths of popular literature in the two countries, focusing on exploring the similarities, differences, and underlying influencing factors shaped by the emergence of online literature. By adopting the methods of literature review and comparative analysis, the paper first examines how online literature has reshaped the creation, dissemination, and reception of popular literature in China and South Korea respectively. It then delves into comparative analyses of key dimensions, including the composition of creators, communication models, industrialization mechanisms, and policy support systems for popular literature. The findings of this study are expected to provide mutual references for the high-quality development of popular literature in both countries and further promote cultural exchanges and mutual learning in the field of literary and cultural industries between China and South Korea.*

Keywords: *Online Literature; Popular Literature in China and South Korea; Development Paths; Comparative Study; Industrialization Mechanism.*

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Since the beginning of the 21st century, online literature has experienced explosive global expansion, evolving from a niche digital content form to a core force shaping the literary industry landscape. Driven by the popularization of mobile internet and the rise of content platforms, its user scale has grown exponentially—for instance, China's online literature users exceeded 500 million by 2024, while South Korea's major platforms such as Naver and Kakao have accumulated over 30 million monthly active readers of web-based literary content. This expansion has not only expanded the boundaries of literary creation and dissemination but also profoundly reshaped the development trajectory of

traditional popular literature: it has lowered the threshold for creation, transformed content consumption habits, and established new industrial links between literature and other cultural sectors. As two major cultural entities in East Asia, China and South Korea have distinct historical foundations of popular literature—China boasts a rich tradition of popular genres such as martial arts novels, which have seamlessly transitioned to online formats like xianxia and urban novels, while South Korea's popular literature has long been intertwined with the “Hallyu” (Korean Wave) industry, with webnovels and webtoons becoming key content sources for film and television adaptations. The geographical proximity and cultural ties between the two countries, coupled with their distinct industrial operation models, make a cross-country comparison particularly valuable. Such a comparison not only helps clarify the unique characteristics of each country's popular literature development under the impact of online literature but also provides a reference for promoting coordinated development of the literary and cultural industries in the East Asian region.

1.2 Research Questions

Against the backdrop of online literature's growing influence, existing studies have yet to systematically address the differences and similarities in how China and South Korea's popular literature sectors have adapted and evolved. This study thus aims to answer three core questions: First, under the impetus of online literature, what commonalities and differences characterize the development paths of popular literature in China and South Korea—particularly in terms of content creation trends, market operation mechanisms, and industry ecology? Second, what underlying factors drive these differences? In particular, how do elements such as the composition of literary creators (amateur vs. professional), the structure of content communication channels (platform-dominated vs. media-integrated), the design of industrialization models (IP-driven vs. film-television linked), and the orientation of policy support systems (top-down guidance vs. market-oriented incentives) shape the divergent trajectories of the two countries' popular literature? Third, based on the identified similarities and differences, what practical experiences can China and South Korea draw from each other to address challenges such as content homogenization, quality control, and sustainable industrial development, thereby promoting the high-quality growth of their respective popular literature sectors?

1.3 Research Objectives and Significance

The primary objective of this study is to systematically compare the development paths of popular literature in China and South Korea under the background of online literature's rise, identify the key factors influencing their development trajectories, and put forward targeted suggestions for mutual learning between the two countries. To this end, the study integrates multi-dimensional analytical perspectives, covering creation, communication, industrialization, and policy, to construct a comprehensive comparative framework that addresses the limitation of oversimplification in existing single-factor studies. The significance of this

research is reflected in both theoretical and practical dimensions. Theoretically, it fills gaps in current academic research on Sino-Korean popular literature: most existing comparative studies focus on the export of cultural products or single aspects of the industry, lacking a systematic analysis of how online literature has comprehensively transformed the entire development path of popular literature. By constructing a multi-dimensional comparative framework, this study enriches the theoretical system of cross-cultural literary industry research and provides new insights into the global impact of online literature. Practically, the research findings will offer actionable references for different stakeholders: for policymakers in both countries, it provides a basis for optimizing policies related to cultural industry support and content supervision; for industry practitioners, it clarifies feasible paths for industrial upgrading and cross-border cooperation; and for literary creators, it sheds light on how to adapt to the digital transformation of the industry while maintaining creative quality.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Studies on Online Literature

Global academic discourse on online literature has primarily centered on its unique characteristics and transformative impact on the traditional literary ecosystem. Scholars such as Jenkins (2006) and deuze (2011) have highlighted online literature's interactivity—enabled by reader comments, author-reader feedback loops, and serialized updates—as a defining feature that differentiates it from print literature, arguing that such interactivity reshapes the “production-consumption” relationship in literary creation. Recent regional studies have further explored how platform algorithms influence content trends: for instance, China's online literature platforms use user data to recommend content themes to authors, while South Korea's Naver and Kakao prioritize content that aligns with webtoon adaptation potential, reflecting a “market-driven creation” logic. Regionally, research on Chinese online literature has focused heavily on its industrialization, with studies by the China Writers Association (2024) and Zhao (2022) detailing the formation of a full IP industrial chain—spanning online novels, webtoons, film, television, and games—and noting challenges such as platform monopoly and content homogenization (overrepresentation of xianxia and urban romance genres). In contrast, South Korean online literature research, represented by works by Kim (2021) and Lee (2023), emphasizes its integration with the “Hallyu” ecosystem: scholars have documented how webnovels serve as “content precursors” for Korean dramas and webtoons, with platforms leveraging cross-media promotion to maximize audience reach. However, these regional studies often remain siloed, lacking cross-country analysis of how cultural and market differences shape online literature's role in popular literature development.

2.2 Studies on Popular Literature in China and South Korea

Research on Chinese popular literature has evolved alongside its transition from print to digital formats. Early studies (e.g., Wang, 2015) focused on traditional popular genres such as martial arts (Jin Yong's works) and romantic novels, analyzing their cultural connotations and mass appeal. In recent years, attention has shifted to online-adapted popular literature: Zhang (2023) examined the rise of “amateur creators” on platforms such as Jinjiang Literature City, noting that over 80% of Chinese online literature authors lack professional literary training but benefit from platform-sponsored writing workshops and income guarantees. Studies also highlight policy influences, such as China's “Online Literature Quality Improvement Campaign” (2022), which has regulated content deemed “vulgar” or “historically inaccurate” and pushed creators toward mainstream themes. For South Korean popular literature, research has long been tied to its role in Hallyu. Park (2019) traced the development of South Korean webnovels from niche online forums in the 2000s to mainstream cultural products, emphasizing their reliance on “female-centric narratives” to capture core readership groups. Lee (2020) further analyzed the collaboration between South Korean publishing houses and media companies, noting that professional authors often co-create with webtoon artists to ensure “adaptation compatibility”—a practice less prevalent in the Chinese context. While both bodies of research capture domestic trends, they rarely compare how online literature has restructured the “creator-audience-industry” relationship differently across the two countries.

2.3 Comparative Studies on Sino-Korean Literary and Cultural Industries

Existing comparative research on China and South Korea's literary and cultural sectors has largely focused on cultural product exports and soft power competition. Studies by Chen (2021) and Kim (2022) compare the overseas dissemination of Chinese online novels and South Korean dramas, highlighting China's reliance on platform expansion and South Korea's focus on content localization. Other works analyze policy support for cultural industries, noting China's top-down subsidies for “national key cultural projects” and South Korea's tax incentives for small- and medium-sized content enterprises. However, these studies suffer from two key limitations: first, they prioritize “end products” over the “internal development paths” of popular literature—including creator training, content distribution, and industrialization model design, which leave a gap in understanding the full impact of online literature. Second, most comparative analyses adopt a single-dimensional lens rather than integrating multiple factors (creator composition, communication models, industrialization, policy) to explain divergent trajectories. This gap is particularly notable given that online literature has reshaped popular literature across all these dimensions, making a multi-faceted comparative framework essential for capturing the complexity of Sino-Korean differences and similarities.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Methods

This study adopts two core research methods—literature review and comparative analysis—to systematically explore the development paths of popular literature in China and South Korea under the influence of online literature, ensuring the comprehensiveness and depth of the research. The literature review method serves as the foundation for understanding existing research and collecting theoretical and empirical materials. Its scope covers three types of documents: first, academic papers published in peer-reviewed journals, which focus on online literature's characteristics, popular literature's evolution, and Sino-Korean cultural industry comparisons; second, industry reports released by authoritative institutions, including the China Writers Association's *Annual Report on China's Online Literature Development* (2015–2024), the Korea Creative Content Agency's (KCCA) *South Korean Webnovel Industry White Paper*, and financial reports of leading platforms; third, policy documents issued by government departments, such as China's *14th Five-Year Plan for Cultural Industry Development* and South Korea's *Cultural Content Industry Promotion Act*, that clarify the policy context of popular literature development. To ensure timeliness and relevance, the literature selection focuses on works published in the past decade (2015–2025), with priority given to studies that address the interaction between online literature and popular literature, excluding outdated research that fails to reflect digital transformation trends.

The comparative analysis method is designed to address the core research question of “similarities and differences in development paths,” with four key dimensions aligned with the study's objectives: creator composition, communication models, industrialization mechanisms, and policy support systems. The analytical logic follows a three-step process: first, for each dimension, the study separately describes the current state of Chinese and South Korean popular literature under the impact of online literature—for example, in creator composition, it systematically organizes data on the proportion of amateur vs. professional writers in China (from Jinjiang Literature City's creator surveys) and South Korea (from KCCA's author demographic reports); second, it compares the two countries' situations to identify commonalities and differences; third, it explores the underlying driving factors of these differences, linking them to cultural contexts and market structures. This step-by-step logic ensures that the comparative analysis is not merely descriptive but also explanatory, laying the groundwork for subsequent discussion of “mutual learning experiences.”

3.2 Data Sources

To ensure the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the research, data sources are divided into primary and secondary categories, with cross-verification between different sources to avoid one-sidedness. Primary sources encompass original documents and first-hand statistical data directly reflecting the industry's

development. Policy-related primary sources include official documents issued by China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism and South Korea's Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, which clarify the policy orientation and support measures for popular literature in both countries. Industry-related primary sources include statistical reports released by platforms and industry associations: for example, China Literature's *2024 Online Literature Industry White Paper* provides data on Chinese online literature's user scale (over 530 million) and IP adaptation revenue (accounting for 45% of total revenue), while Naver Webtoon's *Global Content Report* includes data on South Korean webnovel adaptation rates (60% of top webnovels are adapted into webtoons or dramas). Such primary data ensure that the study's depictions of the industry's status quo are based on objective facts rather than subjective assumptions.

Secondary sources include academic literature and third-party analytical reports, which provide theoretical support and comparative perspectives. Academic literature is retrieved from core databases: Chinese literature from CNKI and Wanfang Data, South Korean literature from KCI (Korean Citation Index), and international literature from Web of Science and Scopus, with keywords such as “online literature,” “popular literature,” “China-South Korea comparison,” and “industrialization mechanism” to ensure coverage of relevant studies. Third-party reports include analyses from consulting firms such as iResearch (China) and Statista (global), which supplement platform-specific data with cross-industry comparisons—for example, iResearch's *2024 Chinese Digital Reading Report* compares user reading habits across different genres, while Statista's *South Korean Cultural Industry Overview* provides data on the contribution of webnovels to the overall cultural industry. The combination of primary and secondary sources not only enriches the data types but also allows for mutual validation: for instance, the proportion of amateur creators in China is verified by both Jinjiang Literature City's surveys (primary) and Zhang's (2023) academic study (secondary), enhancing data credibility.

3.3 Validity and Reliability

To ensure the scientific rigor of the research, this study takes targeted measures to improve validity and reliability. In terms of validity—particularly, whether the research methods and data effectively measure the intended research objects—two strategies are adopted. First, the alignment between research methods and objectives is strengthened: the literature review method covers all key fields (online literature, popular literature, Sino-Korean comparison) to avoid gaps in theoretical basis, while the comparative dimensions (creator, communication, industrialization, policy) directly correspond to the research questions, ensuring that the analysis addresses the core of the study rather than irrelevant content. Second, cross-validation of data from multiple sources is conducted: for example, when analyzing China's IP industrialization level, data from three sources are compared—China Literature's financial reports (platform data), the China Writers Association's industry report (association data), and Li's (2023) academic study

(scholarly analysis)—to resolve inconsistencies by prioritizing data from authoritative institutions with transparent statistical standards.

In terms of reliability—whether the research process is reproducible and results are consistent—systematic documentation of key steps is implemented. For the literature review method, the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework is adopted to record the literature retrieval process: including database selection (CNKI, KCI, Web of Science), search terms (combinations of “online literature” + “popular literature” + “China/South Korea”), initial retrieval results (1,280), screening criteria (excluding non-peer-reviewed papers and studies unrelated to “development paths”), and final included literature (156 articles). This documentation allows other researchers to replicate the literature selection process. For the comparative analysis method, a standardized data coding table is designed, with clear definitions of each indicator and coding rules. This standardized process reduces subjective bias in data analysis, ensuring that different researchers can obtain consistent results when using the same data.

4. Findings

Online literature has exerted a transformative influence on the development of popular literature in both China and South Korea, yet distinct trajectories have emerged across key dimensions of creation, communication, industrialization, and policy support—shaped by differences in market scale, cultural context, and institutional orientation.

In terms of the impact on popular literature creation, the two countries exhibit notable divergences in creator composition and thematic focus.

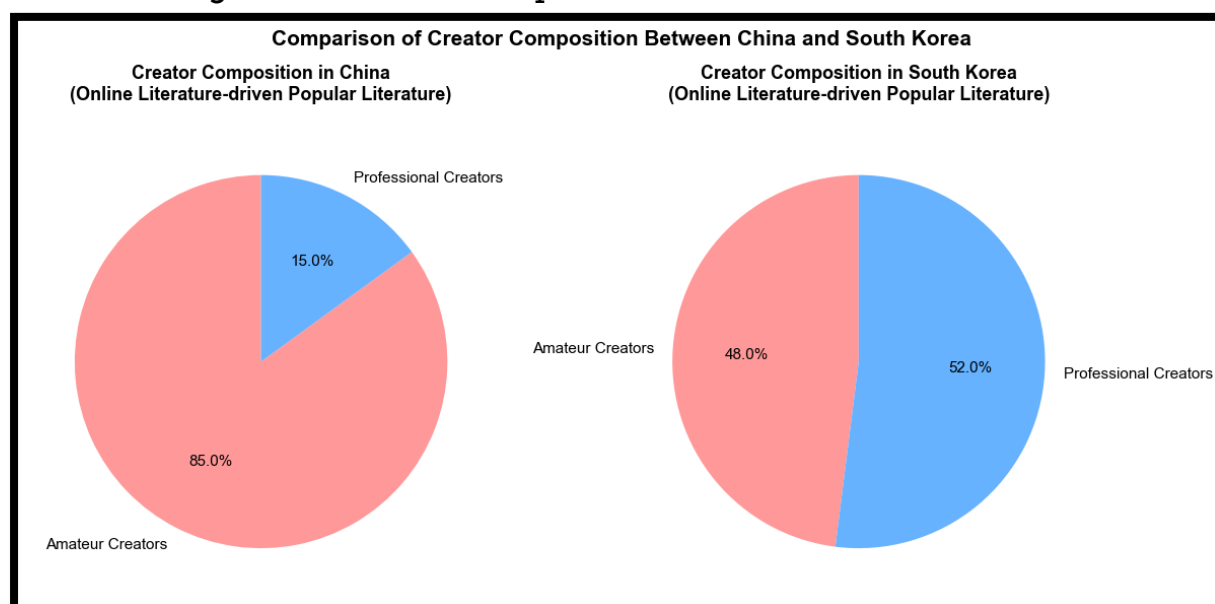


Figure 1: Comparison of Creator Composition for Online Literature-Driven Popular Literature (China vs. South Korea)

In China, online literature platforms have significantly lowered the threshold for entry, leading to a creator pool dominated by amateur writers: data from Jinjiang Literature City's 2024 creator survey show that over 85% of its registered authors lack professional literary training or prior publishing experience, with most joining the platform to pursue part-time income or creative expression. To sustain this amateur-dominated ecosystem, major platforms such as China Literature have established systematic training mechanisms, including online writing workshops, one-on-one mentor programs, and income guarantee plans, which have contributed to the rapid expansion of the creator base—one that has grown from 2.5 million in 2015 to over 8 million in 2024, according to the China Writers Association. This amateur-driven model has also shaped thematic trends, with fantasy (xianxia, wuxia) and urban romance genres accounting for 60% of all popular online novels, as these themes align with mass reader preferences and offer high potential for subsequent IP adaptation. By contrast, South Korea's popular literature creators maintain a more balanced mix of amateurs and professionals: KCCA's 2024 author demographic report indicates that 52% of webnovel authors have professional literary backgrounds, while 48% are amateurs. This balance stems from close collaboration between online platforms and traditional publishing houses—Naver Webtoon, for instance, partners with 30+ South Korean publishing firms to recruit professional authors, who often co-create with webtoon artists during the writing process to ensure content compatibility with visual adaptation. Thematic focus in South Korea leans toward female-centric narratives: romance (35%), slice-of-life (25%), and thriller (15%) genres dominate, reflecting the core readership of women aged 18–35 and the industry's emphasis on aligning with webtoon and drama adaptation demands. From the perspective of communication models, China's popular literature dissemination is characterized by platform dominance and mobile-centricity.

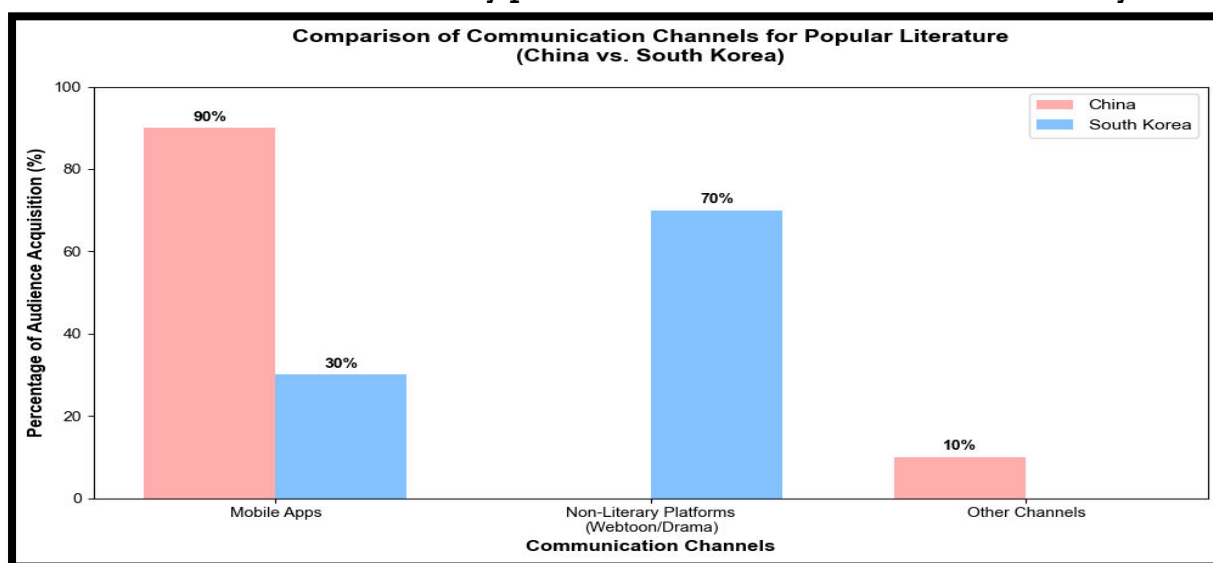


Figure 2: Comparison of Communication Channels for Popular Literature Audience Acquisition (China vs. South Korea)

Leading platforms such as China Literature (controlling 70% of the domestic online literature market, per its 2024 financial report) and Jinjiang Literature City act as gatekeepers, controlling content distribution, pricing, and IP operation rights. This monopoly has concentrated readership on platform-owned mobile apps—over 90% of Chinese online literature consumption occurs via mobile devices, with China Literature's app alone recording 120 million monthly active users in 2024. Cross-platform promotion remains limited, as major platforms prioritize internal content ecosystems to maximize revenue from subscriptions and IP licensing. South Korea, by contrast, has developed a media-integrated communication model that links online literature with webtoons, television, and social media. Platforms like Naver and Kakao leverage their multi-service ecosystems (including search engines, social networks, and video streaming) to promote webnovels across channels: a typical promotion strategy involves releasing a webnovel alongside a serialized webtoon adaptation, then using Naver's search algorithm to push related content to users, and finally promoting the drama adaptation via KakaoTalk social shares. This cross-media synergy has significantly expanded reach—Naver reports that webnovels with synchronized webtoon adaptations attract 3x more readers than standalone novels, and 70% of South Korean webnovel readers discover content through non-literary platforms. In terms of industrialization mechanisms, China has built an IP-driven full industrial chain that extends beyond literature to film, television, games, and merchandise.

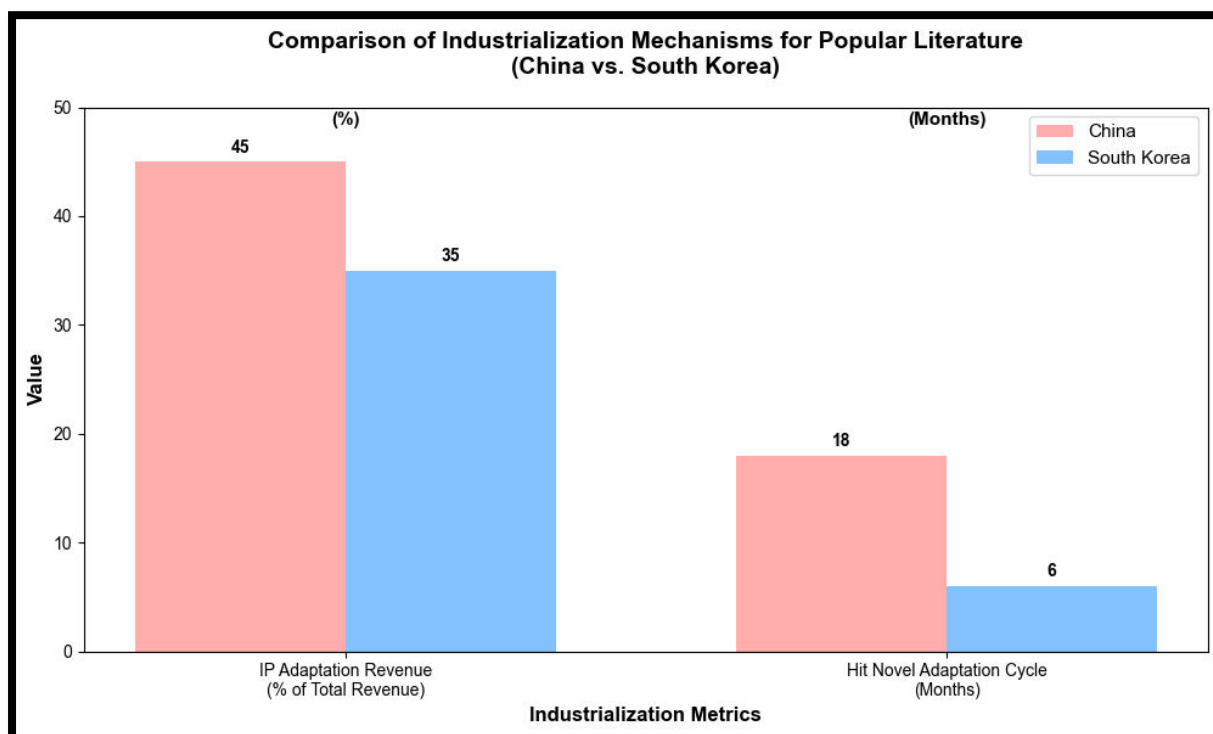


Figure 3: Comparison of Industrialization Metrics for Popular Literature (China vs. South Korea)

The core logic involves identifying high-potential online novels (based on subscription rates and reader comments) and licensing their IP to third-party developers or in-house teams for multi-format adaptation. China Literature's 2024 report shows that IP adaptation revenue accounted for 45% of its total revenue, with notable successes including the *Three Lives, Three Worlds* series (adapted into a drama with 50 billion online views and a mobile game generating 200 million \$ in annual revenue) and *The Wandering Earth* (originally an online novel, adapted into a blockbuster film grossing 700 million). This chain is supported by large-scale capital investment from internet giants and standardized IP evaluation systems. South Korea's industrialization, however, is centered on film-television linkage, leveraging the mature “Hallyu” (Korean Wave) industry to accelerate adaptation. Unlike China's multi-step IP development, South Korean webnovels are often adapted directly into dramas—60% of top webnovels are optioned for drama adaptation within a year of completion, per KCCA's 2024 white paper. This direct linkage is enabled by close partnerships between webnovel platforms and major broadcasting companies (e.g., SBS, tvN), with platforms providing detailed reader data to drama producers to reduce adaptation risk. Additionally, webnovels and webtoons are treated as complementary content within the Hallyu ecosystem: *Crash Landing on You* (2019) began as a webnovel, was adapted into a drama, and later released a companion webtoon to extend audience engagement, generating 50 million in combined revenue from licensing and merchandise. Regarding policy support systems, China adopts a top-down model that combines guidance for quality improvement with strict content regulation.

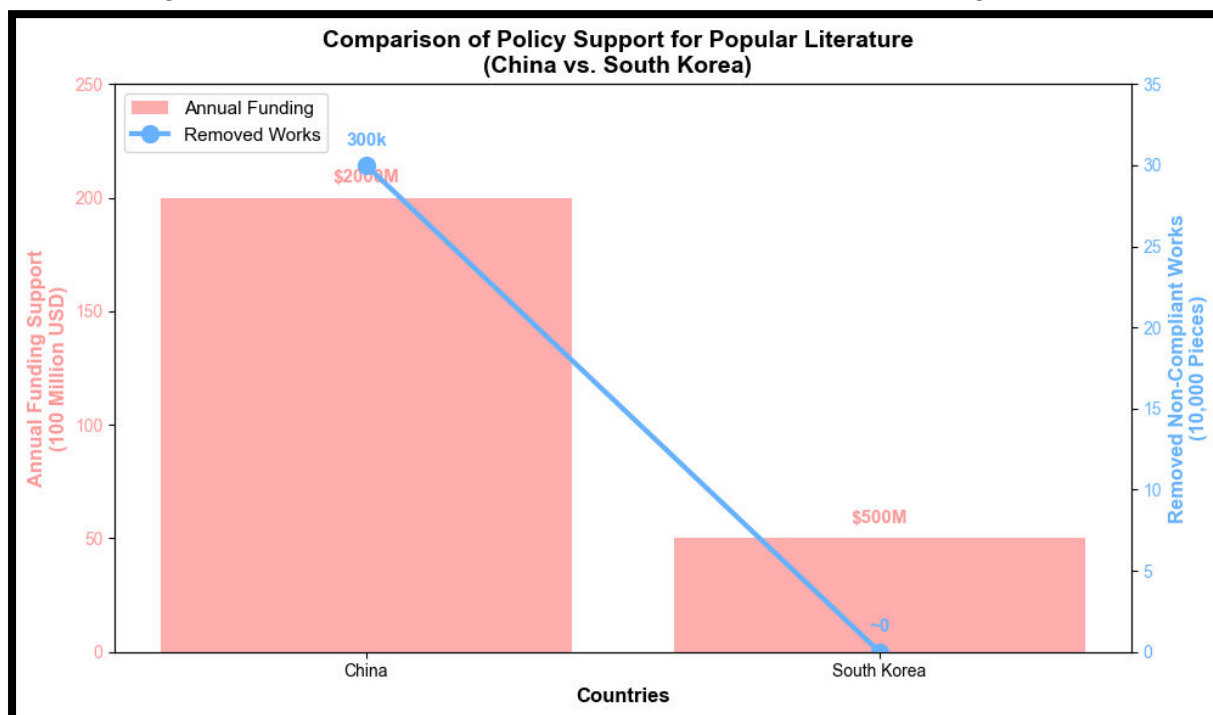


Figure 4: Comparison of Policy Support for Popular Literature (Funding & Content Regulation, China vs. South Korea)

Key policies include the *14th Five-Year Plan for Cultural Industry Development* (2021–2025), which allocates 200 million annually in subsidies to online literature platforms that prioritize “mainstream-themed content” , and the “Online Literature Quality Improvement Campaign” (launched in 2022), which has removed over 300,000 works deemed “vulgar” or “historically inaccurate” and established a content review committee with representatives from government, academia, and industry. These measures aim to balance industrial growth with cultural governance goals, such as promoting positive values and avoiding market-driven homogenization. South Korea, by contrast, implements a market-oriented policy framework focused on incentives for innovation and cross-border promotion. The Cultural Content Industry Promotion Act (updated in 2023) offers tax breaks of up to 20% for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) engaged in webnovel development, and the KCCA's “Global Content Fund” provides 50 million annually to support the overseas dissemination of South Korean webnovels. Additionally, South Korea has strengthened IP protection through the *Copyright Act* amendments (2022), which increase penalties for webnovel piracy (up to \$100,000 in fines) and establish a centralized IP registration system to streamline licensing processes—addressing a key challenge faced by the industry.

5. Results

This section synthesizes and analyzes the findings to systematically clarify the similarities, differences, and underlying driving factors in the development paths of Chinese and South Korean popular literature under the influence of online literature, forming a comprehensive understanding of the comparative research object.

5.1 Summary of Similarities

First, online literature has become a core driving force for the transformation of popular literature in both countries. In China, the amateur creator pool expanded from 2.5 million in 2015 to over 8 million in 2024, and in South Korea, the number of webnovel authors (including both amateurs and professionals) increased by 40% in the past five years—both trends reflecting that online platforms have broken the entry barriers of traditional literary creation and injected new vitality into popular literature. Second, both countries prioritize the industrial development of IP-based popular literature, and regard IP adaptation as a key way to enhance the economic value of literary content. China's IP adaptation revenue accounted for 45% of China Literature's total revenue in 2024, while South Korea's top webnovels have a 60% drama adaptation rate within one year of completion, showing that IP has become a core link connecting popular literature with film, television, webtoon and other industries in both markets. Third, both countries face common challenges in the process of market-driven development. China has the problem of content homogenization (fantasy and urban romance

account for 60% of popular online novels), and South Korea also has a high concentration of female-centric themes (romance and slice-of-life account for 60% of webnovels); at the same time, both countries need to balance the relationship between commercial benefits and literary quality, and avoid the degradation of content connotation caused by over-pursuing adaptation potential.

5.2 Summary of Differences

The differences in the development paths of the two countries are reflected in four core dimensions and show obvious characteristic distinctions. In terms of creator composition, China's popular literature creators are dominated by amateurs (85% of Jinjiang Literature City's authors have no professional training), relying on platform training programs to maintain the scale of the creator team; South Korea, however, maintains a balanced structure of amateurs and professionals (48% vs. 52%), and forms a collaborative mechanism between professional authors and publishing houses/webtoon teams. In the communication model, China's dissemination is dominated by large platforms (China Literature controls 70% of the market), with over 90% of consumption occurring on platform-owned mobile apps, and cross-platform promotion is limited by the monopoly of head platforms; South Korea has built a media-integrated communication system, using multi-service ecosystems to realize cross-channel promotion of webnovels, and 70% of readers discover works through non-literary platforms. In the industrialization mechanism, China has constructed an IP-driven full industrial chain, taking online novels as the starting point to extend to webtoons, games, merchandise and other fields, supported by large-scale capital investment from internet giants (Tencent invested 1.2 billion in China Literature's IP ecosystem); South Korea focuses on the direct linkage between webnovels and film/television (skipping the intermediate link of webtoon adaptation in many cases), relying on the mature Hallyu industry system to achieve rapid IP realization. In terms of policy support, China adopts a top-down guidance model, with annual subsidies of 200 million for mainstream-themed content and strict content regulation (removing 300,000 “vulgar” works); South Korea implements a market-oriented incentive policy, providing 20% tax breaks for webnovel SMEs and a 50 million annual global content fund to support overseas dissemination, while strengthening IP protection through copyright law amendments.

5.3 Key Influencing Factors

The differences in development paths are rooted in three interrelated factors: cultural context, market structure and policy orientation. In terms of cultural context, China's emphasis on “mass culture” promotes the popularization of literary creation—platforms lower the threshold to allow more ordinary people to participate in creation, which is in line with the cultural concept of “serving the public”; South Korea's focus on “creative culture” under the Hallyu strategy pays more attention to the professionalism and adaptation compatibility of content, so

it needs to cooperate with professional authors and multi-media teams to ensure the quality of cultural products. In terms of market structure, China's large domestic market (over 530 million online literature users) provides space for the development of a full IP industrial chain—internet giants can realize scale effects through cross-industry layout; South Korea's relatively small domestic market forces it to rely on cross-border dissemination of Hallyu and focus on efficient IP adaptation (direct film/television linkage) to reduce costs and improve returns. In terms of policy orientation, China's cultural governance goals require balancing industrial development with value guidance—subsidies for mainstream themes and content regulation are important means to realize “positive cultural dissemination”; South Korea's “creative economy” strategy takes cultural industry as a core economic growth point, so it uses tax incentives and overseas promotion funds to stimulate market vitality, and strengthens IP protection to maintain the enthusiasm of industry participants. These three factors interact to shape the distinct development paths of popular literature in China and South Korea under the background of online literature rise.

6. Discussion

The findings reveal that while online literature has become a universal driver of popular literature transformation in both China and South Korea, their development paths diverge significantly across creation, communication, industrialization, and policy dimensions. These differences are not accidental but stem from the interplay of cultural context, market structure, and institutional logic—factors that also shape the practical value of mutual learning between the two countries.

First, the divergence in creator composition and thematic focus reflects the distinct positioning of popular literature within each country's cultural ecosystem. China's amateur-dominated creator base is a product of its large population size (providing a vast pool of potential writers) and the platform-led “mass participation” model, which prioritizes expanding content volume to meet the diverse demands of over 500 million online literature users. The dominance of fantasy and urban genres further aligns with this model: these themes require less specialized knowledge and are more accessible for amateur creators to develop, and have broad cross-demographic appeal—critical for sustaining high subscription rates and IP adaptation potential. In contrast, South Korea's balanced amateur-professional creator mix is rooted in its smaller domestic market (approximately 50 million people), which demands higher content quality to retain readers and support cross-border dissemination via Hallyu. The focus on female-centric romance and slice-of-life genres, meanwhile, ties to South Korea's long-standing cultural emphasis on emotional storytelling and its recognition of women as the core consumer group for both webnovels and their drama

adaptations. This contrast highlights a key insight: creator models and thematic trends are not arbitrary but are shaped by market size and cultural consumption preferences—China's path prioritizes “scale” while South Korea's prioritizes “precision.”

Second, the differences in communication models (China's platform monopoly vs. South Korea's media integration) can be explained by the varying roles of digital platforms in each country's media landscape. China's platforms (e.g., China Literature) emerged as dominant players due to early first-mover advantages, capital concentration (backed by internet giants like Tencent), and limited competition in the digital reading space—allowing them to control the entire content chain from creation to distribution. This monopoly has enabled efficient scaling of content but also led to challenges such as homogenization (as platforms prioritize proven genres) and limited cross-platform collaboration (to protect proprietary content). South Korea's media-integrated model, by contrast, evolved from the country's highly concentrated but interconnected media ecosystem: Naver and Kakao, as multi-service conglomerates with search engines, social media, and video streaming platforms, have incentives to promote cross-media synergy—webnovels drive webtoon and drama viewership, which in turn boost platform traffic and advertising revenue. This aligns with Jenkins' (2006) “convergence culture” theory, which emphasizes the blurring of boundaries between media forms; South Korea's model more fully embodies this convergence than China's platform-dominated approach, offering a template for breaking down content silos.

Third, the divergence in industrialization mechanisms (China's IP full chain vs. South Korea's film-television linkage) reflects differences in industry maturity and resource endowments. China's IP-driven industrial chain is feasible because of its large domestic market, which can support the high costs of multi-format adaptation and absorb the output of games, merchandise, and other derivatives. The involvement of internet giants further accelerates this process, as they have the capital and technical capacity to integrate diverse industries (literature, film, gaming) into a unified ecosystem. However, this model also faces risks: over-reliance on IP adaptation has led to “IP fatigue” among audiences (per China Literature's 2024 user survey, 40% of readers report growing tired of repetitive fantasy themes) and a focus on short-term revenue over creative innovation. South Korea's film-television linkage, by contrast, leverages its mature Hallyu industry—one of the most globally competitive cultural sectors, with established production standards, international distribution networks, and a strong brand reputation. Direct adaptation of webnovels into dramas reduces risk (as webnovels already have proven audience appeal) and allows for rapid entry into global markets. This model's strength lies in its efficiency, but it also has limitations: it prioritizes drama compatibility over literary creativity, potentially restricting the diversity of webnovel themes.

Fourth, the policy differences (China's top-down guidance vs. South Korea's market-oriented incentives) reflect contrasting institutional goals. China's policies balance industrial growth with cultural governance: subsidies for mainstream-themed content and content regulation aim to ensure that popular literature aligns with national cultural values while avoiding the spread of harmful content. This approach has been effective in guiding the industry toward more socially responsible development but has also raised concerns about creative constraints. South Korea's market-oriented policies, meanwhile, focus on enhancing industry competitiveness: tax breaks for SMEs and funding for overseas dissemination support innovation and global expansion, while IP protection measures address a key barrier to industry growth (piracy). This approach has fueled South Korea's success in exporting webnovels and their adaptations but relies heavily on market forces, which can lead to underinvestment in niche genres with limited commercial potential.

These findings also address the research gaps identified in the literature review. Previous comparative studies of Sino-Korean cultural industries focused on end-product exports rather than internal development paths; this study fills this gap by analyzing the full “creator-communication-industrialization-policy” chain, revealing how online literature reshapes each link differently. Additionally, existing research often adopted single-dimensional lenses; this study's multi-dimensional framework shows that differences are driven by the interplay of cultural, market, and institutional factors—for example, China's large market enables its IP chain, while South Korea's Hallyu maturity enables its film-television linkage.

Practically, the findings offer clear directions for mutual learning. China can draw from South Korea's media integration model to address IP fatigue and homogenization: by promoting cross-platform collaboration and integrating webnovels with visual media earlier in the creation process, China can diversify content and enhance audience engagement. South Korea, meanwhile, can learn from China's platform training programs and user scale expansion strategies: China's systematic support for amateur creators has expanded its content pool, and its focus on mobile-first dissemination has captured a broad user base—both of which could help South Korea grow its domestic readership and reduce reliance on overseas markets. For policymakers, China could consider adopting South Korea's IP protection measures to better safeguard creators' rights, while South Korea could explore targeted subsidies for niche genres to promote content diversity.

In summary, the development paths of Chinese and South Korean popular literature under online literature's influence are products of their unique cultural, market, and institutional contexts. Neither path is inherently superior; instead, they offer complementary strengths that, when shared, can drive the high-quality development of popular literature in both countries and deepen cultural exchange in East Asia.

7. Conclusion

This study systematically compares the development paths of popular literature in China and South Korea under the influence of online literature, focusing on four core dimensions—creator composition, communication models, industrialization mechanisms, and policy support systems—and explores the underlying driving factors and their mutual learning potential. The research yields three key conclusions that not only clarify the divergent trajectories of Sino-Korean popular literature but also contribute to theoretical discourse and practical advancement in the field of literary and cultural industries.

First, online literature has reshaped the foundation of popular literature development in both countries, yet distinct “path characteristics” have emerged due to the interplay of cultural context, market structure, and institutional logic. China's popular literature presents a “scale-oriented” path: supported by a large domestic market (over 500 million online literature users), it relies on an amateur-dominated creator base (85% of creators lack professional training) and platform-led dissemination (70% market share controlled by China Literature), building a comprehensive IP-driven industrial chain that extends to film, television, and games. This path prioritizes content volume and industrial scale, enabling rapid growth but facing challenges of homogenization and IP fatigue. By contrast, South Korea's popular literature follows an “efficiency-oriented” path: rooted in the mature Hallyu ecosystem, it maintains a balanced amateur-professional creator mix (52% professional), adopts a media-integrated communication model (webnovels synchronized with webtoons and dramas), and focuses on direct film-television adaptation (60% of top webnovels adapted into dramas within a year). This path emphasizes content quality and cross-media synergy, facilitating global dissemination but risking over-reliance on commercialized themes. These two paths are not mutually exclusive but reflect the adaptive choices of each country's popular literature industry in response to its unique resource endowments—China's scale advantage vs. South Korea's industrial maturity.

Second, the study makes both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of cross-cultural literary industry research. Theoretically, it fills two key gaps identified in the literature review: on one hand, it moves beyond previous studies' focus on “end-product exports” (e.g., Chinese online novels vs. Korean dramas) to analyze the full “creator-communication-industrialization-policy” chain, revealing how online literature reshapes each link of popular literature development; on the other hand, it breaks through the single-dimensional analytical lens (e.g., policy or market) to construct a multi-factor framework, confirming that cultural preferences, market size (large domestic vs. small domestic), and institutional goals (cultural governance vs. market competitiveness) jointly drive path differences. This framework enriches the theoretical system of online literature's global impact and provides a new

analytical tool for comparative studies of East Asian cultural industries. Practically, the findings offer targeted references for stakeholders in both countries: for Chinese industry practitioners, South Korea's media integration model can help address IP fatigue; for South Korean policymakers, China's platform-based creator training programs can expand the domestic readership base; for both countries, mutual learning in policy—China adopting South Korea's IP protection measures and South Korea adding targeted subsidies for niche genres—can promote more sustainable development.

Third, while this study achieves its intended objectives, it also points to directions for future research. Methodologically, the research primarily relies on secondary data (industry reports, academic papers), and future studies could supplement primary research such as in-depth interviews with creators, platform managers, and readers to capture micro-level experiences. Scope-wise, the study focuses on China and South Korea, and expanding to other East Asian countries or Western contexts could reveal global patterns of online literature's influence on popular literature. Theoretically, with the rise of AI-generated content (AIGC), future research could explore how AI reshapes creator roles and industrialization models, addressing emerging challenges and opportunities in the digital era.

In summary, the development of popular literature in China and South Korea under the background of online literature's rise is a dynamic process of adaptation to local contexts. Neither path is inherently superior; instead, their complementary strengths—China's scale and industrial chain completeness, South Korea's efficiency and cross-media synergy—provide a basis for deepened cultural exchange. By learning from each other's experiences, both countries can promote the high-quality development of popular literature, not only enhancing the competitiveness of their own cultural industries but also contributing to the diversity and vitality of global literary and cultural ecosystems.

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