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## Book Publishing Enters the Blockchain Era: Digital Bookplates Promoting the Digitalization of Cultural Industries (Postprint)

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### Abstract

Digital bookplates constitute the digital transformation of physical bookplates based on blockchain technology, representing one of the significant application domains of cultural digitization. This paper classifies digital bookplates into three categories according to their creative foundation: native digital bookplates, derivative digital bookplates, and concomitant digital bookplates. Native digital bookplates achieve digital innovation of bookplates; derivative digital bookplates transcend spatiotemporal limitations, enabling digital sharing of traditional resources; concomitant digital bookplates exploit the added value of products. At present, as a nascent phenomenon, digital bookplates command considerable popularity while simultaneously confronting numerous security risks that demand urgent resolution, necessitating concerted efforts from all stakeholders to advance national cultural digital transformation and herald a “golden era” for digital bookplate development.

### Full Text

#### Preamble

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### Abstract

Digital bookplates represent the digital transformation of physical bookplates based on blockchain technology and constitute a significant application domain

in cultural digitization. This paper classifies digital bookplates into three categories according to their creative foundation: native digital bookplates, derivative digital bookplates, and companion digital bookplates. Native digital bookplates achieve digital innovation in bookplate creation; derivative digital bookplates break temporal and spatial constraints to enable digital sharing of traditional resources; and companion digital bookplates develop additional product value. Currently, as an emerging phenomenon, digital bookplates enjoy sustained popularity while simultaneously facing numerous security risks that demand urgent resolution. Concerted efforts from all stakeholders are needed to advance national cultural digital transformation and usher in a “golden era” for digital bookplate development.

**Keywords:** digital bookplates; cultural digitization; publishing industry

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## I. The Past and Present of Digital Bookplates

### (1) The Predecessor of Digital Bookplates

Bookplates are artistic works affixed to the endpapers or frontispieces of books, first emerging in 15th-century Germany with the primary function of indicating book ownership. In 1470, German Johannes Knabensberg designed and produced a woodcut depicting a hedgehog holding wildflowers while stepping on fallen leaves, which is recognized as the earliest discovered bookplate. Such pictorial bookplates were extremely rare during their initial development phase. Originally, bookplates served to declare book ownership. With advances in printing technology, mass book production satisfied reading demands across all social strata, and the flourishing publishing industry ushered in a golden age for bookplate production and collection. Around the late 19th to early 20th century, bookplates were introduced to China alongside missionaries and foreign scholars.

As numerous books were published and circulated, bookplate usage and collection gradually spread across social classes, with increasing numbers of creators and enthusiasts, consequently generating a collection craze [1]. Initially function-oriented, bookplates began evolving toward artistic expression. Their personalized and diversified artistic characteristics have earned them the reputation of “pearl of printmaking” and “gem on paper.”

These distinctive miniature prints with special functions embody both functional attributes and humanistic value: on one hand, they carry the important function of marking book ownership; on the other hand, as major artists joined the ranks of bookplate creators, their exquisite skills endowed bookplates with profound artistic value and distinct contemporary characteristics. Even when created by ordinary individuals, bookplates represent works bearing art and culture, possessing substantial collectible value.

## (2) Current Development Status of Digital Bookplates

In May 2022, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the “Opinions on Promoting the Implementation of the National Cultural Digitalization Strategy,” making important arrangements for the cultural digitalization strategy and advocating for the formation of an integrated online-offline, three-dimensionally covered cultural service supply system. In the information age, digital technology has greatly promoted cultural development, while culture has become one of the most important application fields for digital technology [2].

Digital bookplates are digital presentations based on blockchain technology, embodying both high artistic collection value and enhanced rarity through their technical characteristics resembling non-fungible tokens (NFTs), making them a convergence of science and humanities with greater digital humanistic value. Blockchain inherently provides data security for digital bookplates. Additionally, non-fungibility, tamper resistance, and indivisibility are unique technical features of digital bookplates. Non-fungibility is the most prominent characteristic—each digital bookplate represents a mapping of different digital resources, corresponding to a unique digital ID. This digital ID is permanent and immutable, and all digital assets minted as digital bookplates are traceable, authentic, and reliable. Tamper resistance ensures the security and credibility of digital bookplates, enhancing their collectible value and appreciation potential. Digital bookplate technology is blockchain-based; modifying information in the blockchain requires consent from more than half of the nodes and changes to information across all nodes, which are typically controlled by different entities, making information tampering extremely difficult [3]. The “Initiative on Preventing NFT-Related Financial Risks” issued by relevant Chinese industry associations explicitly requires not diluting the non-fungible characteristics of NFTs through ownership division—each non-fungible token is unique and indivisible.

“Collecting knowledge and transmitting value” represents the core purpose of digital book collections. In the circulation of digital bookplates, what is traded is not merely the “work” itself but the digital asset, representing a direct manifestation of cultural digitalization. Compared with traditional bookplates, consumers owning digital bookplates not only possess ownership of physical books but also enjoy exclusive virtual materials within digital assets, including limited author signatures, digital numbers uniquely anchored to physical books, and digital peripherals. Centered on physical books and bookplates as creative cores and relying on digital technology for production, dissemination, and transaction, digital bookplates represent an active exploration of Chinese cultural resources in cultural digitalization and a bold initiative for the publishing industry to venture into digital assets.

Xinhua Winshare Sichuan Digital Publishing Media, in collaboration with “Ali Auction,” launched projects including Alai’s *Zhan Dui*, Sichuan People’s Pub-

lishing House's *Ma Shitu's Southwest Associated University Oracle Bone Script Notes*, Zhejiang Literature and Art Publishing House's *Looking at Jiangnan*, Zhejiang People's Publishing House, and Hunan People's Publishing House successively released works such as *Liu Yong Takes You to See Song Paintings*, *From Qin Dynasty to Qing Dynasty: Qin Dynasty Storm*, *Comic Centennial Party History: The Beginning 1921-1949*, *Forever Yuan Longping*, and *Mao Zedong's Early Manuscripts*. These classic works—whether popular IPs influencing generations, red books continuing the bloodline of Chinese civilization, or online novels representing current research culture—have all undergone digital transformation through the form of limited-edition physical books plus blockchain-based limited digital bookplates [4]. Simultaneously, blockchain technology support further safeguards intellectual property rights for digital assets and publication copyrights, becoming “a bold plan” for the publishing industry to enter digital assets and engage in blockchain digital copyright.

Digital bookplates are not merely digital peripheral displays of bookplates but also serve as promotion modes for excellent cultural clusters and digital presentations of historical memory, possessing cultural value in inheriting collective memory. Virtual spacetime breaks free from physical constraints, enabling the dissemination of commemorative out-of-print treasures to broader audiences and promoting digital resource sharing. For example, Visual China's Silver Salt Archive series digital bookplate *Glory Road: The Olympics in Lens* selects over 350 photos from Visual China's historical image archives, presenting classic scenes and figures from the modern Olympics since 1896. Many of these photos are rare, presenting an unusual and unprecedented brief history of human Olympics through animation plus bookplate formats.

## II. Development Models of Digital Bookplates

Due to historical context and technological development, bookplates have a relatively small audience in China. Since initial domestic circulation was mostly tied to books, early audiences primarily consisted of early 20th-century intellectuals. Over time, this core audience is gradually aging and struggling to adapt to bookplate digitalization, while the digital-native generation has limited knowledge of bookplates. Although many bookplate-themed exhibitions continue to be held, visitors remain relatively limited. Digital bookplates undoubtedly serve as a powerful catalyst for promoting bookplate development and dissemination while advancing the cultural digitalization process.

### (1) Derivative Digital Bookplates: Achieving Digital Resource Sharing

The digital derivative model refers to the digital reproduction of physical originals, such as masterpieces, famous paintings, and other excellent traditional cultures, or sources derived from commemorative architecture. Relying on blockchain technology for secondary innovation, it derives digital resources from physical collections. Placing magnificent physical bookplates into computer

networks in data form innovates display methods, diversifies dissemination approaches, and enriches the social value of digital bookplates.

Traditional bookplates are confined to small paper prints pasted on book frontispieces, either serving as declarations of book owners' possession with strong privacy or being displayed in libraries for enthusiasts, with extremely limited circulation scope. As carriers possessing both functionality and artistry, bookplates have shouldered social linking functions since their birth. In the digital era, digital bookplates achieve online sharing in virtual digital asset form, breaking through temporal and spatial limitations. For instance, the “Zhengzi Gongye” *Hundred Flowers Romance of the Three Kingdoms* Five Tiger Generals dynamic print digital collection launched by People's Literature Publishing House's cultural and creative brand “Renwen Zhibao” uses digital technology to “animate” elements such as mounts, weapons, armor, and costumes in the original Five Tiger Generals paintings, adding vivid finishing touches to the works [5]. Another example is the 113th Anniversary Digital Bookplate *Century National Library—National Library 113th Anniversary Digital Bookplate* launched by the National Library of China, which extracts four architectural appearances of the National Library through digital bookplate form, showcasing the library's century-long transformation and allowing the National Library to radiate new technological brilliance through temporal 沉淀.

**1. Memory Sharing Across Time** Bookplates are artworks carrying memory—their content bears memories about books, while production techniques and visual styles reflect memories about society and era. Based on blockchain's public accessibility and distributed storage, digital bookplates possess the important characteristic of permanent certification, meaning they have diachronicity across time—they always exist as carriers of cultural memory stored in the cloud. As eras change, memory between different generations may experience ruptures, but digital bookplates relying on blockchain technology with permanent certification characteristics remain constant. Their powerful temporal transcendence can link intergenerational culture to combat the immutable laws of natural decay and human forgetting, transforming the ephemeral into the eternal [6]. In other words, culture is one of the technical means for transmitting and storing certain information. Precisely for this reason, cultural memory is not limited by biology and can achieve intergenerational memory transmission.

Digital bookplates derived from physical objects further enrich cultural connotations, transforming fixed social backgrounds into permanently circulating virtual assets, stitching together life experiences and cultural differences across generations, and connecting audience memory with mainstream cultural consciousness to achieve intergenerational communication. One of the original intentions behind Sichuan People's Publishing House's launch of centenarian master Ma Shitu's *Ma Shitu's Southwest Associated University Oracle Bone Script Notes* was to promote Ma's masterpiece of deciphering Chinese civilization codes and

continuing cultural lineage to broader spaces through “digital book collections.”

**2. Social Linking Across Space** Based on innovation diffusion theory, during public recognition of new things, mass communication can most fully exert its influence, while in the evaluation stage, interpersonal communication has the greatest impact on decision-making.

Digital bookplates are essentially digital certificates mapping non-fungible digital assets expressed through forms such as digital signatures and digital peripherals, anchored one-to-one with physical books. Virtual assets derived from physical collections enable digital bookplates to be displayed online, expanding circulation scope and exposure. Pre-launch publicity alone can trigger social attention: on the 27th World Book Day, Sichuan Digital Publishing Media Co., Ltd. under Xinhua Winshare announced that China’s first blockchain-integrated book publishing project, “Digital Book Collection,” launched on Ali Auction. Within just one day of preview, the displayed collections received over 200,000 clicks. At launch, Alai’s *Zhan Dui* sold over 2,000 copies within two minutes [7].

Beyond official preheating and promotion, user sharing on social media rapidly increases digital bookplate exposure while enhancing recognition of digital collections through interaction. Consumers can “show off” their held digital bookplates online, and this spontaneous sharing and real-time interaction can strengthen identity recognition among digital bookplate enthusiasts, enhance group cohesion, and promote high-quality content dissemination. Word-of-mouth communication among audiences online and offline further strengthens connections between interest-based communities as an adhesive. The interactivity of new media is a prominent feature of digitalization, and word-of-mouth communication among consumers cannot be ignored.

## **(2) Native Digital Bookplates: Digital Innovation of Traditional Bookplates**

Native digital bookplates refer to those born first in digital form under digital technology, no longer based on physical originals. Original digital bookplates must consider diverse presentation methods such as animation, audio-visual content, virtual reality, and augmented reality from the design stage, making bookplate design and distribution more complete and comprehensive while further highlighting digital asset advantages.

In research on how to perceive user behavioral affordances under blockchain technology, scholars have found that trust plays a heuristic role in the potential connections between technical and emotional affordances, while user cognition also affects their attitudes toward blockchain, with technical characteristics presented through user perception and experience [8]. The technical features of blockchain, such as tamper resistance and traceability, combined with security clauses like the “Initiative on Preventing NFT-Related Financial Risks” issued

by relevant national industry associations, jointly guarantee the security and reliability of digital bookplates, increasing user trust and recognition. Meanwhile, digital bookplate presentations based on online virtual scenes are richer and more interactive, reducing user participation costs to some extent and enhancing the accessibility of digital bookplates, which facilitates stimulating more users to participate in digital bookplate collection activities and become enthusiasts.

However, most domestic digital collection platforms currently still adopt cooperation with IP owners and IP licensing digitalization methods for distribution. Although most platforms explore more distribution models such as airdrops, lotteries, blind boxes, flash sales, and bundling, these remain in the exploration stage with immature business models. From an industry perspective, the market for providing “digital native” creation and economic benefits to creators has not yet opened. Both content and distribution quantity of digital collections possess scarcity [9], and native creation of digital bookplates also holds vast development space yet to be explored.

### **(3) Companion Bookplates: Value Development Based on Additional Products**

Companion digital bookplates refer to those with additional value beyond the bookplate itself at issuance, such as author signatures and other digital peripherals, endowing already rare digital bookplates with richer collectible value and 观赏性.

Leveraging the “celebrity effect” of renowned writers can also create richer value for digital bookplates. Using authors as opinion leaders to mobilize their fan groups achieves effects of attracting attention, reinforcing significance, expanding influence, and adding value to products. For instance, the “Family Reunion” piece in the Renjian Shijie series digital collection distributed by Lingjing · People’s Art Gallery, as a special edition, generates electronic postcards personally signed by Liang Xiaosheng based on the purchasing user’s real-name authentication, priced higher than other regular editions.

Additionally, the emotional value attached to “blind box” formats can also belong to digital bookplate companionship. As a currently popular marketing method, blind boxes are products with random attributes, and uncertainty about specific styles stimulates consumers’ purchasing and collecting desires, thereby achieving high-frequency repurchases. The digital collection “Boundless” sold by literary magazine *Shouhuo* adopts this highly creative blind box format, leveraging curiosity psychology to attract more users to participate in digital bookplate collection. “Boundless” designed dynamic and static signatures of eight writers as digital blind boxes, stimulating consumption through user “card collecting” and welfare redemption methods.

### III. Development Dilemmas of Digital Bookplates

As an emerging phenomenon, digital bookplates have gained sustained popularity from the metaverse craze while simultaneously facing accompanying security risks that cannot be ignored.

#### (1) NFT Currency Trading and Speculation

China explicitly prohibits illegal financial activities related to token issuance, financing, circulation, trading, exchange, and speculation, as well as related illegal securities issuance, illegal fundraising, and illegal token ticket sales. NFT transactions using digital tokens are also prohibited in China. Non-fungible tokens resembling virtual currencies face similar security hazards, including financial security, price speculation, and online fraud risks.

Once digital collections become 泡沫化 (bubble-ized) and monetized, they can easily trigger policy changes and exacerbate publishing risks [10]. Due to lack of knowledge about virtual currency trading, some bookplate collectors have already suffered economic losses in the process of collecting and reselling digital collections. Digital collection platforms continuously innovate 炒作 (speculation) methods such as “airdrops,” “synthesis,” zero-yuan digital collection grabs, blind box draws, and purchase qualifications after certain spending amounts, yet users cannot obtain promised collections at distribution.

Although according to current regulatory characteristics, most domestic digital collections only support gifting and collection with restricted secondary trading [11], phenomena such as promotional hype and private trading frequently occur in privately opened secondary trading platforms. This causes digital bookplates to deviate from their original collection purpose, with wealth flow from trading becoming a more concerning topic for buyers.

#### (2) Platform Qualification Issues

Furthermore, domestic distribution platforms for digital bookplates require rectification. Currently, domestic publishing houses and libraries have two pathways to issue digital bookplates: one is utilizing their own resources to build self-owned platforms, such as the National Library’s Baobao Youth Universe; the other is seeking cooperation with internet technology companies where the tech company acts as the issuer to produce digital bookplates, such as the Sanlian Life Weekly bookplate series sold at Ali Auction’s Yingren Digital Collection Auction Store.

Due to involving new technologies like blockchain and smart contracts, criminal subjects are often difficult to define in digital bookplate financial risk issues. On one hand, investigating technical facts presents difficulties in comprehensively understanding technical principles and specific application models in this field; on the other hand, controversies exist regarding the characterization of digital

collection minting and distribution behaviors, and the determination of due diligence obligations for digital collection trading platforms requires clarification.

### **(3) Digital Technology Shortcomings**

Technology is a natural shortcoming for publishing enterprises in generating digital assets. Facing specific issues such as how to digitally present assets and enhance user experience, most publishing enterprises need to seek outsourcing support, leading to numerous and complex involved entities. Moreover, digital bookplates have relied on blockchain technology since their inception. Currently, blockchain is roughly divided into three types: public chains, consortium chains, and private chains, with most domestic digital collections primarily based on consortium chains [12]. Most digital bookplate distribution also needs to rely on third-party platforms. Compared with fully transparent public chains and private chains open only to individuals or organizations, consortium chains can be considered “partially decentralized”—the public can view and trade, but verifying transactions or issuing smart contracts requires consortium permission, thus potentially enabling consortium member collusion and competition issues among members.

From a regulatory perspective, although digital bookplates have tried various methods to avoid financial attributes, due to uncertain bookplate values and numerous involved entities, once digital bookplates generate high premiums, they are likely to be exploited by criminals, causing a series of financial security risks such as illegal fundraising, money laundering, and cross-border asset transfer.

## **IV. Future Paths for Digital Bookplates**

### **(1) Virtual-Real Integration to Prevent Speculation**

In October 2021, the China Mobile Communications Association and others jointly released the “Non-Fungible Rights (NFR) White Paper—Blockchain Technology Applications in Digital Rights,” proposing the NFR (Non-Fungible Rights) concept to protect digital ownership of physical and digital assets, forming authenticity certificates that become legal means to ensure rights confirmation, storage, transfer, and circulation of digitized artworks. The white paper also pointed out future development directions: digitalization can increase liquidity, which in turn increases trading volume and market value [13]. The integration of digital and physical economies is an inevitable future development direction, and NFT cryptocurrencies make digital versions of artworks easier to trade. As achievements under emerging technologies, digital bookplates inherently carry traffic hotspots, triggering extensive online discussions and gaining higher attention.

Some scholars believe that “the existence of the internet has replaced physical space with virtual space, providing possible conditions for memory disembedding, making the site no longer mean uniqueness and authority” [14]. The advan-

tages of digital bookplates lie not only in virtual display and venturing into digital assets but also in their binding with physical books, stimulating and driving the development of physical books and physical bookplate exhibitions through online-offline integration, effectively enhancing resource utilization within the publishing industry, empowering physical value through digital bookplates, and promoting industry development. On one hand, physical books and precious historical collections are presented through virtual bookplate forms, with online collection and sharing achieving circulation of physical resources in virtual environments, empowering cultural resource sharing through digital forms; on the other hand, online digital bookplates and related derivatives can also be superimposed on offline displays through AR and other technologies, achieving multi-dimensional displays through digital products, enhancing the supply capacity of high-tech audio-visual cultural digital content, strengthening user audio-visual experiences while driving the popularity and sales of physical exhibitions and promoting new forms of cultural consumption.

Taking the digital bookplate *Shanghai Mao Zedong's Former Residence* launched by Shanghai Mao Zedong's Former Residence Exhibition Hall as an example, this digital bookplate uses the "Jiaksiuli" building as a creative element, presenting Mao Zedong's former residence in the virtual world through digital means. By strengthening reality through virtual spacetime, it recreates precious history digitally within virtual space, achieving users' virtual presence and compensating for audiences' regrets of being unable to visit physically due to various practical reasons. The combination of online and on-site digital cultural experiences revitalizes venue buildings and historical artifacts, enhancing the dissemination power, appeal, and 感染力 (infectiousness) of traditional culture, driving physical culture to "come alive" and enter daily life. Digital bookplates represent creative development of traditional culture, achieving reshaping of relationships among digital assets, physical resources, and user exchanges while venturing into virtual environments. The realistic cultural experience serves as a 强心针 (shot in the arm) for awakening users' pride and confidence in traditional culture.

## (2) Platform Screening and Security Enhancement

Further improvement of regulatory measures and admission standards is needed. Chinese relevant departments have adopted measures for digital collection issuance and circulation, formulating normative documents such as the *Digital Cultural and Creative Normative Governance Ecological Matrix Convention*, *Digital Collection Industry Self-Discipline Development Initiative*, *Digital Collection Application Reference*, and *Trusted Digital Collection Program Self-Discipline Code*, continuously standardizing work digitalization mechanisms, establishing assetization processes for copyright resources, and emphasizing the artistic and original attributes of digital collections, laying foundations for the healthy development of digital bookplates. As regulations and rules are gradually being perfected, all parties including creators and distribution platforms should

strengthen industry self-discipline. Only by adhering to “quality, copyright, and rationality as the main principles” in digital collection development can we better respond to opportunities and challenges brought by technological development to cultural construction and jointly promote national cultural digital transformation.

The “Opinions on Promoting the Implementation of the National Cultural Digitalization Strategy” also mentions the importance of building cultural data service platforms, emphasizing legal and compliant data transactions, and providing professional services for confirmation, evaluation, matching, trading, and distribution of cultural resource data and cultural digital content, placing social benefits first [15]. Platform uncertainty may not only infringe upon consumer rights but also adversely affect the digital bookplate industry, leading to reduced audience trust in digital bookplates. Additionally, the lack of relatively unified collection platforms restricts digital bookplate circulation, affects audience experience, creates difficulties for regulation, and hinders digital bookplate development. Therefore, as publishing enterprises, they should screen legitimate platforms and produce high-quality content.

### (3) Strengthening Innovation and Enhancing Content Value

Development and design of digital bookplates should transfer physical cultural resources to virtual space, expanding asset value through online sharing methods and strengthening full exploration of numerous 沉淀 (precipitated) cultural stories within the industry. For example, “Twenty Years · Stories of Time” launched by Changjiang New Century gathers the essence of the publishing house’s 20-year career, selecting nearly 700 representative covers from over 2,000 book covers, recording beautiful memories of the publishing company’s growth together with readers. The *Sanlian Life Weekly Bookplate Series* digital collection launched by Sanlian Life Weekly organizes its ninety-year history, selecting five highly era-characteristic annual covers to commemorate scholars active in academic and cultural fields across generations.

The publishing industry has always guarded a rich treasure trove of cultural resources that can provide abundant content sources for digital bookplate development. From the publishing industry’s perspective, its industrial development is diachronic, accumulating a certain fan base and possessing user foundations and attention levels during its continuous development process. Therefore, starting from specific historical nodes in publishing houses’ development processes may discover more commemorative content to expand digital bookplate creative space.

As a digital currency possessing both technological and cultural attributes, digital bookplate distribution is not only digital currency transactions but also online circulation and resource sharing of traditional culture, achieving digital transformation of cultural resources and accumulating practical experience for the publishing industry’s exploration of digital assets. Publishing industry par-

ticipation in digital collection development will further enrich and expand the all-media influence of high-quality publishing.

Under the national cultural industry digitalization strategy background, future digital transformation will inevitably deepen continuously. Only by adhering to “quality, copyright, and rationality as the main principles” in digital collection development can we better respond to opportunities and challenges brought by technological development to cultural construction and jointly promote national cultural digital transformation.

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