



Literature

Literature in China at a glance

China's literary landscape today remains a state-prioritised cultural industry with ideological oversight, creative ambition, and international aspirations. Literature in China spans a remarkable range of segments and formats, each with its own trends and importance. From ancient classics to cutting-edge web novels, and from state-funded academic monographs to mass-market genre fiction, the breadth is enormous.

It is home to the world's largest online reading audience, with over half a billion digital readers and millions of active authors. While the print market remains robust, it is the industrial-scale rise of web literature, audio formats, and live-streamed book content that sets China apart. This expansion has propelled literature from solitary reading to participatory fandom and IP creation—where novels become games, films, and global franchises. While commercial trade in literature is not the focus in this report, for UK stakeholders, China's literature industry presents a space where mutual curiosity and long-term partnership can flourish, particularly in areas of digital innovation, education, translation, and festival programming.

- **£9.39 billion** (¥91.2 billion): China's print book market value in 2023
- **£164.8 billion** (¥1.6 trillion): Total digital publishing sector value in 2023
- **537 million** readers
- **24 million** writers

Opportunities for UK partners

For UK stakeholders, China's literary sector offers both scale and specificity—where print publishing, digital reading, and live literary culture coexist. While policy sensitivities and language barriers exist, there is an appetite for international dialogue, peer-to-peer exchange, and high-quality translation. The path forward lies in finding shared themes and formats that enable mutual exchange.

- **Festival exchange:** Book fairs and literature festivals are effective soft entry points. UK partners can use these settings to meet Chinese counterparts, showcase UK writing, and understand China's evolving literary ecosystem.
- **City-to-city literary collaboration:** like the Manchester–Nanjing partnership, city-level partnerships demonstrate how literature can bridge cultural and civic engagement. These exchanges can bring together writers, readers, educators, and cultural policymakers. UK organisations can take the lead in shaping reciprocal projects.
- **Digital literature and innovation:** China is a world leader in digital publishing and online literature. UK publishers, libraries and literary institutions can experiment with co-producing digital collections, audio content, or interactive formats.

Market development timeline

1990s

Publishing Commercialised and Global Integration

Publishing becomes commercialised. The industry welcomes private capital (via ISBN leasing), grows genre fiction, and enters the global market.

- 1986** Beijing International Book Fair (BIBF) was founded.
- 1994** Publishing was designated as part of China's cultural industries.
- 1997** *Rongshuxia* ("Under the Banyan Tree") becomes China's first major online literature site.
- 1999** China is a guest of honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair.
- 2000** Gao Xingjian won the Nobel Prize in Literature.

2000s

Digital Publishing and the Web Literature Boom

Online literature platforms emerge and flourish. Traditional publishing expands while digital writing is commercialised.

- 2001** Qidian (Starting Point) web novel platform was founded.
- 2002** Online second hand book trading platform Kongfz.com was founded.
- 2003** Jinjiang Literature City was launched, later dominating in online romance.
- 2004** Shanda created China's first online literature conglomerate.
- 2004** Shanghai Book Fair was founded.
- 2006** Government supported digital publishing in the 11th Five-Year Plan.
- 2007** Bookworm Literary Festival was founded by The Bookworm bookstore Beijing.
- 2008** Internet authors were admitted to the China Writers Association.

2010s

Mobile Reading and Industry Consolidation

Online reading becomes mainstream via smartphones. Digital platforms consolidate; literature becomes a multi-platform IP economy.

- 2012** Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize in Literature.
- 2013** Tencent launched its literature division.
- 2013** China Shanghai International Children's Book Fair launched.
- 2015** Tencent merged with Shanda to form China Literature Ltd.
- 2015** Tencent launched WeChat Reading APP.
- 2016** The first China Science Fiction Convention was held in Beijing.
- 2017** China Literature's IPO raised \$1 billion in Hong Kong.
- 2019** Nanjing was named a UNESCO City of Literature.
- 2019** The Bookworm bookstores closed.

2020s

Digital Maturity and Global Reach

Literature thrives in a hybrid digital/print ecosystem. Online literature, audio formats, and global collaborations expand.

- 2021** New regulations tighten oversight on online content.
- 2022** Short-video apps become the second-largest book sales channel.
- 2023** China's digital publishing sector reaches ¥1.6 trillion.
- 2024** British Library and China Literature Ltd. launch joint digital literature programme.
- 2024** Manchester and Nanjing begin a 9-month UNESCO literary exchange.

Market overview

China's literature landscape is shaped by its dual structure: a legacy print industry dominated by state players, and a dynamic, tech-enabled digital sector. While print book sales remain strong, the most disruptive growth is in online literature, mobile reading, and audio-visual formats. Domestic consumption dominates, with a limited but growing emphasis on international exchange and outbound literary influence.

Market size

The total value of China's book publishing sector (print and digital) is substantial.

- **Print book retail market:** ¥91.2 billion in 2023 (≈£9.39 billion), up 4.7% from 2022
- **Digital publishing:** reached ¥ 1.6 trillion in revenue in 2023, up 19% year-on-year⁹³. (including e-books, online journals, mobile content, as well as online gaming and ads)
- **Digital reading:** ¥11.3 billion in revenue (2023)

China Literature (Yuewen) reports an ecosystem of **over 537 million readers and 24 million writers** on its platforms, with 2 million new literary works added online in 2023 alone⁹⁴. Web literature has become an industrialised content engine.

Market segment

- **Print vs. digital:** Digital platforms now dominate reader engagement, especially among younger users. E-commerce and short-video platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou are now crucial to book discovery and promotion, enabling influencers, authors and publishers to promote titles through bite-size content, live streaming and personalised recommendations, reshaping the publishing value chain. While print publishing has stabilised post-pandemic, physical bookstores continue to decline, as rising rents and digital competition erode traditional retail models.
- **Book festivals and fairs:** despite digital dominance, major book fairs and literary festivals continue to play a strategic role, especially for relationship building, rights trading and cross-cultural engagement. Events like the Beijing International Book Fair (BIBF) and the Shanghai Book Fair remain important convening spaces for publishers, agents, translators, and institutions—serving as launchpads for new titles and as critical arenas for foreign rights negotiation and translation deals.
- **Domestic orientation:** China's literary ecosystem is heavily localised. Over 90% of books sold are written and published domestically. Translations account for a small fraction, and English-language imports remain niche. By contrast, the UK book market is highly international, both as an exporter and as home to globally translated works. This asymmetry presents both a challenge and an opportunity for cultural exchange.
- **Publishing infrastructure:** In the UK, publishing is a private, market-driven industry with no need for government licenses, aside from standard copyright and libel laws. China maintains a dual system where state-owned ISBNs and distribution networks (e.g. the Xinhua bookstore chain) coexist with an emergent private sector (e-commerce giants and small presses partnering with state firms). This creates unfamiliar huddles to UK publishers and demands patience, trusted intermediaries, and local understanding.



Key trends and opportunities

1. Literature is going multi-format: Audio, video, and social media integration

Audiobooks and literary podcasts are on the rise. Platforms like Ximalaya FM and Qingting FM have millions of users listening to book content, and many web novels are adapted into audio dramas. Short-video apps (Douyin and Kuaishou) have also become influential in the book world – creators produce bite-sized book reviews or even live-reading sessions, blending literature with social media. Whereas the UK still relies heavily on traditional bookstores and Amazon, by 2023 short-video platforms became the second-largest channel for book sales in China⁹⁵, after e-commerce, as influencers live-stream book promotions.

Opportunities: UK publishers and literature professionals can experiment with new storytelling formats through partnerships with Chinese platforms beyond paper. Collaboration might involve reading short stories into audio mini-series, short videos for social media, or co-producing live-streamed reading with influencers.

2. Tightening content censorship

The current ideological oversight of literature has tightened somewhat, but support for literature as a soft power persists. The 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) includes goals for enhancing China’s cultural influence, which means continued funding for literature that can “go global” and more state-curated exchange programs.

Regulations introduced in 2021 placed new limits on fan fiction and online romance genres (as part of a broader cyberspace clean-up), challenging web platforms to police content even more. Nonetheless, the state also launched initiatives like the National Publishing Fund to subsidise important literary and scholarly works, and campaigns to promote reading classics and President Xi’s writings. The balancing act between creative freedom and control remains a defining tension of the 2020s.

3. Science fiction boom

Genre fiction has experienced significant growth and popularity in China over the past decade, becoming a notable cultural and commercial phenomenon.

Science fiction, in particular, has emerged from a niche genre into a mainstream cultural force. Key milestones include Liu Cixin’s *The Three-Body Problem* receiving the Hugo Award in 2015, marking the first Asian novel to achieve this distinction. Its success has propelled interest in Chinese speculative fiction internationally and domestically, prompting significant investments in adaptations across film, television, animation, and video games.

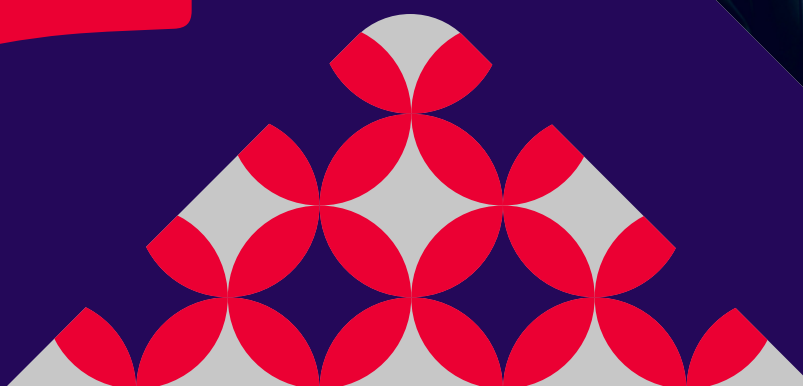
The China Science Fiction Convention (CSFC), established in 2016, has rapidly grown into a vibrant gathering that attracts leading writers, filmmakers, publishers, industry professionals, and thousands of fans from across China and internationally, exploring science fiction’s role in literature, cinema, animation, gaming, and emerging technologies, facilitating international dialogues and collaborations.

4. China’s literature “going out” and language barriers

In 2019, Nanjing became China’s first UNESCO “City of Literature,” signifying international recognition of its rich literary heritage. Liu Cixin’s *The Three-Body Problem* trilogy achieved worldwide fame and a TV adaptation deal with Netflix by the early 2020s, marking perhaps the first Chinese literary franchise to penetrate Western pop culture so deeply. Such cases exemplify China’s literary “going out” success, a trend likely to continue with official backing.

However, while there is strong demand for Chinese-to-English literary translation, there is also a shortage of skilled translators. UK publishers, universities, and funders could jointly support residencies, mentorships, and translator development programmes to grow this vital talent pipeline.

Case studies



British Library x China Literature (Yuewen), 2024 - 2027

This three-year collaboration explores the rise of digital literature in China, connecting Yuewen's vast online ecosystem (home to 24 million authors and over 500 million readers) with the British Library's audience and curatorial and archival expertise.⁹⁶ It involves exhibitions, events, and knowledge exchange on preserving digital literary works and making web fiction accessible to English readers. The partnership marks a pioneering public-private, UK-China partnership highlighting digital literature as a cultural bridge.



Manchester x Nanjing, 2024-25 UNESCO Cities of Literature Exchange

Funded by the British Council's International Collaboration Grant, this 9-month programme⁹⁷ brought together poets, illustrators, and playwrights from both cities to explore shared themes of nature and contentment. The project featured reciprocal residencies, a bilingual poetry collection, a cross-cultural play, and school engagement initiatives – on themes of nature and “Real Contentment” inspired by a Chinese poem. It stands as a model for how UNESCO Creative Cities can co-create artistic outputs while building lasting city-to-city literary ties. (Image © Nanjing City of Literature)



Literature festivals and book fairs

Book fairs and literary festivals have served as key platforms for bilateral exchange. 155 British publishing exhibitors attended 2025 Beijing International Book Fair⁹⁸ and 65 Chinese exhibitors attended the London Book Fair 2025⁹⁹. Since China's Market Focus year at London Book Fair in 2012, curated UK-China dialogues have continued in events like the London Literature Festival and Edinburgh International Book Festival, often with support from cultural institutes.

Sinoist Books: telling sinophone stories

Sinoist Books¹⁰⁰ is a UK-based independent publisher dedicated to bringing contemporary Sinophone literature to English-speaking audiences. As a spin-off from Alain Charles Asia (the first Western publisher to establish an office in mainland China), it received National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) status from Arts Council England in 2022.



One-way Street media (Owspace)

One-way Street¹⁰¹ is a prominent Chinese literary platform producing content across publishing, audio, video, and live events. It has played an active role in promoting British literature to Chinese audiences. In 2017, Dandu collaborated¹⁰² with the British Library to promote their touring exhibitions¹⁰³ in China. In 2018, it published a special edition mook¹⁰⁴ featuring first Chinese translations of works by emerging UK authors. In 2021, it hosted an online international literature roundtable, inviting UK literary curators and writers and other international literature professionals. In 2024, the editorial team travelled to Outland Publishing Fair¹⁰⁵ in London. (Image © One-way Street Media)

