



Liu Zhenyun: acclaimed novelist, BIBF Reading Ambassador - and now accidental social media star

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People - Interviews Tuesday, 17th June 2025

On the eve of the BIBF, Reading Ambassador Liu Zhenyun discusses building the international profile of Chinese literature, connecting with readers via social media, and the art of screenwriting.



Liu Zhenyun is one of China's foremost and celebrated novelists. He was awarded the Mao Dun Literature Prize (China's most prestigious literary award) for *Someone to Talk To*, and has been anointed Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters in France. His screenplays include an adaptation of his novel, *I Am Not Madame Bovary*, which was an international hit. He is the Reading Ambassador for Beijing International Book Fair – a considerable honour, and a role he takes with all due seriousness.

He is also a screenwriter, who has adapted his own novels (*like Remembering 1942, I Am Not Madame Bovary*, and *Someone to Talk To*) for the big screen. These adaptations have been garlanded with nominations and awards at festivals like China's Golden Rooster and Hundred Flowers Awards, the Directors Guild of China Awards, and internationally at festivals in Berlin, Rome, Toronto, Busan, Iran, Taipei, and Hong Kong. *I Am Not Madame Bovary* won both Best Film and Best Actress at the 64th San Sebastián Film Festival. Zhenyun is also an accidental social media star, with over half a million followers on Douyin [the Chinese equivalent of TikTok], where his comedy videos and Literary Masterclasses have exceeded 100 million views, despite Zhenyun's protest that he is "the least humorous person in my village".

In the UK, we fret about the reading for pleasure crisis (particularly amongst older children and teenagers; although the most recent figures from The Reading Agency show that the number of UK adults who read regularly has fallen to 50%, with young adults, aged 16-24 particularly affected). As the Reading for Pleasure ambassador at the BIBF, how does the Chinese landscape compare?

I haven't conducted a formal study on China's overall reading trends, but the publishers of my books send me quarterly print-run reports, and my books have been selling very well, with numbers still rising. My works have sold over 15 million copies in China. Based on that, I'd say that Chinese people's reading habits are still strong.

As for the relationship between books and mobile phones, the internet, and streaming media, I don't think they are in conflict. In China, platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu [Little Red Book] are very popular. My Douyin videos have been viewed over 100 million times. Many readers actually discover my books through

short videos, and then go on to buy them to read. So, I don't see books and short video platforms as mutually exclusive—they may, in fact, support each other.

I often visit rural areas in China to participate in charity activities. I grew up in a village myself, so I naturally feel a deep connection to rural life. At the same time, China's rural areas are still relatively underdeveloped and need specific kinds of support. For example, in December 2017, I went to Chuxi Primary School in Xiayang Town, Yongding District, Longyan City, Fujian Province, and taught Chinese there for a week. Starting with basics like "big/small, many/few," "up/down, left/right," "high/low, near/far," I taught texts by Lu Xun, my own writings, and also shared stories of my childhood in the village. I developed a deep bond with the children. At the end of the week, when I was leaving the village, the children walked me to the edge of town. One child ran up and put a piece of candy in my hand—it was a piece he had saved and couldn't bear to eat himself.

In August 2018, when the Beijing International Book Fair opened, I coordinated with the fair to bring the children from Chuxi Village to Beijing so they could attend the event. It was their first time on a plane. I took them around the fair and to Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, the Summer Palace, and even to my alma mater, Peking University. At Peking University, I gave them another Chinese lesson. Going to Beijing, especially to Peking University, made a big difference for them. Several children stood at Peking University and said firmly, "I want to study here in the future." That wasn't just a dream—it was a resolution. To this day, those kids are now in middle school and still write to me regularly, telling me about their studies and lives. What I receive is not just letters—it's warmth and nourishment for life.

Of course, more work needs to be done for rural China. One key task is to build a connection between villages and the wider world. This is also an important mission of the Beijing International Book Fair. While my strength is limited, I will continue to do what I can.

Do you offer a particular message to reluctant readers? Which books do you recommend?

If someone doesn't enjoy reading, then let them not read. Perhaps they believe their knowledge and understanding are already sufficient. Finding joy in oneself is also a kind of state of being. There's a Chinese saying: 'Contentment brings constant happiness'. There's no need to force anyone — that is democracy. But for a writer, reading is definitely necessary, because all great writers are richly learned. I've said before: a great writer is certainly academic in nature.

There are far too many books I like — I could name three hundred. For now, I'll mention two. One is *In Search of Lost Time* by the French writer Marcel Proust. What makes it great is how he stretches physical time in daily life to an extreme — something nearly impossible in reality, but he achieves it in the novel. Marcel eats a piece of cake with tea — and it takes five pages.

Another is *Ulysses* by the Irish writer James Joyce. He transforms the mundane and even the filthy into an epic. Bloom is an utterly humble man, someone no one notices, and yet within him lies a world of sensuality and noise. Some have said this is an epic written with scraps.

Your work has been translated into over 30 languages – do you think there are subtle differences in the translations that brings new meaning?

I've become good friends with many sinologists working in those languages. During the translation process, they often email me with questions. I'm always happy to discuss with them—some questions are about the overall work, others about specific details. Whether overall or detailed, these questions reflect the translator's cultural background. The same detail in the same book might be interpreted differently depending on the translator's culture. Discussing those differences is valuable for me—it gives me insights for writing my next work. I welcome differences, because differences lead to inspiration. Sameness doesn't offer much value.



Given that so much of writing holds up a mirror to the country, have you noticed your writing changing as China itself changes?

Objective changes, of course, will influence an author's writing. The "objective" includes both objective things and objective people. Objective things change rapidly with time, but objective people — their humanity and souls — do not advance even a centimetre in a thousand years. And literature places greater emphasis on humanity and the soul. This is the dialectic between change and constancy.

As an author, my own subjectivity is also evolving — and this change is actually very important. If the author's subjectivity does not change, they will not produce new or creative works. The change in subjectivity refers to the development of the author's understanding and thought — their understanding of subjectivity, objectivity, and literature, and the evolving recognition of the relationships among these three. This constitutes another kind of dialectic.

How do you build the profile and readership of Chinese literature with an international audience?

At my talk at the London Book Fair this April, I mentioned that in order to reach an international audience, you first have to write good stories, then hope that skilled sinologists will be willing to translate them, and that international publishers will publish them. Only then can your books leave China and reach foreign readers. (For example, my English translators are Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin.)

Such exchange is very important—it might not change your writing style, but interacting with readers across languages can offer unexpected inspiration. You must know others to know yourself; and only by knowing yourself can you understand others. What do you discover about yourself? Your shortcomings. What do you learn from others? Their strengths. This is how people grow.

For instance, in *Someone to Talk To*, there is an Italian priest who came from Milan to my hometown Yanjin, Henan, in the early 1900s to preach. When he arrived, he couldn't speak Chinese. After over 40 years, he could speak Chinese, Henan dialect, and even our local Yanjin dialect. Italian names are long, so locals shortened his name to "Old Zhan." Old Zhan preached for more than 40 years and only converted eight followers, but he never gave up. He once met a butcher named Old Zeng by the Yellow River and tried to convert him. Old Zeng asked, "What's the benefit of believing?" Old Zhan said, "If you believe, you'll know who you are, where you came from, and where you're going." Old Zeng replied, "Even without believing, I know—I'm a pig butcher, I came from Zengjia Village, and I go from place-to-place killing pigs." Old Zhan thought for a moment and said, "You have a point."

With no one to share his faith with, he wrote letters every day to his eight-year-old nephew in Milan, explaining his theological insights. That child came to believe that Old Zhan was the world's greatest missionary, with millions of followers in the East.

When Old Zhan died, Old Zeng handled his burial and found a blueprint among his belongings—for a magnificent church like the Milan Cathedral. When Old Zeng opened the blueprint, it suddenly came to life—the church's windows flung open, and its bell tower rang loudly. At that moment, Old Zeng realized that Old Zhan was indeed the greatest missionary in the world. He hadn't converted others—but he had converted himself. Where is the best place to preach? The place where no one believes.

When the Italian edition of *Someone to Talk To* was published, I visited Italy. In Turin, a man stood up and said he was moved by Old Zhan's story. Then he asked me, "Do you know what that little boy in Milan is doing now?" I couldn't answer—he was just a recipient of letters in the story. The man told me, "He's now the Archbishop of Milan Cathedral."

I was stunned. He had thought further and deeper than I had. It reminded me that a work of literature continues to be created by its readers long after the author is finished writing. Coincidentally, I went to Milan



next, and the next day was Sunday—Mass at the Cathedral. I attended the service, which was grand and lasted over two hours. When the elderly Archbishop—already in his 80s—walked out slowly, I said in my heart: “Sir, I know who you are.”

At that moment, I regretted not thinking more deeply about my characters during the writing process. If I had thought of what the Italian man said, the character would’ve gone much further.

BIBF is now the second-largest book fair in the world. Its guiding principle is “go out, bring in”—providing a platform for Chinese authors to go global and for foreign authors to enter China. BIBF has built strong relationships with the Frankfurt, London, Paris, New York, Cairo, New Delhi, and Kuala Lumpur book fairs. Every year BIBF invites publishers, writers, and media from many countries to Beijing. As BIBF’s reading ambassador, I’m delighted to take part in this.

Does how you write change according to the format (screen versus novel, for instance)?

Of course, the credit for good films goes mainly to the directors and actors. I only provided the novel as the source material. I’ve worked with talented directors like Feng Xiaogang and Liu Yulin, and actors like Zhang Guoli, Ge You, Chen Daoming, Li Xuejian, Fan Wei, Tim Robbins, and Adrien Brody. I’ve learned a lot from them. At the 97th Oscars, Adrien Brody won Best Actor again for *Dirty Movement*. I congratulated him.

When a novel is adapted into another art form, that form’s unique imagination opens up directions the novel never reached. That helps broaden my thinking when I write new novels.

Screenwriting is a specialized craft. Good writers aren’t necessarily good screenwriters. I’ve come to understand that deeply. Screenplays and novels have completely different structures—a screenplay has to tell a complete story in a limited word count, with dramatic plot, relationship conflicts, and twists. I admire professional screenwriters. In comparison, novelists are freer. When writing a novel, I can keep going without constraint. That said, the precision of film dialogue has made me more concise in my next novel’s dialogue—no wasted words.

Has your popularity on Douyin allowed you to reach a whole new readership?

I’m not sure how well-known I am on social media, because I’m not good at using those platforms. But my staff once told me a number: my content on Douyin (Chinese TikTok) has exceeded 100 million views. They said that number was quite impressive. Rather than saying I participate, it’s more accurate to say I’m “being participated.” For example, last year I ate stewed noodles at a Henan noodle shop in London. Right after I finished, someone sent me a Xiaohongshu [Chinese Instagram] link. It turned out a reader had seen me there, taken a photo, and posted it online with the caption: “The seat Liu Zhenyun sat in.” That post went viral.

I don’t reject communicating with readers through social media—if it helps them understand what I’m like in everyday life. There’s nothing to hide about what a person’s life is like. Of course, I also hope they engage with me through my work. Because life and literature are two different things. I’ve said before: Where life stops, literature begins. Where does life stop? Thinking. Where does literature begin? Thinking. So I’ve also said: The foundation of literature is philosophy. People are too busy in life, pushed forward by it with no time to think. But literature gives us space to think—why does this character act this way? One must think it through clearly. That’s why we read: because in books, we find the truths that life leaves behind.

How do you use humour? Is comedy an effective way of critiquing serious issues?

I don’t think I’m humorous, nor do I see myself as a satirical writer. I’ve said before, I’m the least humorous person in my village.

There are many kinds of humour. For example, a work’s language might be humorous—but humorous

language is of little value in literature. If you use clever quips, readers might find the author slick or trying to be smart. What's more useful in literature is humour in the details; more useful than that is humour in the plot; better still is humour in the story itself; and even better is humour in the story structure or character structure. The highest form of humour is the absurdity behind those structures.

The language in my novels is very plain, without any obviously humorous sentences. What I care about is the underlying logic hidden behind the stories and relationships.

What do you think makes a great writer?

A writer who offers a unique perspective on the world is a great writer.

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