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# Gendered keywords as entry points: the construction and evolution of *nūpin* and *nūxing-xiang* in Chinese Internet literature

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## ABSTRACT

China's Internet literature (CIL) epitomises one of the most vibrant platformised cultural sectors in China and is characterised by a distinct gender demarcation. This paper critically revisits the history of its gendered development by identifying *nūpin* (women's channel) and *nūxing-xiang* (women-oriented) as keywords in China's cultural sphere. Drawing from platform studies and cultural studies, the study examines the power dynamics underpinning the construction and evolution of *nūpin* and *nūxing-xiang*, and the implications for their normalisation. My research finds that *nūpin* is established on patriarchal assumptions that prescriptively confine women's literature to certain genres as a point of difference for market competition. Additionally, while *nūxing-xiang* started as a community identity, it later became incorporated into the *nūpin* effect through the increasing convergence of CIL and multimedia sectors. By unveiling how individual platforms, users, market forces, gender norms, and power relations intersect to shape the trajectories of these keywords, this article lays the groundwork for interventions to challenge the prevailing gendered binarity in CIL.

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## Introduction

Since its emergence in the late 1990s, China's Internet literature (CIL) has evolved from a decentralised participatory culture to be increasingly commercialised and concentrated on major digital platforms, making it part of a global trend of platformisation (Thomas Poell, David Nieborg and José Van Dijck 2019). During this transition, large platforms such as Qidian (Qidian Chinese Network, [qidian.com](http://qidian.com)) and Jinjiang (Jinjiang Literature City, [jjwxc.net](http://jjwxc.net)) assumed dual roles as both intermediaries and infrastructure that profoundly shape and govern the entire value chain of Internet literature in China (Xiang Ren 2022).

A distinct yet often overlooked facet during this paradigmatic shift is how CIL has split along gender lines. This gendered focus is so marked that six out of the nine platforms under Tencent-backed China Literature Limited, the industry's current leader, explicitly

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target female users, identified as “nuxing-xiang” platforms. Those that cover more general user bases typically feature a specific women’s channel, known as “*nüpin*.” Over time, these neologisms have become keywords in both scholarly and popular discussions of CIL, often used loosely and interchangeably to denote literary spaces and works dedicated to women (YanJun Shao and Yusu Wang 2018).

*Nüpin* 女频, abbreviated from “*nüsheng pindao*,” literally translates as “women’s channel.” It was first introduced by the male-centric platform Qidian as a section in 2005, and became a standard practice on CIL platforms, serving to organise production and guide consumption along gender lines. *Nüxing-xiang* 女性向 is a loanword from the Japanese phrase *josei muke* (女性向け), meaning “for women.” In the context of CIL, it was initially appropriated by danmei subculture community as a self-identifier, symbolising a space of autonomy and resistance. As CIL converges with other media sectors, the scope of *nüxing-xiang* has expanded to encompass a wide range of popular cultural products aimed at female audiences beyond literature (Jamie J Zhao and Ng Eve 2022; Wanning Sun and Ling Yang 2019).

Despite their widespread usage, scant attention has been paid to the unique trajectories and implications of their transformation into contemporary keywords, with *nüpin* gaining institutional status through top-down platform initiatives, and *nüxing-xiang* moving from bottom-up subcultural roots to a label of popular culture and entertainment. This oversight misses a critical opportunity to unpack the negotiations and struggles that underlie their distinct provenances and subsequent convergence, allowing the perpetuation of a gendered binary in literature to go unchallenged.

To fill this gap, this paper leverages a keyword-focused approach, inspired by Raymond Williams’ classic *Keywords* (1976; 1985), to problematise the taken-for-grantedness of *nüpin* and *nüxing-xiang*. Drawing from platform studies, cultural studies, and feminist critiques of media and technology, I conceptualise them as technological constructs and marketing categories, and critically examine their emergence and careers within the context of CIL’s platformisation. This approach aims to contribute to a multifaceted understanding of how they shape and are shaped by the power dynamics of digital platforms, individual agency, gender norms, and market forces.

My analysis reveals that while *nüpin* began as a contingent categorisation based on stereotypical notions about gender and literature, it quickly established a categorical imperative across the field, a phenomenon I refer to as the “*nüpin* effects.” And although *nüxing-xiang* originated from a self-generated domain, it has subsequently been subsumed into the commercial logic of *nüpin*, becoming a complex and contested space. This exploration foregrounds a critique on the powerful role of digital platforms in influencing how women’s literature is perceived and valued, and cautions that *nüpin/nüxing-xiang* may limit scope and autonomy of women’s literary expressions by cementing a gendered dichotomy. Ultimately, it calls for more scholarly interventions to challenge the normative constraints by the current binary structure, and forge paths towards more inclusive representations of gender.

## The gendering of Chinese Internet literature

Literature is one of the earliest areas in Chinese cyberspace where amateur creativity flourished. Women have been at the forefront of utilising the low barrier and relative

freedom of new media technology to carve out dedicated spaces to explore their gender identities and desires, and foster feminist sentiments through literature-related activities (Jiang Chang and Hao Tian 2021; Jin Feng 2013; Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu 2015). Following the freemium model introduced by Qidian.com in 2003, the field was boosted by an influx of capital, consolidated through multiple rounds of mergers and acquisitions, particularly noticeable under conglomerates such as Shanda and Tencent (Elaine Jing Zhao 2017). Online writing has been increasingly transformed from an individual artistic pursuit for literary enthusiasts into a streamlined industry that capitalises on user-generated content and affective fan engagement (Yan Jun Shao 2023).

The rise of *nüpin* and *nüxing-xiang* as keywords signifies both the vibrant engagement of women in pushing the boundaries and creating a literature of their own, and the market's strategic response to categorise and commercialise this female-centric content. These terms now encompass a diverse array of genres considered to be written by and for women, including danmei, fanfiction, time travel, workplace fiction, farming fiction, matriarchal tales, etc. *Nüpin* and *nüxing-xiang* represent a fruitful area of CIL research, engaging in deep analyses across literary and cultural studies, fandom studies, and incorporating insights from feminist and queer theory (Feng 2013; Shana Ye 2023; Yunyi Hu 2023).

Yet it was not until recent years that these concepts themselves have attracted scholarly attention. Shao Yanjun and her associates from Peking University, who self-identify as “aca-fans,” lead the efforts by systematically discussing these terms in their Williams-inspired book *Wallbreakers: Keywords of China's Internet Culture* (2018). Shao's team contend that while both *nüpin* and *nüxing-xiang* are used by business entities to target female audiences, *nüxing-xiang* bears a feminist ethos that is absent in *nüpin*. This difference is rooted in their origins: *nüpin* was introduced by the male-centric platform Qidian.com in 2005 as a women-specific channel, marking it as an industry-established practice, while *nüxing-xiang* originated from women-led danmei forums such as Lucifer Club (founded in 1999) and Sunsun Academy (founded in 1998). This female-driven genesis of *nüxing-xiang* is viewed by Shao's team as emblematic of women's autonomy in literary expression, “a tendency of women to write using their own language in their own space, shunning away the male gaze” (Yingxuan Xiao 2016, 175), which led to many literary genres that challenge hetero-patriarchal norms. This grassroots emergence is seen as giving rise to what they call “network feminism” from below (Yan Jun Shao 2016; Hanning Gao 2022, 2016). Their pioneering exploration is conceptually valuable, yet an emphasis on etymology leads to a rather linear narrative that follows the terms from their origins to support their feminist interpretation of *nüxing-xiang*, failing to account for the complex histories of the two words in real-world usage.

Guirong Sun and Guimei Qiu (2017) challenge this view by stating that *nüxing-xiang* needs to be contextualised within a broader societal discourse that frames women predominantly as consumers, suggesting that most fiction within this category conforms to rather than subverts patriarchal ideologies. Similarly, Tao Jiang (2020) sees *nüpin* and *nüxing-xiang* as both consumerist strategies deployed by profit-seeking platforms to exploit women's desires, and questions the transformative potential of this user-generated culture. Jiang further observes that fans of the more subversive genres, such as danmei, rarely support any LGBTQ+ agendas, too often, they would relinquish their

subcultural ethos for mainstream acceptance (see also Liang Ge 2022; Eve Ng and Xiaomeng Li 2020; Sheng Zou 2022).

The disagreement stems from the tendency to derive the meanings of *nüpin* and *nüxing-xiang* by examining the literary works categorised under them, and the inadequacy of acknowledging the ever-evolving nature and multivalence of these words. My contention is that the significance *nüpin* and *nüxing-xiang* transcends the collection of works, and instead is shaped and stabilised through a network of human and non-human actors that interact within the digital platform environment. The goal of this article is thus not to pin down definitive meanings for these words, but to take them as entry points to re-examine the nexus of power between digital platforms, female participation, gender norms, and market forces that intersect to shape their meanings.

### Platforms, gender and the power to categorise

At first glance, *nüpin* and *nüxing-xiang* may appear to be digital extensions of “*nüxing wenxue*” (women’s literature) in traditional literature, yet a closer examination reveals stark differences. *Nüxing wenxue* was established in the late 1980s largely through feminist scholars’ endeavours to recuperate a women’s writing tradition from its marginalised and neglected past (Lydia H. Liu 1993; Xiaojiang Li and Xiaodan Zhang 1994). In contrast, *nüpin/nüxing-xiang*, alongside their male counterparts *nanpin* (men’s channel) and *nanxing-xiang* (men-oriented), are embedded in the platforms’ architecture and design, pre-emptively assigning a gender to literary texts upon publication. To capture these dynamics, I suggest analysing these two keywords through dual lenses: as socio-technical constructs realised through platforms’ software design, and as gender-based categories shaped by platforms for matchmaking between texts and audience.

First, *nüpin* and *nüxing-xiang* initially materialised in the interface of specific digital platforms, instantiated in section headings, subsites, About Us pages, or announcements, before they became recognised by wider audiences as established categories around which new economic regimes grow. Platforms do not only facilitate the circulation and consumption of texts, but actively shape and structure the flow of information and interaction—“everything on a platform is designed and orchestrated” (Tarleton Gillespie 2018, 21). The design of platforms, on the one hand, reflects the owners’ strategic decision making and cultural beliefs, and on the other, they actively mediate user activities by imposing specific orders, structures, and guidance (José van Dijck 2013). In this way, a platform’s economic models, designs, algorithms, and discourses, exert a performative influence; they are instrumental in crafting and sustaining new operational regimes aligned with the objectives they are engineered to support (José van Dijck, Thomas Poell and Martijn De Waal 2018).

For instance, when “*nüpin*” was featured on Qidian’s homepage, and “*nüxing -xiang*” was embraced by Jinjiang as a tagline, they are not to be taken as simply representations of what a section, subsite, or the platform is about, but are performative in the sense that they play an active role in reordering the interactions and economic value on their sites.

Second, *nüpin* and *nüxing-xiang* are part of a continuum of institutional efforts to name, define and construct categories for gender-specific audiences. Gender is often used as a primary distinction, widely used in businesses, designing, advertising and marketing practices to create carefully defined customer categories or niches that determine the

desirability for their businesses (Joseph Turow 2008). Past studies on gendered marketing have critiqued two interrelated problems that are relevant here. On one level, the gendered framing of audience or user categories is often undergirded by powerful dynamics of patriarchy and capitalism (Eileen R. Meehan 2002; Bingchun Meng and Yanning Huang 2017) and could facilitate the exploitation of women by emphasising their role as consumers and community makers (Liesbet Van Zoonen 2002; Kelley Cotter, Mel Medeiros, Chankyung Pak and Kjerstin Thorson 2021). On another, constructed classification systems are often taken as natural and essentialist, creating a feedback loop where gender-based categorisations could become “a self-reinforcing truism” (Anne M. Cronin 2008, 304).

Viewed this way, it becomes clear that *nüpin* and *nüxing-xiang* are more than just taxonomic features facilitating content discovery but represent strategic visions of platform owners to introduce a new overarching category that hinges on gender as the defining criterion. Meanwhile, this dual perspective underscores the significant influence digital platforms have on how users interact with texts. The combined framework makes it both a necessity and an opportunity to unveil, deconstruct, and analyse the meanings coded into these gendered keywords, how the boundaries are delineated, and the degree to which they enable or constrain women’s autonomy in literary expression and consumption.

### Methods and data: gendered keywords as entry points

This paper takes *nüpin* and *nüxing-xiang* as entry points, and critically analyses the conception and materialisation of these two gendered keywords in CIL’s platform ecosystem. Keywords are valuable because they provide “unique entry into some aspect of reality that may be obfuscated or otherwise challenging to discern” (Ted Striphas 2023, 46). Many have demonstrated the methodological potential of keywords (Gustavo Gomez-Mejia 2023; Tani Barlow 1994; Nicholas A. John 2013). Practically, this means identifying the period when the meanings of a keyword changed, and surveying historical materials to find out “who used these words, in what context, with what ambition, and with what effects” (Marie Moran 2021, 1026).

Having established that *nüpin* and *nüxing-xiang* operate not only on discursive but also socio-technical level, my methodology is also informed by historical approaches in platform studies. According to Anne Helmond and Fernando N van der Vlist (2019), the materiality and multisided nature of digital platforms provide abundant opportunities to gather material traces, and triangulate findings in historiographical studies. Meanwhile, changes on a platform, such as homepage layout or tagline, serve as points of entry to study key turning points in a platform’s evolution (Jean Burgess 2015). Lastly, it is imperative to contextualise the transformations of individual platforms within the broader media ecology (van Dijck 2013; Rena Bivens and Oliver L Haimson 2016).

Mindful of these methodological considerations, I organise my data and analysis by focusing on the journeys of the two keywords respectively. First, I locate the initial adoption/creation of these gendered keywords within CIL platforms and collect relevant material traces, including the About Us, FAQs, meta descriptions, announcements, policies, and interface. This part of the data was collected largely using the Internet Archive Wayback Machine (<https://archive.org/web/>), a non-profit service that contains archived

pages of websites since 1996. It is widely used in web-related research, but not without its limitations, as noted by scholars (Jamie Murphy, Noor Hazarina Hashim, and Peter O'Connor 2007). Secondly, I consider political economic factors such as ownership changes, industry reports, using materials from news reports, management interviews, U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) filings (applicable to Shanda), IPO filings and public financial reports (applicable to Tencent-backed China Literature). This data serves as a profound contextualisation for a multi-layered analysis of the motivation, construction, purpose of *nüpin* and *nüxing-xiang*.

Next, I set out to understand how these keywords transformed into normalised signifiers; the different reaches of the two words require different sets of data. To understand the institutionalisation of *nüpin*, I compile a list of 25 most significant CIL platforms (only considering those that publish original web fiction) to track its spread and influence. Because *nüxing-xiang* is used beyond CIL, I use WiseSearch, a Chinese-language news database to understand the process of its “mainstreamisation.”

## Qidian and the *nüpin* effect: the institutionalisation of *nüpin*

### *Romanticising women, feminising romance*

*Nüpin* originated from Qidian, which, interestingly, is generally considered the most influential and largest male-oriented platform (Shao 2023). Like most CIL websites at the time, Qidian was launched with a pronounced focus on community building. In 2002, a group of *xuanhuan* (Eastern fantasy) enthusiasts known as the Chinese Magic Fantasy Union established Qidian, whose goal was to promote original literature online and foster a community space for *xuanhuan* fans. After pioneering a paid-reading model in October 2003, it was acquired by Shanda Cloudary as a wholly-owned subsidiary and became the first Chinese original literature site to rank among the top 100 on Alexa (E.J. Zhao 2011).

In May 2005, *nüpin* was launched as a section on Qidian’s homepage ([mm.cmfu.com/](http://mm.cmfu.com/), Figure 1), then migrated to its own domain in 2009 as Qidian Female Net ([qdm.com](http://qdm.com)). *Nüpin* was a strategic move to fill a perceived gap between rapidly growing female internet users, who constituted 41% of netizens by the end of 2005 (CNNIC China Internet Network Information Center 2006), and a scarcity of offerings that catered to “feminine” tastes. At the time, already-commercialised platforms such as Huanjian Shumeng, Zhulang and Tianying, all predominantly focused on “masculine” genres like *xuanhuan*, fantasy, martial arts, and military fiction. Websites like Jinjiang, Hongxiu, and



Figure 1. Qidian’s main page and *nüpin* (2005).

Xiaoxiang, which had a stronger appeal to female users, had yet to undergo commercial transitions.

The establishment of a “women’s channel” was not entirely ground-breaking; sections explicitly named *nüpin* had already been a feature on prominent portal websites like Sohu, Sina, and NetEase from the start of the 21st century. These sections typically mirrored topics in women’s magazines, with a heavy reliance on traditional notions of femininity and framing women as consumers (Lan Kang and Min Xu 2009). When *nüpin* was introduced on Qidian, it was accompanied by a series of discursive and technological work that need to be considered collectively and contrasted critically. To begin with, I look at its inaugural announcement<sup>1</sup>:

Qidian has been continuously exploring and researching since its launch to better meet the needs of both authors and readers. As a result, we have established the largest online reading platform in China and created our own brand, offering excellent management and service. Now, in order to further serve female users who enjoy reading and writing, we are thrilled to launch the Qidian Women’s Channel.

This new channel aims to cultivate a group of original female novelists in China and explore the potential for original Chinese content. Our goal is to inspire a new generation of female writers who have a passion for writing and provide them with the most suitable development pathways on a platform that combines service and creativity.

A close reading of the announcement reveals two noteworthy aspects. Firstly, Qidian abandons the previous community-based positioning and instead promotes itself as a professional service-providing platform. This move signals a strategic shift in the platform’s identity and purpose. Second, this announcement was mainly geared towards aspiring writers, whom it relies on for content creation, so as to attract readers, publishers and advertisers. The appeal for writers also changed from artistic expression or community recognition to a focus on turning users’ passion for writing into professional authorship, with the promise of financial and reputational returns.

Yet, delving into *nüpin*’s design and reveals divergences from the promises of empowerment and support and raises concerns about the gendered assumptions inherent in such categorisation. It also becomes evident that Qidian exerts significant influence in outlining the perimeters of *nüpin*, and shaping its content according to the platform’s vision.

Qidian’s layout juxtaposed *nüpin* with otherwise genre-based sections, implying that what’s not included in *nüpin* naturally belongs to an unnamed domain of “male default,” resonating with Simone de Beauvoir’s (1949) critique of how women are othered, and defined in relational terms to the male mainstream. Furthermore, the platform’s power extends beyond introducing a category, but also setting the standards of membership, which are explicitly delineated in Qidian’s Help Centre article excerpted below.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that *nüpin* is not a *descriptive* category that emerged from community practices or agreed-upon beliefs, but a *prescriptive* one, conceptualised by the platform and materialised through its mechanisms and policies.

How to Publish on the Women’s Channel:



Women's Channel reserves the right to reject works that are not suitable for female readers or those that are deemed unsuitable for publication on this channel by editors or do not align with the direction of the channel.

The criteria for inclusion in the female channel are as follows:

- (1) Works by female authors are automatically included.
- (2) Works in the romance genre are automatically included.
- (3) Works that have been selected by the female channel editorial team as suitable for female readers are automatically included.

It is crucial to see that the standards of inclusion also imply exclusion (Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star 1999; Hope A. Olson 2002). The criteria of *nüpin* first presume that women's works are predominantly consumed by a female readership, which means that female authors wishing to avoid the *nüpin* label may feel compelled to mask their identity to avoid automatic inclusion. Secondly, women's literary presumption is conveniently reduced to being equated with romance (with its subgenres), and the genre of romance is designated as essentially feminine. This also means that non-female-identified readers seeking romance genres have to navigate, as if trespassing, to a channel clearly labelled female. And above all, it is Qidian, and rather than women writers or readers themselves, that reserve the ultimate authority to gatekeep what's suitable and not suitable for the perceived *nüpin* readers.

### **The *nüpin* effect**

*Nüpin* catalysed a transformative ripple across the field. A survey of 25 CIL platforms with the keyword approach reveals three distinct manifestations of what I identify as the "*nüpin* effect." This phenomenon is mapped in [Figure 2](#).

For starters, *nüpin* triggered a wave of emulations among its peers at the time. For instance, Qidian's principal competitor, Huanjian Shumeng ([hjism.net](#)), promptly added a women's channel to its homepage in the same month. This approach soon became a standard practice in the industry. Newer websites like [zhulang.com](#), [17k.com](#), [zongheng.com](#), etc. all adopted *nüpin*, often featuring it in a pink colour scheme to distinguish it from the main site.

Meanwhile, *nanpin* (men's channel) emerged as a reactive construct and is widely adopted by platforms like [fmx.cn](#), [readnovel.com](#), or [fanqienovel.com](#). When Tencent Literature was founded, it consisted of two divisions, Chuangshi ([chuangshi.qq.com](#)) as a *nanpin* website, and Yunqi ([yunqi.qq.com](#)) as *nüpin*.

Furthermore, under the *nüpin* effect, platforms previously focused on romance content or with a predominantly female user base began explicitly marketing themselves as women-centric, such as [hongxiu.com](#), [xiaoxiang.net](#), [4yt.net](#) and [jjwxc.net](#). Their gender-specific rebranding is strongly correlated with their transition to commercial operations—they were all found to have adopted an explicit women focus after transitioning to a VIP paid-reading model. For example, Xiaoxiang ([xxy.net](#), 2000-), which aimed to build "the best website for fiction reading," decided to remove all "masculine" genres to focus mostly on romance after their commercialisation, a strategic move to avoid head-on competition with Qidian (Yan Jun Shao and Yingxuan Xiao 2020), and changed its tagline to "professional women's fiction site." Similarly, 4yt.net shifted its tagline from being "a library for romance" to "a dedicated

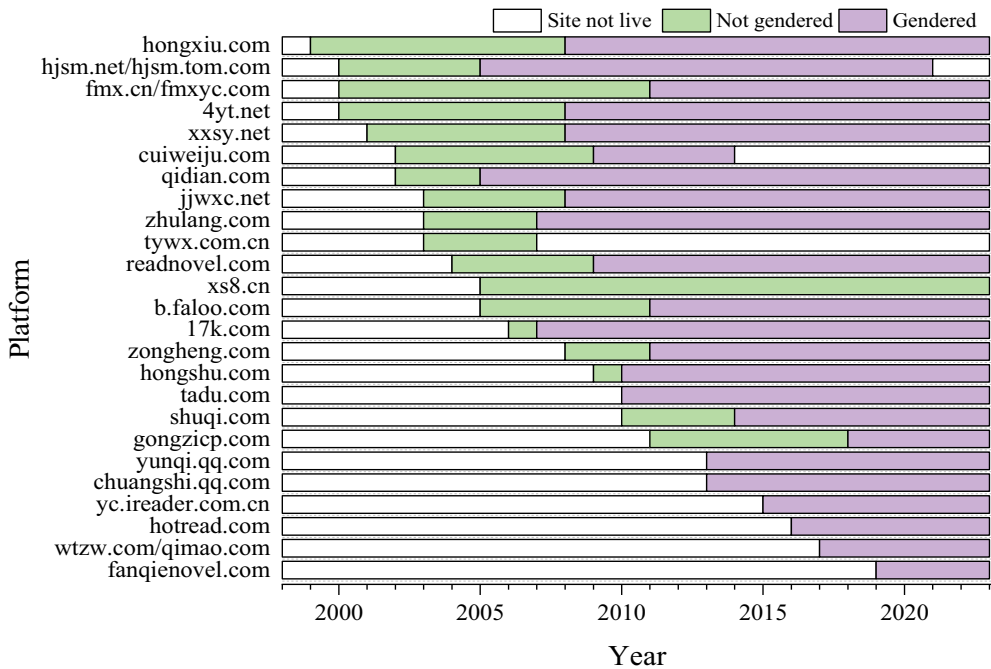


Figure 2. Mapping the “nüpin effect” across 25 platforms (1998–2023).

space for women’s reading and writing.”<sup>3</sup> An exception is the platform Romance Fiction Bar ([xs8.com](http://xs8.com)), which maintains its original genre-centric approach rather than adopting a gender-based one, at least in any explicit ways.

These three types of gendered approaches (collectively represented as “gendered” in Figure 2)—the addition of “nüpin,” the reactive creation of “nanpin,” and the rebranding towards female audiences—reflect platforms’ attempts to define and tap into female market by casting women as consumers and romance readers. For example, Hongxiu’s About Us in 2008 reads, “women have always been stronger than men in online consumption, but the development of romance novels—a key focus for female readers—has been relatively lagging behind.”<sup>4</sup> However, even the parent company’s own statistics question the validity of such a simplistic bifurcation. According to Shanda Cloudary’s preliminary prospectus in 2012, Qidian’s readership was estimated at 61.6% male for its rich offering of fantasy fiction, while Hongxiu’s focus on romance attracted a readership that was 56.7% female. This discrepancy highlights the fact that *nüpin* is a category constructed by CIL platforms to organise, steer, and “matchmake” (David S. Evans and Richard Schmalensee 2016) between production and consumption, rather than acknowledging the diversity and complexity of female creativity and experiences.

The rippling effects of *nüpin* spread across the CIL platforms, which, in turn, gave the word the sense of inevitability and naturalness it has today. In this way, *nüpin* has a performative force—it shapes and defines the very subject it claims to represent (Judith Butler 2010). Meanwhile, by adopting a gendered name, *nüpin* indicates that the content published on it is inherently feminine, and women’s literary consumption is best represented by *nüpin*, resulting in the simultaneous making of gender and market.

## Convergence and contestation: the mainstreamisation of *nüxing-xiang*

The path of *nüxing-xiang* within CIL takes a more winding route, and can be traced to prior to platformisation. This section charts its course from its initial use by the online community Lucifer Club to its reemergence on Jinjiang, and its expansion into mainstream culture, particularly after 2015.

### “Misuse” of *nüxing-xiang* before platformisation: Lucifer Club and the danmei subculture

The earliest adoption of *nüxing-xiang* dates back to Lucifer Club ([lucifer-club.com](http://lucifer-club.com), 1999–), one of the earliest and most influential forums dedicated to the danmei subculture in China (Shih-chen Chao 2016). An examination of its welcome page<sup>5</sup> and community guidelines<sup>6</sup> below, sheds light on the specific meanings and functions attributed to *nüxing-xiang*.

Welcome! This is a club for fans of *nüxing-xiang* danmei and fanfiction. Most of the works here contain BL elements. If you are allergic to this element, please leave the site immediately. If you are not clear on what is danmei or *nüxing-xiang*, please leave immediately. —Lucifer Club staff, 2000.10

This is a *nüxing-xiang* BL website. It features a substantial amount of BL-themed material and is open exclusively to fans above the age of 18 who share similar interests. (If you're unsure about the nature of this content, please exit the site. Meanwhile, this website does not assume responsibility for the education of minors. If you are underage, please leave.) —Lucifer Club Community Guidelines

Firstly, the expression was used to refer specifically to the danmei/BL genre. Danmei/BL emerged as a genre of “girls’ comics” in Japan in the 1970s, and was introduced to China as a genre of Japanese anime and manga that experienced immense popularity in the 1990s (Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu 2016). It led to the importation of many ACG-inspired words directly borrowed in their kanji forms, such as danmei (tanbi), baihe (yuri), funü (fujoshi), zhai (otaku), meng (moe), tongren (dojin), among many more (Maud Lavin, Yang Ling and Zhao Jing Jamie 2017). Similarly, *nüxing-xiang* is derived from the Japanese phrase *josei muke*, which is commonly used in Japan’s ACG sector to describe products targeting women, such as *josei-muke gēmu* (women’s games) and *josei manga* (ladies’ comics) (Fusami Ogi 2003; Hyeslin Kim 2009). In the Japanese context, while danmei is considered a by-women-for-women genre, it is only a part of the more encompassing category *josei muke*. Lucifer’s use of *nüxing-xiang* in fact amounted to a misappropriation of the term (Gao 2022).

Secondly, this intentional misappropriation imbued the term a boundary-keeping function to preserve the community’s privacy and subcultural identity, emphasising their disinterest in engaging with outsiders or seeking their validation. Apart from adopting a gender-specific description, Lucifer implemented an “entry-test” system consisting of 20 questions to vet applicants’ knowledge of danmei works and its community rules,<sup>7</sup> so as to safeguard the site from potential abuse. This strong sense of boundary is at the core of Shao et al.’s conceptualisation of *nüxing-xiang* as an assertion of women’s autonomy to carve out a feminine cultural territory within the masculine hegemony, which they had little chance of doing

before. However, I argue this guarded stance also reflects the controversial perception of danmei/BL in society, as well as the self-perception of the participants. Chinese danmei fans adopted the self-deprecating label used by Japanese BL fans to identify themselves, *fujoshi*, or *funü* in Chinese, which literally translates as “rotten women”—rotten because their obsession with fantasies of male-male sexuality is deemed deviant by prevailing patriarchal family values (Patrick W. Galbraith 2011). This defensive and self-preserving attitude has been inherited by subsequent generations of danmei fandoms too, who follow the principle of *quandi zimeng*, or “enjoying yourself on your own ‘territory’” (Xi Tian 2020, 199).

At this stage, *nüxing* was a community identity for fans of the danmei subculture, who creatively misused the term to mark off a space where participants themselves could exercise control and ownership over their cultural production and consumption. As the digital literary landscape matures, *nüxing-xiang* is reemerging and evolving into a mainstream popular culture keyword, but simultaneously becoming detached from its original connotations as a subcultural identifier and a space of exclusivity.

### ***Towards a nüxing-xiang culture: Jinjiang and the gendered “IP”***

After Lucifer Club declined around mid-2000s, it was not until 2015 that Jinjiang adopted the exact phrasing in its tagline, making it the only mainstream Chinese literary website positioned as a *nüxing-xiang* platform (Shao and Wang 2018).

Jinjiang’s adoption of a gendered orientation is part of the “*nüpin* effect.” It repositioned itself as “the largest base for *nüxing* wenxue (women’s literature)”<sup>8</sup>, after it sold half of its shares to Shanda and started implementing a paid-reading model in January 2008. The rebranding was reflected in its revamped content navigation system, which prioritised two newly-added tabs: “originality” and “sexual orientation” to distinguish it from its competitors, such as danmei and fan fiction, while placing other selectable options, like genres, settings, or tropes, in secondary positions. The innovative and transgressive nature of many of these genres, such as “*tongren*” (fan fiction), danmei, “*baihe*” (girls’ love), and “*nüzun*” (matriarchal), is the reason why Jinjiang is critically acclaimed among feminist literary scholars (Feng 2013; Shao and Xiao 2020).

Despite featuring genres that challenge hetero-patriarchal power structures, Jinjiang itself has never explicitly asserted a commitment to any feminist/LGBTQ+ agendas. Instead, its self-identification as a platform for women is primarily explained with a focus on young female consumers, as indicated in its “market occupation” tab on its about us page.<sup>9</sup> This text speaks to a broader social and historical context, where women have been increasingly constructed as consumers in China’s post-reform discourse, enveloped in a mix of commodity feminism, gendered consumerism, and national identity (Megan M. Ferry 2003; Xiaomeng Li 2020).

Jinjiang’s male-to-female user ratio is approximately 7:93. Women with robust purchasing power are the primary consumers on our platform. In terms of age, 84% of our users belong to the main consumer group aged 18–35. Jinjiang’s users are part of the mainstream group driving economic consumption. — Jinjiang, “Market Occupation”

Compared with this significant revamp, the subtle tweak from *nüxing wenxue* to *nüxing-xiang wenxue* (women-oriented literature) in 2015 is easily overlooked, because it did not bring any substantial changes to the level of the platform’s interface. To put this change in perspective, I conducted a thematic analysis of newspaper articles with the keyword search of *nüxing-xiang* across the span of 2000–2020 ( $n = 398$ ) by the type of content/products it’s associated with (Figure 3). The analysis reveals a spike in 2015 is most directly the result of a series of TV shows broadcast that year that were adapted from CIL works published on women-targeting platforms and gained phenomenal popularity. These include *My Sunshine*, *The Journey of Flower*—both published on Jinjiang—and *Nirvana in Fire*, originally serialised on Jinjiang and later migrated to Qidian’s *Nüpin* (Yingxuan Xiao and Xuqiao Ye 2016).

The change from *nüxing* to *nüxing-xiang* is reflective of the broader shift in CIL industry conglomeration and convergence, aptly encapsulated by the buzzword “pan-entertainment” popularised by Tencent (You Wu 2023). In this new phase of business development, literary texts are reimagined as “IPs” (intellectual properties), defined by Tencent as “high-quality and profitable cultural asset[s] that can be sustainably developed along the cultural industry value chain” (Baoyi Guo and Jiaqi Liu 2021, 1), and the online reader base is seen as potential consumers supporting the transmedia adaptations. The year 2015 is thus often hailed by Chinese scholars and critics as the first-year ushering in an “IP era” in CIL’s development (Feng Qin and Rongting Zhou 2017).

Therefore, a bidirectional dynamic exists between Jinjiang and the keyword *nüxing-xiang*, where Jinjiang actively shapes the semantic connotations associated with *nüxing-xiang*, and, in turn, becomes defined by the word it has contributed to defining. On one

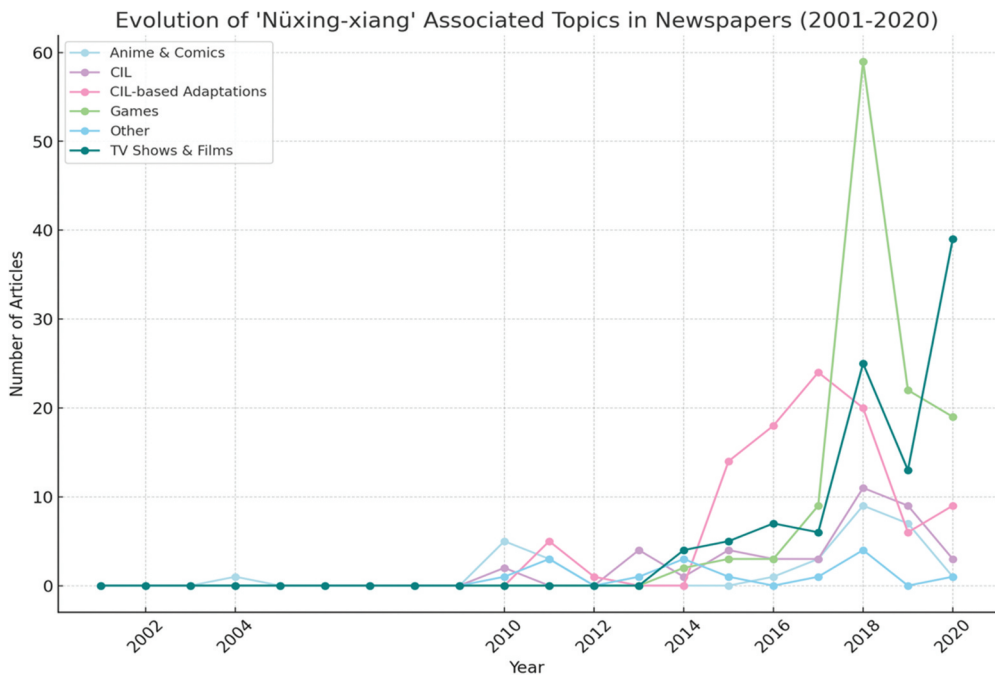


Figure 3. WiseSearch newspaper database, keyword search of “*nüxing-xiang*” (2001–2020, 398 in total).

hand, Jinjiang's adoption of *nüxing-xiang* was not coincidental; it harnesses the term's accrued cultural currency to redefine and reposition itself within the burgeoning market for female-centric popular culture. In 2018, Jinjiang About Us page updated its main business as "IP transactions," declaring its mission was to create "a *nüxing-xiang* pan-entertainment platform centring on literature."<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, Jinjiang's wide recognition as "one of the earliest and most influential women's literature websites" (Feng 2013, 53), makes it an important source for transmedia adaptations aimed at capturing female audiences. Jinjiang-originated works play an important role in influencing popular conceptions of what this so-called "*nüxing-xiang* culture" is about, from time-travel romance to Mary Sue characters, to "big heroine dramas," and the controversial rotten girl culture (Ye 2023; Ruoyun Bai 2019; Zheng Ying 2020; Zhao and Eve 2022).

The following period between 2015–2017 saw a major surge of *nüxing-xiang* in newspaper coverage, predominantly attributed to the booming success of TV shows based on what is now collectively referred to as *nüpin* literature. As Hou Xiaoqiang, the former CEO of Clouday, boldly observed, "IP is female. Winning the game of IP is all about winning the hearts of the little girls" (Ni Ying 2018). Critics and newspaper articles started calling this phenomenon the rise of a "*nüxing-xiang* culture," explained as the rise of cultural commodities that appeal to women's psychological needs and desires as a result of women's increasing consumption power (Ping Huang 2011; Zi Zhou 2017). Thus, through a value chain of convergence, the business logic and performativity of *nüpin* are extended to various cultural sectors that take the gendered segmentation as truism, feeding into a discourse of "women-oriented literature and culture" (W. Sun and Yang 2019, 13).

## Discussion and conclusion

*Nüpin* and *nüxing-xiang* defy simplistic definitions due to their changing meanings over time and across contexts. In this paper, I have conceptualised the two keywords as dynamic and contingent processes, symptomatic of and co-evolving with CIL's platformisation, offering a lens to re-scrutinise the gendered dichotomy now poised for broader influence.

*Nüxing-xiang* emerged as a manifestation of female-led participatory culture, driven by shared interests and a collective desire for autonomy in the digital space. It functioned not only as a means of community formation but also as an enclave for reimagining traditional gender perceptions. *Nüpin*, in contrast, originated from strategic initiatives that leverage gender as a pragmatic tool to reorganise and relabel the components of the nascent literary market—a process imbued with stereotypes that confined the scope of women's literature to specific genres for the sake of product differentiation and customer segmentation.

As CIL evolved from Web 2.0 to a platform-centric paradigm, the initial distinctions between *nüpin* and *nüxing-xiang* began to merge, heralding a phase of mutual construction and negotiation, as well as struggles over control and representation. *Nüxing-xiang* became increasingly enveloped in the "*nüpin* effect" through the increasing convergence between CIL and multimedia sectors, and *nüpin* was enriched by the boundary-pushing momentum represented by *nüxing-xiang*. Together, they underscore the growing material and symbolic importance of women, capitalised on by the downstream adaptation

companies who increasingly rely on the demographic and popularity data as guidance in their “IP development” (Wu 2023).

Moreover, these gendered keywords, when accepted uncritically, risk being a site of performativity, a breeding ground for iterations of cultural stereotypes (Wei Li 2022). *Nüpin* and its variations, including *nüxing-xiang*, solidify a gender-based dichotomous framework through which all aspects of literary engagement—creation, distribution, consumption, interpretation, and adaptation—are filtered and defined. This system, as Jinjiang’s founder Yanming Huang (2020) warns, may polarise readers and marginalise the space available for works that do not neatly align with the nü/nan split. In turn, they discursively construct women as consumers and fans of media texts labelled as *nüpin/nüxing-xiang*, disregarding the true spectrum of women’s interests.

Echoing Bowker and Leigh Star (1999, 26), classification systems can “give advantage” to some and “give suffering” to others. This prompts us to consider what other forms of literary expressions and narratives are sidelined or even rendered invisible by this binary approach. Given the performative power of these keywords when embedded in CIL platforms, it is also worthwhile to explore how they influence artistic creativity and innovation, orchestrate gendered divisions of labour, and mould users’ experiences and identities.

In this paper, I have centred my critique on the role of digital platforms in the institutionalisation and mainstreamisation of *nüpin/nüxing-xiang*, which addresses a gap in CIL studies, and participates in discussions on the mutual shaping between platform designs, culture and gender (Ben Light, Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay 2018; Bivens and Haimson 2016). I hope this paper could serve as a groundwork for future research to explore the ongoing negotiations and far-reaching implications behind the apparently natural movements of words, and to reimagine paths towards a more inclusive approach to gender in digital literary spaces.

## Notes

1. Archived at [https://web.archive.org/web/20051030022004/http://mm.cmfu.com/yq/yq\\_new7.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20051030022004/http://mm.cmfu.com/yq/yq_new7.htm)
2. <https://web.archive.org/web/20081012035150/http://www.qidian.com/Help/qianyue.aspx>
3. <https://web.archive.org/web/20081106040050/http://4yt.net/>
4. <https://web.archive.org/web/20081216023603/http://www.hongxiu.com/htm/aboutus/index.htm>
5. <https://web.archive.org/web/20030204025225/https://www.lucifer-club.com/>
6. <https://web.archive.org/web/20030308122214/http://www.lucifer-club.com/ruler.htm>
7. For an instance, see <https://web.archive.org/web/20040618005750/http://www.lucifer-club.com/exam1.dll>
8. <https://web.archive.org/web/20080731102910/http://www.jjwxc.net:80/>
9. Jinjiang – About Us “market occupation,” archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20100210094851/http://www.jjwxc.net:80/aboutus.php>
10. Jinjiang’s “about us” page. “打造以文学为核心的女性化泛娱乐生态平台.” Archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20180719101042/http://www.jjwxc.net:80/aboutus>

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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