BOOK REVIEW

DIGITAL CHINA: CREATIVITY AND COMMUNITY IN THE SINOCYBERSPHERE

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Abstract: *Digital China: Creativity and Community in the Sinocybersphere*, edited by Jessica Imbach, is a multidisciplinary volume exploring cultural production, identity formation and community-making within contemporary Chinese digital spaces. The book investigates how online literature, poetry, influencer culture, and digital art reshape socio-political and socio-economic realities in China. Through qualitative approaches such as textual and media analysis, contributors demonstrate that China's digital sphere—often described as tightly regulated—remains a dynamic arena of creativity, negotiation, and grassroots participation. The volume challenges simplistic assumptions about censorship and technological control, arguing instead for a nuanced understanding of the "Sinocybersphere" as a site where state structures, market forces, and cultural actors interact. By engaging themes such as danmei fiction, AI-generated poetry, rural influencer economies, and pandemic-era digital art practices, the book makes an important contribution to digital humanities, gender studies, and Chinese cultural studies. While questions remain regarding internet shutdowns and gender

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restrictions in other geopolitical contexts, this collection offers valuable insight into how digital creativity can foster community resilience and cultural innovation.

Originally developed for military and academic purposes, the internet has evolved into a central arena for cultural production and activism. In the twenty-first century, digital spaces have become crucial not only for communication but also for negotiating socio-political realities and reshaping national identities. Against this backdrop, the book *Digital China: Creativity and Community in the Sinocybersphere* offers a rich exploration of how China's digital environment fosters creativity, community, and cultural transformation. The edited volume comprises eleven chapters organized into five thematic sections: Digital Worldbuilding, Poetry in the Digital Age, Performing Authenticity, Cyberpunk Negotiations and Networked Creativity. Through interdisciplinary qualitative methodologies—including textual, visual and platform analysis—the contributors examine how internet literature, digital poetry, online performances and social media platforms contribute to grassroots cultural production.

According to Jessica Imbach, technological advancement and commercialization—often supported by state infrastructure—have profoundly reshaped China's socio-economic landscape (16). Platforms such as WeChat integrate financial services, healthcare access and entertainment into everyday life. Yet the book resists portraying digital China as wholly state-controlled. Instead, it highlights the agency of artists, writers and users who actively negotiate digital constraints while cultivating vibrant online communities (18–21). The concept of the "Sinocybersphere" captures this interplay between governance, creativity and identity formation.

Several chapters stand out for their nuanced treatment of genre and cultural politics. Cui Qian analyzes *xuanhuan* fiction

and its reconfiguration of the classical concept of *tianxia*, demonstrating how digital fantasy literature reconstructs social belonging and global imagination within contemporary internet culture (41–43). Jin Sujie's examination of *danmei* fiction explores how online literary communities engage gender and homosocial themes despite censorship pressures, including the 2014 state crackdown on sexually explicit digital content (60). Rather than reducing *danmei* to homoerotic writing, Sujie situates it within broader literary traditions and evolving gender negotiations (62, 69–70), revealing how online fiction rearticulates femininity, domesticity and self-reliance.

Joanna Krenz's chapter on AI-generated poetry offers a compelling analysis of human–machine collaboration in literary production. By tracing two waves of digital poetic experimentation—first inspired by machines and later shaped through machine-learning technologies—Krenz argues that algorithmic poetry reflects not only technological innovation but also the ideological frameworks and literary-historical knowledge embedded by programmers and engineers (99–101, 119). Digital poetry thus becomes a cultural medium that reassembles traditional aesthetics within contemporary technological infrastructures.

Rui Kunze's research presents cultural influencer Li Ziqi as a compelling example of digital authenticity, gender representation and mediated cultural imagination in contemporary China. Through carefully curated rural lifestyle and culinary videos, Li introduces global audiences to an aestheticized vision of rural China that blends cultural continuity, artisanal labour and narratives of economic resilience. Kunze argues that her digital persona strengthens China's international cultural image while addressing domestic concerns by promoting self-sufficiency, traditional skills and grassroots creativity (147–149). Kunze further demonstrates how Li Ziqi's representation challenges stereotypes of female fragility. Despite criticism often directed at female influencers, her labour-intensive creative process highlights endurance and craftsmanship, presenting women's digital creativity as a form of strength and agency. By portraying women as agents of cultural preservation and innovation, Li

symbolically redefines femininity and inspires marginalized communities. The recurring presence of her grandmother reinforces intergenerational continuity and traditional kinship values, situating rural femininity within familial ethics while extending it into global digital circulation (157–158).

The final section addresses pandemic-era digital art practices in Guangzhou and Kuala Lumpur. Helen Hess and Diyi Mergenthaler analyse digital art practices in Guangzhou and Kuala Lumpur during the lockdown years of 2020–2021, showing how artists and curators reimagined exhibition and participation under restrictive conditions (223–224). Their study reveals how pandemic-era initiatives reshaped engagement with vulnerable communities while challenging cultural power structures and gender disparities. In Kuala Lumpur, social media enabled virtual exhibitions, while in Guangzhou platforms such as Ximalaya, Bilibili, Weibo, and WeChat connected quarantined individuals and facilitated cultural production (226–227).

The strength of this edited work lies in its refusal to romanticize or demonize China's digital sphere. It neither exceptionalizes China nor reduces it to a narrative of censorship. Instead, it foregrounds negotiation, hybridity and cultural agency. At the same time, broader comparative questions remain. How might digital creativity function in contexts where internet access is fully restricted? How do stricter gender regulations in other regions reshape digital participation? These questions point toward fruitful directions for further research. Despite such open questions, *Digital China* is a significant contribution to digital humanities, gender studies and contemporary Chinese cultural scholarship. It will be particularly valuable for policymakers, researchers and students interested in digital creativity, community formation and the evolving streams of technology, identity and national culture.