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A Window to the Nation A Welcome to the World

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Cover caption

With its futuristic design, the library located at Binhai New Area Cultural Center in Tianjin has been acclaimed as one of China's most beautiful libraries since it was inaugurated in 2017. It has a floor area of 33,700 square meters and holds up to 1.3 million books. VCG



March 5, 2021: The fourth session of the 13th National People's Congress (NPC) is held at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.

During the session, lawmakers adopted documents including the report on the work of the government, the Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) for National Economic and Social Development and Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035, and the work report of the NPC Standing Committee. Lawmakers also adopted the amendments to the organic law and procedural rules of the NPC. Chinese President Xi Jinping signed presidential orders to promulgate the amendments. The session also adopted a decision to improve the electoral system of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). After completion of all items on the agenda, the session concluded on the afternoon of March 11. by Li Xueren/Xinhua



March 5, 2021: The fourth session of the 13th NPC is held at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. by Xu Xun/*China Pictorial*



March 4, 2021: Journalists attend a group interview via video in Beijing. Members of the 13th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), China's top political advisory body, took questions via video at the Great Hall of the People. That day, the fourth session of the 13th CPPCC National Committee commenced.

A resolution on a work report of the Standing Committee of the CPPCC National Committee, a resolution on a report on how the proposals from CPPCC members have been handled since the previous annual session, a report on the examination of new proposals, and a political resolution on the fourth session of the 13th CPPCC National Committee were approved at the meeting. Political advisors unanimously agreed to support the NPC, the national legislature, on a decision to improve the electoral system of the HKSAR. The 13th CPPCC National Committee concluded its annual session on the afternoon of March 10 after completing all of the items on the agenda. by Yang Jia/China.org.cn

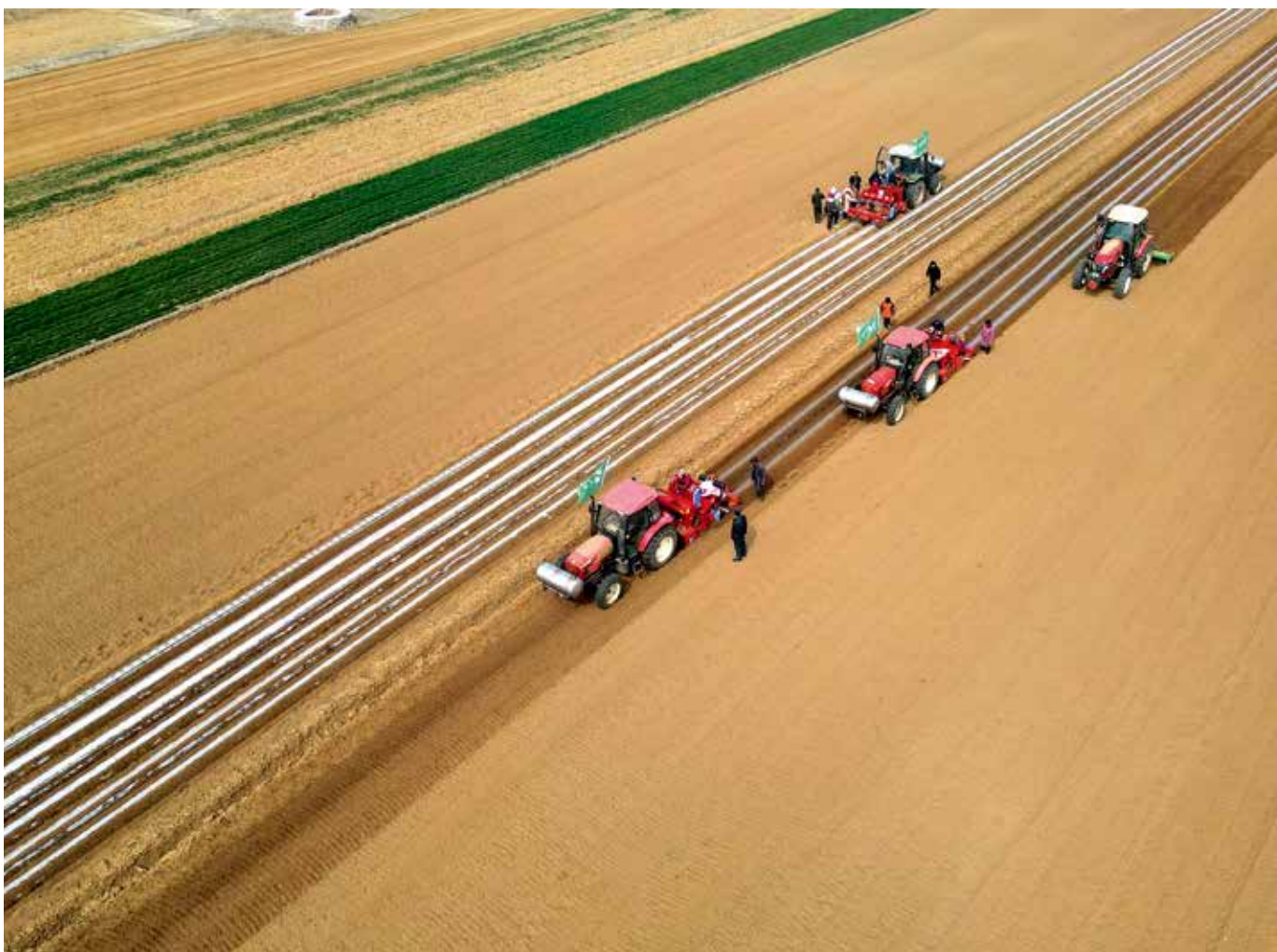
March 11, 2021: A newly formed Hong Kong cross-sector alliance holds a press conference to express firm support for a NPC decision on improving the electoral system of the HKSAR.

On March 11, Chinese lawmakers voted overwhelmingly to adopt a decision on improving the electoral system of the HKSAR at the fourth session of the 13th NPC. It came months after the NPC Standing Committee enacted the *Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the HKSAR*, which represents another major move by the Chinese central government to improve the legal and political systems of the HKSAR. According to the decision, the electoral system should conform to the policy of “One Country, Two Systems,” meet the realities in the HKSAR, and ensure that Hong Kong is administered by people who love the country and love Hong Kong. It should be conducive to safeguarding China’s national sovereignty, security, and development interests and help maintain the long-term prosperity and stability of Hong Kong. by Wang Shen/Xinhua



March 12, 2021: Potato seeders work in a field in Weihai City, eastern China's Shandong Province.

On February 25, 2021, China declared complete victory in its fight against poverty after realizing its goal of eradicating absolute poverty in the country. Shaking off poverty is not the finish line, but the starting point of a new mission. After its victory in poverty reduction, China will comprehensively promote rural revitalization, a historic shift in focus of work related to agriculture, rural areas, and farmers. According to this year's report on the work of the government, China will implement the rural revitalization strategy across the board and promote steady development of agriculture and growth in rural incomes. The country will continue to promote the development of areas that have been lifted out of poverty, bolster agricultural production, and improve working and living conditions in rural areas. VCG





February 21, 2021: A five-day Spring Festival temple fair for children opens in Yuquan District of Hohhot, northern China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.

Rejuvenation of the Chinese nation requires a strong material foundation as well as powerful spiritual support. The Chinese government attaches great importance to cultural development and has devised a strategic and holistic plan in this regard. The Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) stated that during the 14th Five-Year Plan period (2021-2025), efforts would be made to build China into a culturally strong country, develop cultural undertakings and industries, and enhance the country's cultural soft power. IC

Bookshelf Souls

Text by Liang Wendao



Liang Wendao, a famous columnist and media practitioner in Hong Kong, has excelled at writing book reviews and anchoring reading programs thanks in large part to his diligent dedication to reading. courtesy of Liang Wendao

I never tire of hearing the story of a Harvard freshman and his boring medieval English literature professor.

When the summer holiday came, the student was excited to start a summer job at a second-hand bookstore. One day, he was instructed to go to a house in the suburbs to collect some used books. As he was ushered past a beautiful garden into the house by the hostess, he realized he was in the home of the old professor of the boring medieval literature class, who had just died.

The student found an entire cabinet dedicated just to detective novels. He smiled to discover such an interesting hobby. And further into the collection, he found two full shelves of gardening books. "He likes horticulture," said the professor's wife. At that moment, the young man became mesmerized by the glistening of the freshly watered grass. Gardening happened to be one of the student's favorite hobbies. The student made the decision to buy all of the books himself.

"The moment I saw his books, I was introduced to the other

side of him outside class," the student said. "The books reflected his soul. If I took them back to the bookstore, they would be separated and placed on different shelves, losing a part of his soul." To preserve the professor's "soul," he chose to pay off the price of the books by working part-time at the bookstore until graduation. Luckily, the bookstore owner found a soft spot in his heart and offered a 50 percent discount.

A bookshelf captures a person's soul, so does the house keeping books. I once envisioned authoring a book to peer into the personalities of various figures by visiting their homes to see what books they had collected. But I discovered that my idea had already been realized by Biancheng Press in Taiwan, China, which published a book about famous people's bookshelves, including Taiwanese poet Yang Ze and writer Zhang Dachun. I acted too slowly.

Later, I started working on a reading TV program which added a segment to visit cultural celebrities' homes and read their books. However, many people who were usually happy to help me declined



The books people choose to display say much about their personality. This 1954 photo shows the book room of Czech musician Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904), where he produced most of his works. Xinhua

to appear on the show, including famous writer Dong Qiao. "No, no. No way," he giggled. "How could I show my book room to the public?"

Of the books that did successfully peer into interesting book rooms, my favorite has always been *At Home with Books*. Every chapter brings new surprises.

For example, Rolling Stones

guitarist Keith Richards is a real bibliophile. The author was amazed that such a prolific rocker could have such a large home library and find time to buy so many books, considering that he toured most of the year and stayed in different places, spending most of the time with his guitar and band. However, nothing is more


July 18, 2019: A book room in the former residence of Ke Ling (1909-2000), a famous Chinese writer, screenwriter and critic, in Shanghai. Every item in the room reflects the personality and preference of its owner. IC



satisfying for Richards than lying on the sofa at home with a book.

The author of the book also interviewed seven architects and designers, seeking to solve “headaches” caused by the necessity of organizing massive piles of books. For example, Michael Graves, a celebrated American architect who designed many famous 20th century libraries, has unique ideas on the issue. Most architects try to make a narrow space look bigger, but Graves took an opposite approach by designing a big book room like a “narrow street.” His concept has bookshelves on each side of the room arranged as mini “building clusters.” Entering the room feels like merging onto a

street of a city of wisdom, where each “building” offers a wealth of knowledge.

Everyone’s bookshelf is organized in a certain order, which is why I like to see others’ so much. A book room or shelf reflects a person’s value of order. After a purchased book moves from the market into a home, it transforms from a commodity into something meaningful for a person and even an important part of a life and soul. 

A book room or shelf reflects a person’s value of order.

The author is a well-known media practitioner and columnist in Hong Kong, China. This article has been included in the book *The Common Reader*, published by Cultural and Art Publishing House.

Materials of the Future



A study published in *Nature* magazine on December 10, 2020 revealed that 2020 marked the point human-made materials outweighed all living things on earth.

Concrete, plastic, and fiber are the most consumed human-made materials, and they all cause heavy environmental pollution. Some scholars hold that solving the mess caused by the artificial materials requires addressing "decoupling wars" that tend to be fought around the balance between economic growth and environmental limits. We should fundamentally change our current way of living and stop measuring happiness in terms of material enjoyment.

Sanlian Life Weekly
March 1, 2021

The Milk Tea Generation



A beverage with distinct Chinese characteristics, milk tea has already penetrated every corner of Chinese life and taken on new connotations with modern development. It comforts the hearts of indoorsy young people, breaks ice in the office and other social venues, and injects happiness into daily life.

Nowadays, simple Boba milk tea has evolved into a customizable Chinese-style beverage with dozens of options to perfectly meet the varying preferences of customers. Milk tea culture regularly goes viral online, evidencing how tightly the younger generation has embraced it. The beverage has become so mainstream and global that it can be easily found in every major city in the world.

China Newsweek
February 1, 2021

Chinese Familial Love



As of March 10, Chinese movie *Hi, Mom* had grossed over 5.15 billion yuan (US\$785 million) at the box office, becoming one of the 100 highest-grossing films in the world.

The love within Chinese families has always been embedded so deeply that parents and children often hardly express feelings out and loud to each other. In the movie, the mom and the daughter always seek reconciliation after conflicts, which is how most Chinese parents and their children manage to get along. However, the steep development of the times has brought increasing challenges to the Chinese-style parent-child relationship. New avenues to express love may be needed.

Vista
March 8, 2021

Weirdo Times



Times have changed from rejecting weirdoes to embracing them, from avoiding weirdness to seeking it, and from celebrating conservative values to developing open-mindedness. Today, weirdness may refer to a unique style, character, and even great talent, without concern for fitting in. Some even pretend to be weird as a way to seek fame and fortune.

Weird things can become precious social resources. Respecting different characters and passion for creation of anything and supporting any person determined to pursue their own dreams is only good for society.

New Weekly
March 1, 2021



Reading Today

Text by Zhou Xin

If “reading books” no longer requires either “reading” or “books,” then what is it really?



March 3, 2021: The Zhongshuge bookstore in Changchun City, Jilin Province, features an interior design style like Hogwarts Library. Outside, the bookstore looks inconspicuous, but a distinct space is hidden inside. IC

艺术设计

*"You can't call Confucianism misleading,
Much worth can be obtained from its reading.
The best case is state governance improves,
The worst case, only yourself is moved."*

A pamphlet of easy-to-understand poetry called *Prodigy Poems* was distributed to children learning to read in ancient China. Chinese culture has placed high importance on reading since ancient times. In ancient China, reading was closely linked to the imperial examination and the government positions it enabled. But in fact, it was even more meaningful. Ancient Chinese people also believed that reading was about improving oneself. As the poem asserts, even if reading doesn't improve the country, it will still improve an individual.

Although the pace of life is constantly accelerating these days, reading still plays an important role in Chinese life. April 23 this year will be marked as the 27th World Book Day. Changing times and advancement of technology are making methods of reading more diverse than ever before.

Ebb and Flow of Books

Xinhua Bookstores could be found throughout the country, and they were the main way to buy books as well as a bridgehead to protect authorized printing of copyrighted works. When you walked into any Xinhua Bookstore in the past, you would see light-colored marble floor

tiles, white walls, square bookshelves, and readers combing through books between shelves. Back then, the bookstore did not provide seats, and the staff didn't allow readers to sit on the floor. In addition to Xinhua Bookstores, such a policy actually became standard in all bookshops throughout China.

At the turn of the 21st century, online bookstores such as 99read.com, Joy (later acquired by Amazon), and Dangdang.com emerged. Physical bookstores usually sold books at the full cover price, and online bookstores offered the same books at a 20 to 40 percent discount. Consumers could get perfectly printed authentic versions at the same price as pirated books without leaving home, so the old bookstore model was left without appeal.

However, the salad days of online bookstores didn't last long. With the popularization of large-screen mobile phones, tablets, and e-book readers, physical books themselves have faced severe challenges. Devices with electronic ink screens make reading in the digital age not only convenient, but also "healthy." Improvement of the digital reading experience on mobile devices enables reading to happen anytime and anywhere. As for modern people, the mobile phone is already an extension of the body. Flourishing audiobook platforms have liberated exhausted eyes, so "reading" a book no longer requires eyes or even full attention.

In Beijing's Panjiayuan Antique Market,



December 12, 2017: The Zhongshuge bookstore in "Thames Town" of Songjiang District, Shanghai. by Zhou Xin/*China Pictorial*

second-hand book transactions are the same as they have always been except for the option to pay through a QR code. On the WeChat applet Duo Zhuayu (literally "catching more fish"), you can sell and buy used books with your phone. This app built a whole system for online trading of second-hand books thanks to the popularity of the mobile internet.

When the world of books is turned so upside down that "reading books" requires neither "reading" nor "books," then what does the word "reading" even mean anymore?



August 4, 2020: A temporary second-hand bookstore is established by Duo Zhuayu on Anfu Road, Shanghai, on the site of the former Shanghai Museum of Old Camera Manufacturing. The bookstore is simply called the "Bookstore Under Construction." IC

Efficiency and Emotion

When words leave the paper, "books" are returning to their essence.

In remote antiquity, when language had emerged but writing had not yet taken shape, people relied on knots to record things. With the advancement of techniques, books in the forms of bamboo slips, sheepskins, and paper eventually developed. Paper is not fundamentally different than its predecessors. It remains a vehicle for recording human thought. Through reading, people acquire knowledge of the past, enrich their spiritual "experience," and engage in brain exercise.

Different forms of digital reading platforms are also new types of carriers for knowledge. Based on their powerful functions, they can do many things that could not be imagined with previous carriers of text.

On an extremely crowded subway on weekdays, seeing passengers attempt to read with a mobile phone raised above their heads "in despair" is commonplace. In a noisy environment, many



December 12, 2017: The Zhongshuge bookstore in “Thames Town” of Songjiang District, Shanghai. by Zhou Xin/*China Pictorial*



The Nanjing Xiaosong Library, launched by famous Chinese musician, director, and writer Gao Xiaosong, is popular with young readers. Like its peer in Hangzhou, the Nanjing Xiaosong Library also requires appointments. It has a daily limit of 500 visitors, and tickets are hard to get on weekends. IC

wear a headset to stay in the quiet world of a book. After reading a book on an electronic device, you can directly export or search the notes. You can see other readers’ comments. Users are allowed to view through their friends’ online bookshelves that are open. Thus, you can visit your friends’ “study rooms” at any time to learn from each other. In the era of mobile internet, portability and high efficiency have enabled communication between bibliophiles to be faster and easier than ever.

After all, the “sense of ceremony” that reading a physical book can offer is irreplaceable. Pleasure brought by ingenious binding, elegant paper, ink aroma, appealing layout, and the comfortable surrounding environment has become indispensable for readers. Gui Youguang (1507-1571), a scholar in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), described his study room “Xiangjixuan” with affectionate words: “On the fifteenth night of each lunar month, the bright moon lit up half the wall. When a gentle breeze arose, laurel leaves shimmered flecks of moonlight on the wall; it was pleasing to see the shadows dancing and hear the leaves rustling in the wind.” He integrated the act of reading with birds, laurel trees, the breeze, and the moon, shining light on the spiritual world of scholarly reading in those days. Such a world remains the ideal vision for almost every reader. Despite the numerous advantages of e-books, physical books remain loved by many.

Like a Paradise

“I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library,” quipped Argentine writer Jorge Borges. For book lovers today, bookstores have the same spiritual function.

What can a bookstore do aside from putting books on shelves?



February 22, 2019: Sanlian Taofen Bookstore in Chaoyang District, Beijing. VCG

Upon entering Zhongshuge in “Thames Town” of Songjiang District, Shanghai, visitors are immediately surrounded by dark brown lacquered wooden bookshelves like a deep tunnel toward a treasure of knowledge. Bookshops like Zhongshuge have opened in many places across China including Wangfujing Street in Beijing and Tianfu Avenue in Chengdu. Zhongshuge already enjoys a national reputation as “the most beautiful bookstore.” In addition to Zhongshuge, many other bookstores with ingenious decoration and book selection such as PAGEONE and One-Way Street Library have become more and more popular as weekend activity destinations. Salons and discussions between authors and readers organized by many

bookstores provide face-to-face communication opportunities. Cultural products and beverages such as coffee have now become necessities for most bookstores.

On a weekend afternoon, a reader may walk into a bookstore with bright windows and elegant decorations, pick a favorite book, order a cup of coffee, and find a comfortable seat to sit and read. Bookstores today seek to provide an ideal on-the-spot comprehensive sensory experience. For those who like to read, such is likely an ideal afternoon.

After reading or buying a book, exiting the shop releases the reader back into the bustling crowds. The experience seems as fleeting as last night’s dream. Physical bookstores will never stop offering spiritual support for human beings. 47

The Lights of the City

Text by Gong Haiying

Regardless of changes to bookstores, words have always continued to be read. Riding the tides of the times, physical bookstores have consistently served as city lights, illuminating and empowering the spiritual world for people of every era.

Xu Zhiyuan, a well-known media figure and co-founder of the Chinese bookstore chain OWSpace, posted an article on the bookstore's official WeChat account on February 23 this year, titled "Wandering through City Lights Bookstore, I Opened OWSpace."

The article began with a brief obituary: "Lawrence Ferlinghetti, a poet and co-founder of world-renowned City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco, passed away at the age of 101."

"A bookstore should be like City Lights Bookstore," Xu said.

When Dreams Find the Internet

On New Year's Day 2006, Xu Zhiyuan and 12 partners opened One-Way Street Library, the predecessor of OWSpace, in a yard encircled by corridors and planted with walnut trees in the Old Summer Palace. The bookstore was named after the collection of writings by German critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin, as a nod to intellectuals'

idealist atmosphere.

One-Way Street Library offered readers not only offbeat literary options, but also unique cultural salons. Xu organized the first cultural salon by inviting famous Chinese poet Xi Chuan to read poems in the bookstore. That day, hundreds in the audience ended up reading aloud alongside Xi Chuan.

Xu Zhiyuan credited inspiration for the event to his experience hearing a Polish poet talk about poetry at City Lights Bookstore in 2002. Over the following decade, his bookstore hosted more than 1,000 cultural salons. "It came of age alongside a generation of young people," he said.

Similar bookstores existed in China before One-Way Street Library. When Xu was still a freshman at Peking University in 1995, a number of intellectuals across China opened boutique bookstores specializing in literature including Beijing Wansheng Book Garden (founded in 1993), Shanghai Jifeng Bookstore (founded in 1997), and Nanjing's Librairie Avant-garde (founded in 1996). The



On January 12, 2019, the first flagship store of OWSpace officially opened in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province. Through creative design, the 2,800-square-meter store has created a multifunctional cultural space integrating book sales, salon activities, exhibitions, art performances, and catering. courtesy of OWSpace



Xu Zhiyuan has always been closely connected with books and writing across his multiple roles as a media figure, writer, and bookstore operator. This 2017 photo shows Xu Zhiyuan in OWSpace. courtesy of OWSpace

emergence of such bookstores changed the market formerly dominated by state-owned bookstores such as Xinhua and transformed the landscape for those seeking spiritual satisfaction.

The internet era upended the boom of private bookstores in major cities across China. By 2010, the rise of online book-selling platforms and digital reading had left many private bookstores sinking in quicksand. The physical bookstore industry was forced to seek anything available to grab.

“Since day one at One-Way Street Library, we’ve been not only a bookstore, but also a reading space and atmosphere,” said Xu.

So when One-Way Street Library received



The courtyard where One-Way Street Library opened in 2006 conveys the ideals of a generation of young intellectuals represented by Xu Zhiyuan. courtesy of OWSpace

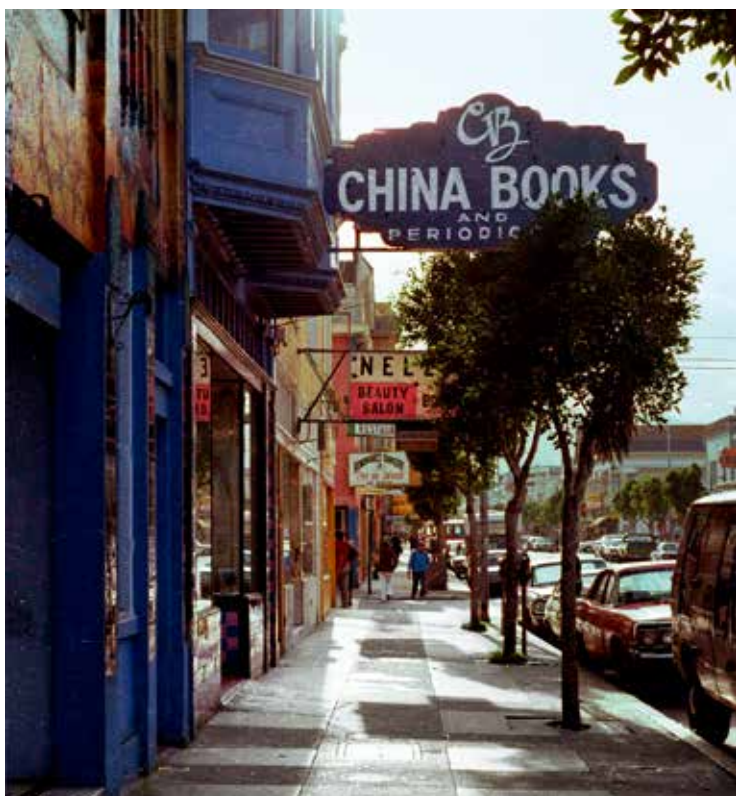


Since its establishment, OWSpace has organized various cultural salons to provide spiritual products related to reading, thinking, and humanistic wisdom. Pictured is an OWSpace literary event to mark the 76th anniversary of Irish novelist James Joyce's death on January 13, 2018. courtesy of OWSpace

its first commercial funding in 2014 to build a comprehensive cultural space blending online and offline platforms, it was like the market's missing link. The open and free atmosphere was exactly what many bookstores had always dreamed about.

When a bookstore morphed from a small physical space in the corner of the city into an entity within ubiquitous and omnipresent cyberspace, the role of the shopkeeper changed to what many had long imagined.

"I really hope that bookstores turn into more intimate places with a plethora of functions," Xu said. "I hope everything can happen in bookstores in the future. We will only become more cognizant of creative or romantic moments fostering spiritual and physical intimacy."



In the 1980s and 1990s, the reform and opening up brought cultural exchange between China and the world increasingly close. The picture shows a Chinese bookstore in San Francisco, USA, in 1983. CFB



In the 1980s and 1990s, many private bookstores emerged in China. Founded in 1993, Wansheng Book Garden has been regarded as a cultural landmark of Beijing for many years due to its pioneering role in Chinese private bookselling. The picture shows a cultural salon held at Wansheng Book Garden in 1996. courtesy of Wansheng Book Garden

Part of Daily Life

When private bookstores started springing up across China in the 1990s, Xinhua Bookstores, which once reached every corner of the country, underwent a comprehensive reform.

In November 1994, Guangzhou Book Center, a large book retail enterprise opened by Guangzhou Xinhua Bookstore Group Co., Ltd. with a modern business operation mode, moved into a space of more than 10,000 square meters and offered nearly 100,000 titles.

Later, the establishment of many new Xinhua Bookstore branches such as Northern Book Center in Shenyang, Beijing Book Building, and Shanghai Book City solidified the time-honored bookstore chain's central role in terms of distribution channels and shaping the book market.

In the internet era, Guangzhou Book Center again became a pilot reform site among state-owned bookstores. In 2014, Guangzhou Book Center was temporarily closed for renovation and returned the next January as an "urban cultural life center" after renting out considerable space to cultural and creative shops, restaurants, and education and training institutions.

The same year, Sanlian Taofen Bookstore in Beijing, which originated from a well-known publisher, introduced the concept of "open 24 hours" after refurbishing and remodeling its branches. Since its establishment in 1996, the bookstore has become the "spiritual homeland" for many intellectuals thanks to its image as an "independent bookstore" fostered by the new-style cultural bookshop model with a coffee bar.

This adjustment not only retained the essence of state-owned bookstores from their early days, but also expanded their lecture space. The institutions have been shifted to organizing cultural



The business patterns of China's book industry have been constantly enriched, and many "most beautiful bookstores" have been crowned. The picture shows the Yanjiyou bookstore in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, on December 19, 2018. VCG



To provide readers with an optimal experience, Bi'an Bookstore in Beijing was ingeniously designed and arranged in terms of spatial environment, lighting, and book display. The picture shows a corner of the bookstore in 2015.

by Chen Jian/*China Pictorial*

activities enriched with more interesting topics to attract public participation compared with previously primarily internal academic discussions. Such efforts seek to transform the bookstore into a Beijing cultural landmark.

"In the changing and innovating era, some traditions should be preserved," said Shu Wei, deputy editor-in-chief of Sanlian Taofen Bookstore. "In the process of re-understanding bookstores, we should also recognize the weight of time and history."


The active transformation of traditional bookstores feels like spring, especially considering the "butterfly effect" rippling

throughout the bookstore industry.

After the demise of a big chunk of private bookstores, many provinces and cities in China have started promoting policy support and financial investment for physical bookstores since 2014, to help the transformation and development of branded bookstores.

Support from the government helped the number of physical bookstores in Beijing reach 1994 by the end of 2020, equal to 0.8 bookstore per 10,000 people, ranking among the top major cities around the world. In 2021, Beijing will continue to promote initiatives to help the establishment of bookstores on campuses and in shopping malls and cultural industry parks to make them even more integrated into daily life.

New bookstore models and ideas are emerging. Bookstore grouping and chain operations have become mainstream, and many "most beautiful bookstores" have been crowned. Many smart bookstores and digital reading halls harnessing technologies such as 5G, big data, and the Internet of Things have also opened to tease the public's imagination.

Regardless of any changes that occur to bookstores, words will continue to be read. Riding the tide of the times, physical bookstores have always been city lights, illuminating the path to spiritual satisfaction for people of every era. 

Reading Behind the Lines

Text by Zhou Xin

Digital books are changing millennia-long reading traditions.

In 104 B.C., Sima Qian began to compile a history of China from prehistoric times to the period of Emperor Wu (156-87 B.C.) of the Western Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-9 A.D.). Back then, paper had not yet been invented, and writing was done on bamboo slips. After writing on a number of single bamboo slips, the author connected the dried bamboo slips in sequence, rolled the chain up, and then picked up new bamboo slips and repeated the procedure.

Sima Qian's book, *Records of the Grand Historian*, has more than 520,000 Chinese characters and was hailed as "a masterpiece of the ages" by renowned Chinese writer Lu Xun (1881-1936). It is estimated that the monumental book took about 20,000 bamboo slips, so several rooms might be needed just to store a single title.

China has a long history of written communication. For thousands of years, the wisdom of the sages and the history of each dynasty were recorded with written language. Whether the carrier was bamboo slips or paper, the vast sea of writings preserved the essence of the Chinese civilization, which has been passed down from generation to generation. A Chinese idiom used to heap great praise on one's

knowledgeableness goes, "His mind bears more knowledge than could have been contained in five cartloads of books."

More than 2,000 years later, a microscopic chip can easily store the *Twenty-Four Histories*, a collection of books on Chinese dynastic history from about 3000 B.C. to the 17th century. The *Twenty-Four Histories*, said to "make the ox pulling it sweat," can now be carried by a baby.

Reading, from carrier to consumption, is now undergoing changes unseen in thousands of years.

The Rise of E-books

Li Yang, who works in Beijing, was among the first few in China to experience reading on electronic ink screens. The avid reader felt lugging around his heavy load of paper books becoming increasingly inconvenient. In 2007, Amazon launched its first Kindle e-book reader, and Li Yang snapped one up immediately.

"We called it an electronic-paper book at the time," Li said. The 6-inch, palm-sized e-book reader was not only light and portable, but also offered a screen designed to provide a reading experience close to that of a physical book. The screen was easier on the eyes than normal electronic screens.



November 10, 2019: Local residents read on e-readers in a public library in Urumqi, northwestern China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. VCG

The early e-reader only had four gigabytes of storage, which was already enough to hold many e-books. And while reading an English book, a Chinese-speaking reader can see a Chinese translation instantly with a click, which greatly improves the speed of reading.

Electronic readers have gradually been embraced by more and more people. From iReader, China Literature, and JD.com to Dangdang.com, Chinese domestic producers quickly caught up and released their own e-book readers.

Although e-book readers still boast multiple advantages, larger screens and better apps on smartphones have made the reading experience on a primary device on

par with using an e-book reader.

According to the *2020 National Reading Report* released by Amazon China, 46 percent of people read both paper books and e-books, and 29 percent mainly read e-books, an increase of 6 percent from the previous year. In addition, 72 percent of readers believe that digital reading has helped them increase their total reading volume.

Bookish Interaction

A loyal fan of the e-book app WeChat Read, Zhang Wenwen has read 102 books through the app since 2016, covering a wide range of genres including literature, philosophy, work efficiency, and wealth management. The app enables her to share the books she



January 19, 2021: First-grade students at Shilimiao Primary School in Hefei City, Anhui Province, take a quick test on “electronic schoolbags.” The system automatically generates an evaluation on students’ performances. IC

has read through a virtual bookshelf and compare with her daily time spent reading with that of her friends.

The WeChat Read app was a latecomer in the e-book market. It rolled out in 2015 when various reading apps had already been established. However, the app boasts a unique advantage: It bridges the reading experience to social connections by working seamlessly with WeChat, one of China’s most popular chat apps.

“Socialized reading is an important means of social interaction,” said Yang Jianhua, head of the Sociological Association of Zhejiang. “Sharing the reading experience is more likely to stimulate interesting discussion. The internet has made it easier for

readers with similar taste in books to gather on virtual platforms.”

Like many other popular e-book apps, WeChat Read allows users to see other readers’ comments when reading a book. “This feature represents the scene of communicating with other readers and creates a pleasant atmosphere for sharing ideas,” said Zhang Wenwen. “I post some sentences in books I like on the app to introduce books and authors to more people.”

At the 2015 International Digital Publishing Forum, digital publishing expert Rüdiger Wischenbart argued that the book industry is becoming more driven by the reader community as the impact of social media on books has expanded; and some

August 17, 2016: The 2016 Shanghai Book Fair, themed “Love Reading, Love Life,” is held. Audio sharing platform Himalaya FM showcases its audio library. IC



literary critics who once made bestsellers with an endorsement have been shaken from their dominant positions.

Momentum of Audiobooks

Reading the monumental novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, considered the pinnacle of classical Chinese literature, is a “mission impossible” for many occupied readers. For Wu Yue, mother of a four-year-old, reading the novel seemed like a daunting task, but she easily finished listening to it on an audiobook app.

Audiobooks are ideal for the fast-paced and high-pressure society populated by those with little time to read. “Audiobooks allow users who don’t have enough time or don’t like reading paper books to engage in reading in an easier and simpler way,” said Fan Deng, founder of the audiobook platform Spiritual Wealth Club.

According to iiMedia, a data mining and analysis firm, the scale of China’s audiobook market was around 6.36 billion yuan (US\$978 million) in 2019, and the number of users rose from 218 million in 2016 to 478 million in 2019. The three most popular Chinese audiobook platforms, Himalaya FM, Qingting FM, and Lanrentingshu, have over 10 million monthly active users each. According to a report on the global audiobook market released at the Frankfurt Book Fair, China is expected to become the largest audiobook market in 2022.

However, some don’t regard audiobook

listening as real reading. Devoted fans of paper books believe that the cost of reading paper books today is already very low, and audiobooks reduce the cost to almost zero: You don’t have to buy books or reading equipment, or to squeeze in time to concentrate. This kind of extreme availability makes books accessible to everyone but at the same time dispels the serious aura of reading. Readers may gradually lose interest and patience to appreciate serious works if they become accustomed to listening to books digested and read by others.

Nevertheless, with traditional methods of reading becoming a bit unfit for fast-paced life in the modern era, the ways and means of reading must change, and one could do worse than listen to audiobooks. “Books were limited to paper in the past, but thanks to technological advancements, today readers can enjoy many different experiences such as engaging with audiobooks,” remarked Chen Pingyuan, a noted scholar at the Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Peking University. “If a paper book is read out to be heard and loved by many, that means it is a good book.”

Millennial Used Books

Text by Bian Xiuhong

Two used bookstores spearheaded by creative millennials hearken to Platform 9¾ at King's Cross Station in *Harry Potter*: They take readers into a different world.



On April 23, 2014, World Book Day, Zhengyang Bookstore was relocated to the courtyard of the Pagoda of Monk Wangsong in Zhuanta Alley, Xicheng District, Beijing. Named after the Buddhist monk Wansong Xingxiu (1166-1246), the pagoda was built in the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) and is one of the earliest symbolic buildings in the old district of Beijing. courtesy of Zhengyang Bookstore

If Zhengyang Bookstore is a miniature museum of Beijing's history and culture, Déjà vu Bookstore founded by Wei Ying is a community for like-minded readers to sell and buy used books.

Zhengyang Bookstore: An Impromptu Beijing Museum

"Tucked away from the hustle and bustle of the marketplace, Zhengyang Bookstore is located in the courtyard of the pagoda in honor of the Buddhist monk Wansong Xingxiu (1166-1246) and comforts the honoree's soul with the fragrance of its books," wrote a loyal fan of the bookstore. Located in Zhuanta Alley in Beijing's bustling Xicheng District, the 350-square-meter Zhengyang Bookstore specializes in second-hand books about the old city and maintains a low profile in its central urban location.

In the courtyard of Zhengyang Bookstore stands the Pagoda of Monk Wansong, and several pomegranate trees were planted in front of the pagoda. It is flanked by antique fish basins, door panels, and gate piers that match the quaint decoration style. Surprisingly, Cui Yong, founder of the antique bookstore, was born in the 1980s. In 2009, as Beijing was undergoing major renovation and construction, the then-26-year-old felt an



Zhuanzhuan, a stray cat that was taken in by a clerk of Zhengyang Bookstore in 2014. According to the owner of the bookstore, the cat naturally engages with visitors who pet and caress him, just like a child raised by the whole community in the quadrangle dwellings of old Beijing. by Ma Gengping/*China Pictorial*



Cui Yong, founder of Zhengyang Bookstore, said his ideal would be to develop the bookstore into a time-honored store for the new era. by Ma Gengping/*China Pictorial*

obligation to do something to preserve some pieces of the historical and folk culture of old Beijing. He founded a bookstore specializing in second-hand books about old Beijing in Langfang 2nd Alley, Dashilan Commercial Street. On the World Book Day in 2014, Cui took over Beijing's first non-profit public reading space, Zhuandu Reading Space, a site provided by the government for free for him to open Zhengyang Bookstore.

For Beijingers, the bookstore bridges past and present Beijing because every member of a three or four-generation family can find a familiar façade of Beijing. In contrast with the fancy decoration of some popular bookshops, Zhengyang Bookstore is more like a traditional Beijing-style quadrangle dwelling where books can “live” and people can chat. “If writer Lao She (born in Beijing in 1899, known for vivid usage of the Beijing dialect) was still alive, he would

certainly be a frequent visitor to the bookstore,” Cui said.

Turning its back on the traditional business strategy of offering as many titles as possible, Zhengyang Bookstore has gradually embraced the identity of a theme bookstore dedicated to Beijing history and culture. Whenever he travels to a foreign city of historical or cultural significance like Paris, London, Rome, or Tokyo, Cui inquires about local bookstores specializing in the cultural history of the city and has not yet found one. A special cultural carrier of old Beijing, Zhengyang Bookstore has continuously attracted many experts, scholars, and culture aficionados to learn more about the ancient city. Pursuing cultural revitalization, the bookstore aims to build a complete knowledge system of Beijing studies based on its book collection and publishing operations. “My ideal is to develop Zhengyang Bookstore into a time-honored store for the new era,” added Cui.



A picture wall composed of Déjà vu logos designed by 405 Déjà vu users. courtesy of Déjà vu Bookstore



A worker in a Déjà vu workshop verifies a second-hand book. Used books purchased by Déjà vu are inspected, polished, cleaned, disinfected with ozone, and packaged with degradable materials before they reach a new buyer. courtesy of Déjà vu Bookstore

Déjà vu Bookstore: A Community of Readers

In 2017, Wei Ying built Déjà vu Bookstore as China's first C2B2C second-hand book online platform enabling users who want to sell a book only to simply scan the ISBN code. An algorithm verifies the title and determines a buying price based on supply and demand. Then the seller waits for a scheduled pickup, and the book is shipped to a factory where all of Déjà vu's incoming purchases are cleaned, polished, disinfected, and packaged before they reach new buyers. A company staffed by only 100 people, Déjà vu has amassed six million users so far. From selling only one book a day at first, it now sells more than 20,000 second-hand books daily and has circulated more than 13 million copies in total.

Déjà vu's slogan is: "Good books are



The first offline Déjà vu bookstore opened in a former factory building in Chaoyang District, Beijing in October 2019. The retained original brick wall, log bookshelves, and wooden floors add a vintage aura to the bookstore. In contrast with the offline-to-online business strategy of most bookstores, Déjà vu began to open offline bookstores after winning success with its online second-hand book trading platform. courtesy of Déjà vu Bookstore

worth reading twice.” The meaning of its name is feeling like one has lived through the present situation before. Wei Ying feels it perfectly captures the moment an old book tugs at the heartstrings of a new customer. Traditionally, people buy a book because it is useful to them. Déjà vu seeks to turn the traditional practice into a new engagement experience: When you sell your used books, you are sharing your values and social currency. When you buy used books, you are building connections with people who share your values.

When popular Chinese authors and actors started selling books on the Déjà vu app, more people began noticing the platform and becoming users. Although similar apps already existed for other sectors, online bookseller Déjà vu created a cultural community of shared values that helps build connections. Such an

atmosphere attracts loyal users.

According to Déjà vu, the three most circulated books on its platform so far are: *The Miracles of the Namiya General Store* by Japanese crime author Keigo Higashino, sold 18,730 times, *What I Have Seen* by Chinese reporter Chai Jing, sold 17,902 times, and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez, sold 17,462 times. In the second-hand book community that Déjà vu has nurtured, books worth reading again circulate over and over and often generate far more wealth for the company than a new edition would.

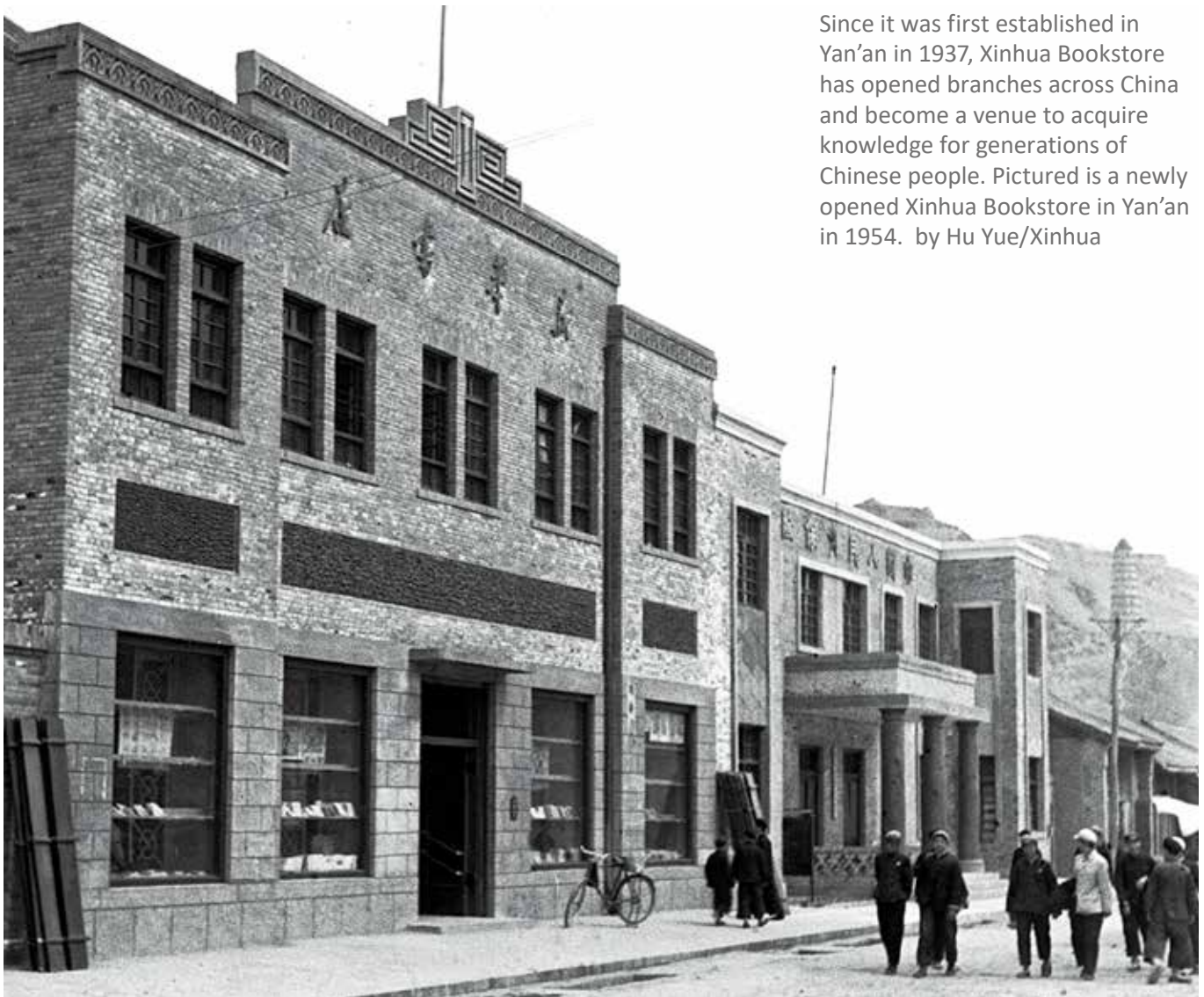
Both used bookstores spearheaded by creative millennials hearken to Platform 9¾ at King’s Cross Station in *Harry Potter*: They take readers into a different world. [🔗](#)

Tracing Chinese People's Reading Memories

Edited by Gong Haiying

The chosen reading material of Chinese people throughout history reveals much about the era in which they lived. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the places, media, content, and consumption methods of Chinese reading have changed profoundly with the times. The practice moved past paper to e-books and from renting books to collecting them. However, passion for reading and acquiring knowledge has remained consistent. 47

Since it was first established in Yan'an in 1937, Xinhua Bookstore has opened branches across China and become a venue to acquire knowledge for generations of Chinese people. Pictured is a newly opened Xinhua Bookstore in Yan'an in 1954. by Hu Yue/Xinhua





The photo shows an unmanned book stall in 1952. To make it easier for people to buy and read books, Xinhua Bookstore introduced its first unmanned bookstore in Shanghai in May 1950. All books were labeled with price, and buyers dropped money into a cash box. CFB



This 1959 photo shows young readers asking a salesperson for books at a Xinhua children's bookstore. by Li Shu/CFB



Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, Chinese people's living standards have improved dramatically. This 1955 photo shows a Xinhua Bookstore in Beijing packed with people during a weekend. Except for a few sample books, the inventory was kept behind a counter, and customers had to ask an employee for a title. CFB



From the 1950s to the 1980s, libraries were the primary public places to read to avoid standing in a Xinhua Bookstore. Pictured is the old National Library of China in 1950. CFB



After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, book exchange between the National Library of China and its foreign counterparts developed fast. The library established a book exchange relationship with 135 institutions in 38 countries during the 1950s. The photo shows staff of the National Library of China organizing foreign books in 1955. by Zheng Guanghua/CFB



The photo shows people reading at a book stall in 1956. Back then, many second-hand books about literature, science, and technology were displayed at book stalls in Beijing Dong'an flea market, which consistently attracted readers. by A. Hoffmann/CFB



This 1972 photo shows two students reading a comic book by a river in Guilin, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.
by Zi Ming/CFB



This 1995 photo shows a bookstore at Peking University packed with customers. Newly enrolled students flooded into the bookstore to buy books and other reading materials, seeking to adapt to the intense schedule and heavy workload at Peking University, one of the country's top institutions of higher learning.
by Chen Jian/China Pictorial



Established in 1998, the Beijing Book Building remains the largest state-owned bookstore with the most diverse offers in Beijing. To meet the new demands of readers in the internet era, it opened an online bookstore offering 160,000 titles on March 9, 1999, becoming the first Chinese bookseller to adopt digital operations.
by Qi Heng/Xinhua

LINK

Lianhuanhua: A Classic Cultural Icon in Chinese Memories

Lianhuanhua, a kind of palm-sized booklet with picture stories and accompanying text, has been a cultural icon in the history of China. Soon after it emerged in the early 20th century, *lianhuanhua* became quite the draw for various bookstores, libraries, and book-renting stalls before foreign comic books entered the Chinese market. With a wide variety of subjects, attractive illustrations and interesting stories, as many as 100 million copies of *lianhuanhua* circulated annually at their peak, and they remain central figures in the memories of generations of Chinese people.



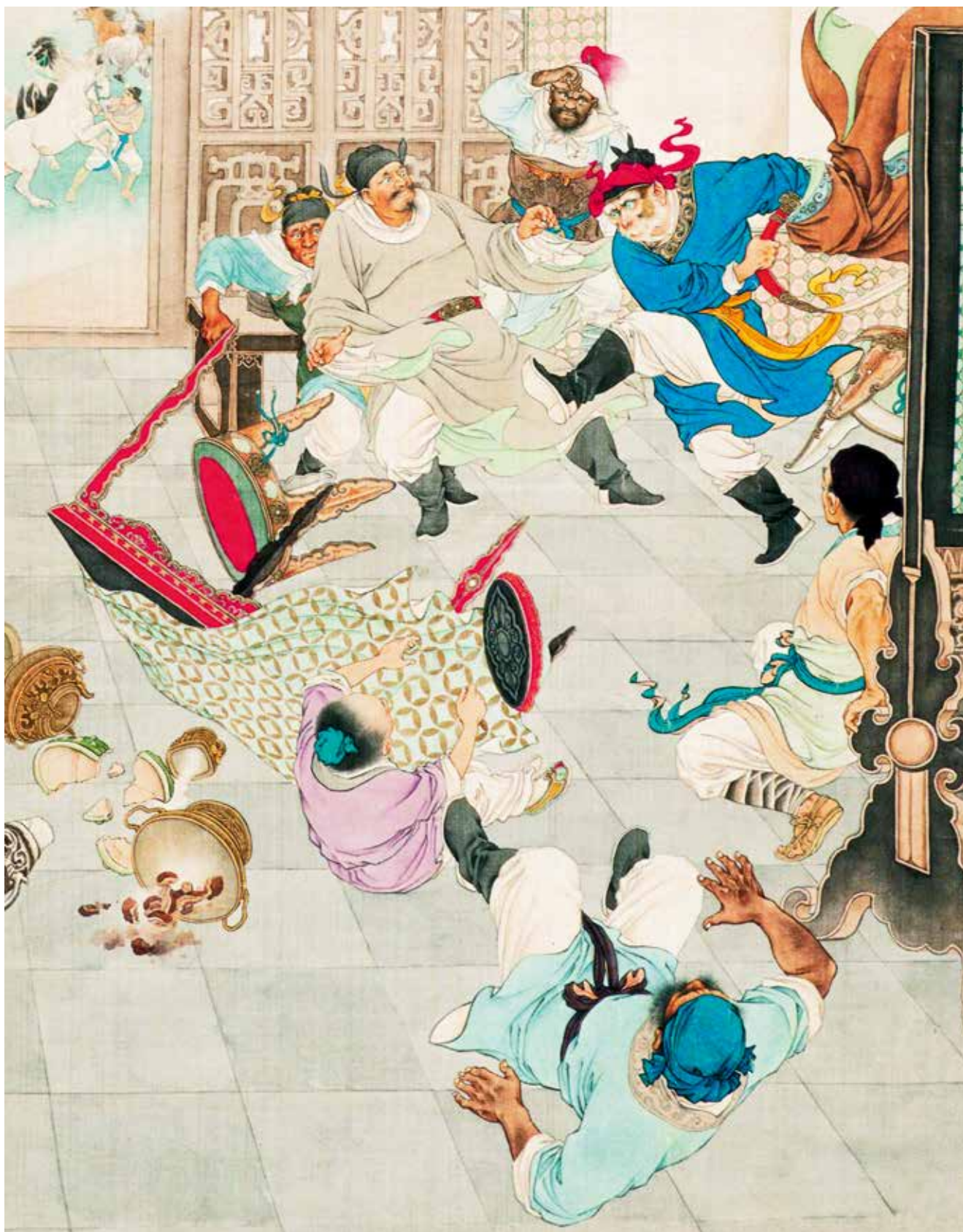
Adventures of San Mao by Zhang Leping, 29×40.5cm, 1947-1949. CFB



Luolun Going for Imperial Examination by Gao Yun, 12.5×19cm, 1983. CFB



Momotaro, the Peach Boy by Hua Sanchuan, 24×53cm, 1981. CFB



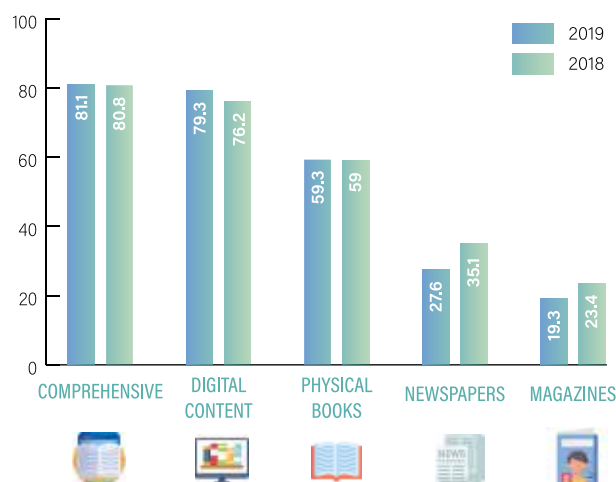
Havoc in Heaven by Liu Jiyou, 50.1×39.1cm, 1956. CFB

National Reading Report

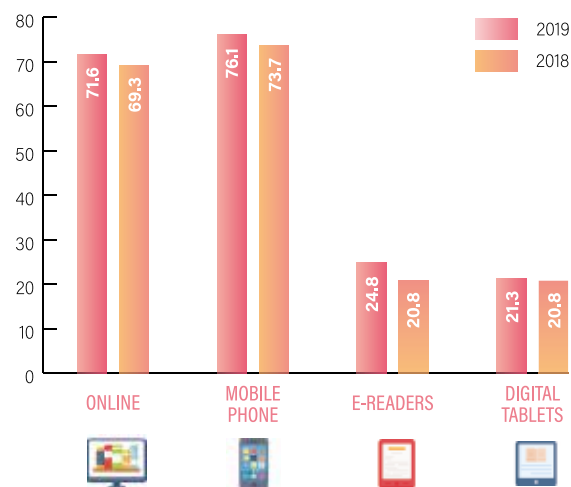
Designed by Cecile Zehnacker

The comprehensive reading rate of Chinese adults across various types of media maintained growth in 2019, and the digital media reading rate also increased. In addition, both the reading rate and volume for minors under the age of 18 have increased. Audiobooks have been increasingly popular in China, and audio-supported apps on mobile devices have become standard for audiobook listeners. **EP**

Chinese Adult Citizens' Reading Rates (%)



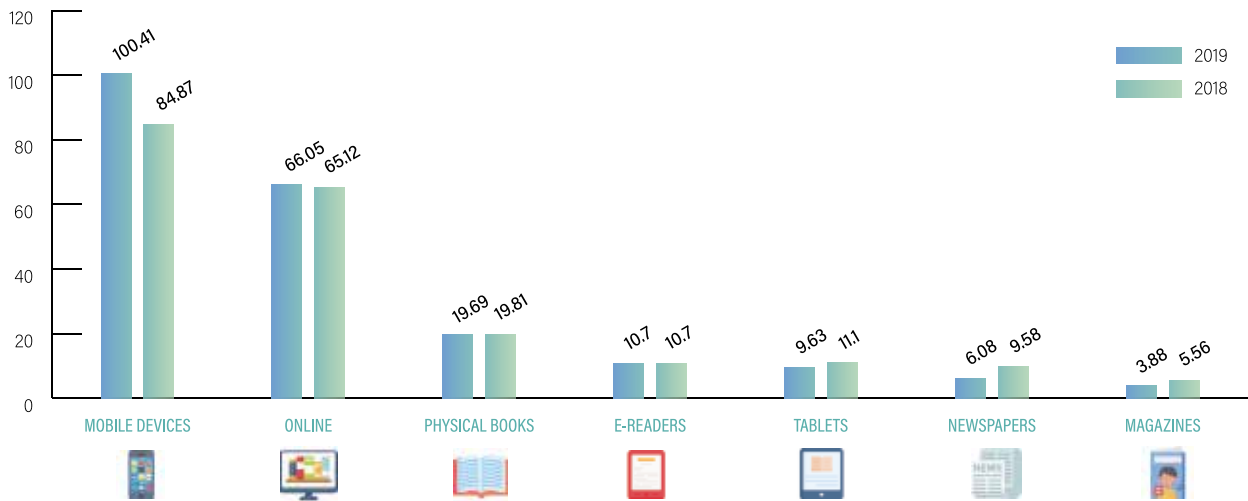
Chinese Adult Citizens' Digital Reading Rates (%)



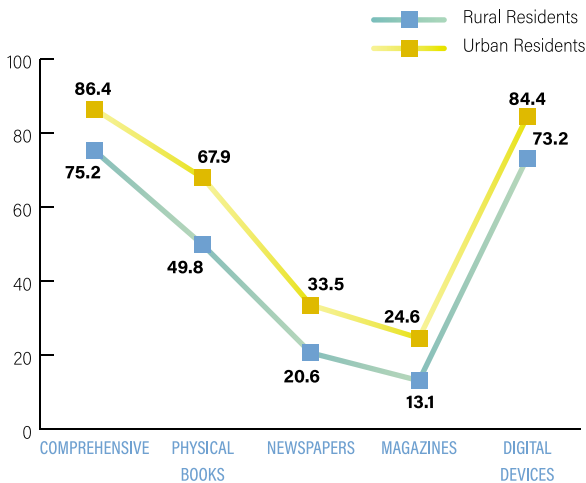
People Spending More Than One Hour a Day Reading Books



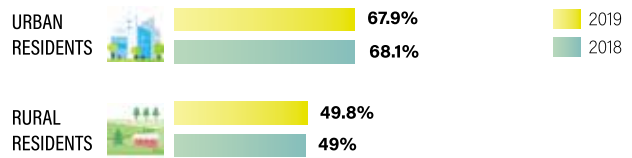
Chinese Adult Citizens' Daily Reading Time on Different Kinds of Media (minutes)



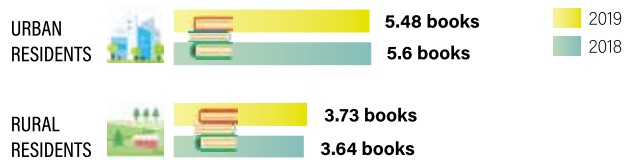
Chinese Adult Citizens' Urban and Rural Reading Rates in 2019 (%)



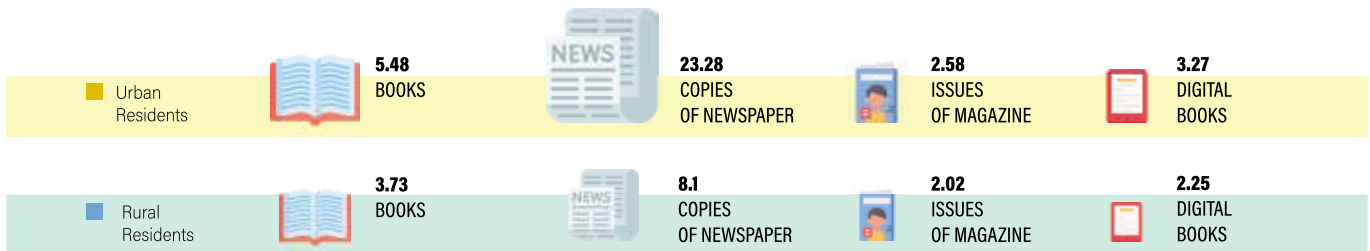
Chinese Adult Citizens' Urban and Rural Physical Books Reading Rates in 2018 and 2019



Chinese Adult Citizens' Urban and Rural Physical Books Reading Volumes in 2018 and 2019



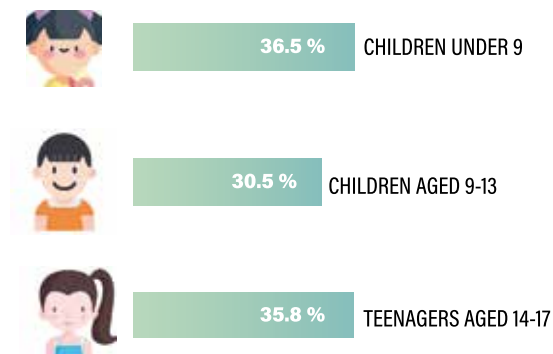
Urban-Rural Reading Volume Comparison by Medium in 2019



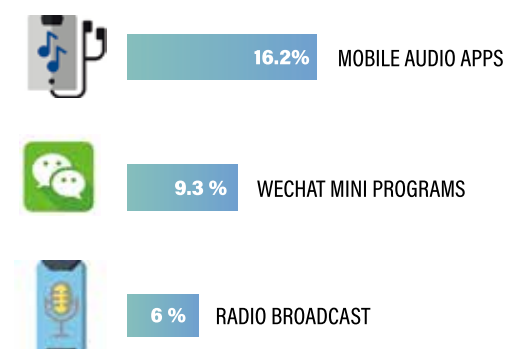
Audio Listening Rates (%)



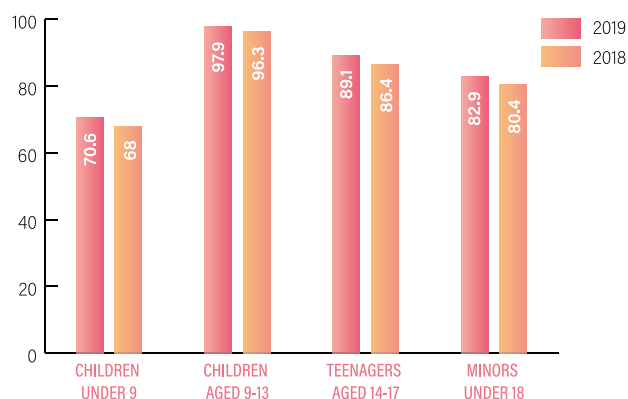
Children's Audio Listening Rates by Age



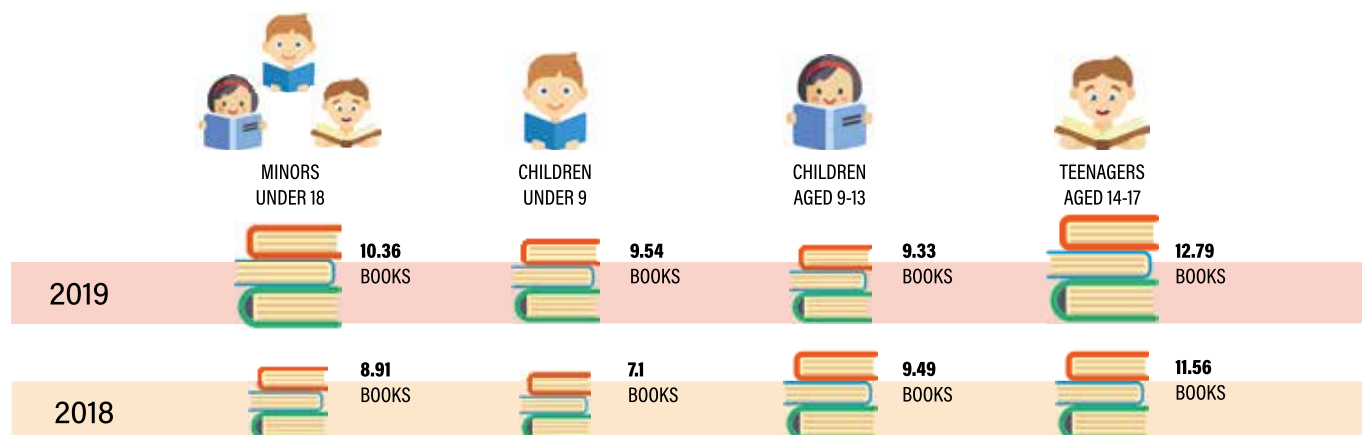
Major Audio Book Listening Channels



Children's Reading Rate by Age (%)



Reading Volume of Chinese Children



Source: The 17th National Reading Survey issued by the Chinese Academy of Press and Publication in 2020

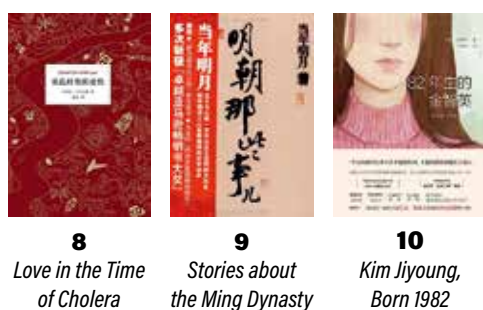
Preferences of Chinese Readers by Generation



Ten Best-selling E-books on Amazon China Kindle Store in the First Quarter of 2020



Ten Best-selling E-books on Amazon China Prime Reading in the First Quarter of 2020



The Art of Bookbinding

Text by Qin Bin

Books play a significant role in maintaining the continuity of human civilization.



A leaf made by Zhang Xiaodong for the handmade book
Dream of the Red Chamber. by Qin Bin/China Pictorial

With a cup of pu'er tea and a burning sandalwood incense stick on the desk, Zhang Xiaodong begins the day's work at his studio in Yizhuang in the southeastern suburb of Beijing. Zhang is the inheritor of the intangible cultural heritage known as Dragon Scale Binding.

Also called Fish Scale Binding, Dragon Scale Binding is an ancient bookbinding technique that emerged during the transitional period when collected writing shifted from scrolls to books formed with leaves during the Tang Dynasty (618-907). The binding technique not only shortened the length of a book to facilitate more efficient reading and searching, but also vastly improved the reading experience. However, the original exquisite and intricate technique was once lost, and the only existing ancient book using this binding technique was preserved in the Palace Museum in Beijing.

Fortunately, Zhang brought the binding technique back to life.

Born in Zhangjiakou City, Hebei Province, in 1981, Zhang graduated from Shenyang Aerospace University. In 2008, he began to concentrate on book design. He studied under famous book designer Lu Jingren, Peking University professor Xiao Dongfa, and renowned bookbinding expert Wang Huaizhu. When Zhang finally became a book design professional, the "golden age" of book



When opened, *The Diamond Sutra in 32 Seal Scripts* using Dragon Scale Binding looks like a colorful dragon. As the breeze blows, its leaves dance gently, and its illustrations seem to come to life. by Qin Bin/*China Pictorial*



A Mural of Fahai Temple, a *qianye* work by Zhang Xiaodong. A new invention by Zhang, *qianye* (literally “Thousand Pages”) is a technique to revive ancient classics with paper sculpture. by Qin Bin/*China Pictorial*



The only existing Tang Dynasty (618-907) book using the technique of Dragon Scale Binding, preserved in the Palace Museum. courtesy of Zhang Xiaodong

publication had already ended alongside the rise of e-books and the decline of printed material.

“Back then, I thought future books would probably develop in two directions: e-books to meet the trend of fragmented reading in fragmented time and space, and greater appreciation for

once-ignored functions of printed books—their physical properties, ornamental attributes, and functionality to convey emotions as a kind of tangible media, as well as their collectability,” he recalled. “I believe that handmade books with aforesaid functions represent a direction of future books.”

That sentiment sent Zhang down the road to restore the lost Dragon Scale Binding. He consulted scholars, ancient painting restoration specialists, and printing experts from the Palace Museum and delved into researching a slew of relevant historical material. After

A thangka painting using the
qianye technique created
by Zhang Xiaodong.
by Qin Bin/China Pictorial






Zhang Xiaodong shares his views on book design. by Qin Bin/*China Pictorial*

numerous experiments over two and a half years, Zhang eventually completed his first handmade book using Dragon Scale Binding: *The Diamond Sutra in 32 Seal Scripts*.

When opened, a book bound with this technique hearkens to a colorful dragon. As the breeze blows, the leaves dance gently and illustrations in the book seem to come to life and leap into the eye. "This is an expressive technique rich with Zen flavor that causes readers to become more immersed in the Buddhist sutra," Zhang explained.

With more than 10 years of arduous efforts, Zhang restored and improved Dragon Scale Binding from the Tang Dynasty and won over 20 patents related to book design. In 2019, he was invited to participate in the Venice Biennale. After restoring the technique of Dragon Scale Binding, Zhang spent four years completing a handmade edition of *Dream of the Red Chamber* using an innovative binding technique integrating the advantages of Accordion Binding and Dragon Scale Binding.

"Books play a major role in

maintaining the continuity of human civilization," declared Zhang. "Ancient books of the Tang, Song (960-1279), Yuan (1271-1368), Ming (1368-1644), and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties had much richer functions than today's books. They were not only the best media for men of letters to express their emotions, but also embodied the perfect combination of material and technique. For this reason, many were collected by renowned scholars and even the royal court. In fact, books as objects represent a conduit for cultural inheritance." 



Napoleon, Dostoyevsky, Stendhal, and Tolstoy: these voices—among others equally compelling though lesser known—reveal the essence of Europe in their narratives of encounter with the threshold city of Vilnius in the book *The Biography of Vilnius: City of Strangers*. Lavishly illustrated and carefully researched, the book is a veritable hall of mirrors, which yields an illuminating vision of Vilnius and an exceptional window on Europe. courtesy of New Star Press

Vilnius: The Pulse of Europe

Text by Bian Xiuhong

China and Lithuania will celebrate the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations on September 14, 2021. In this context, *China Pictorial* invited Diana Mickevičienė, Lithuanian Ambassador to China, for an exclusive interview to share stories about Vilnius and prospects for China-Lithuania cooperation. For anyone curious to know more about Vilnius, Ambassador Mickevičienė recommends *The Biography of Vilnius: City of Strangers*, which has a Chinese translation published by New Star Press.

China Pictorial: Last year, the China Railway Express delivered anti-epidemic supplies to European countries hit by COVID-19, and Vilnius became an important distribution hub. What role will Vilnius play in the Belt and Road Initiative in the future?

Mickevičienė: If you look at our geographical location, we're always at a crossroads of countries, so connecting people has become part of our DNA. Our culture has accumulated a lot from the Slavs, Germanic tribes, and even the Tatars, an indigenous ethnic minority descended from the empire of Genghis Khan. Lithuania and China were neighbors during the 14th and

15th centuries.

Vilnius plays a central role today in connecting people and countries. The role we play is naturally given by our geographical location and is of flexible and multi-cultural nature. Our logistics and transportation sector contributes about 15 percent of our GDP. In terms of costs and other factors, we clearly offer some of the best solutions.

China Pictorial: Vilnius boasts an impressive concentration of Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, and other classical buildings. Many modern high-rises also sprouted up in the 20th century. How does the city balance its aesthetic value with economic development?



Vilnius was built at the confluence of the Vilnia and Neris rivers. The unplanned streets and alleys of the city radiate like veins of a leaf from the winding rivers under the night sky. by Laimonas Ciūnys



Diana Mickevičienė, Lithuanian Ambassador to China, shares stories about Vilnius and prospects for China-Lithuania cooperation in an exclusive interview with *China Pictorial*. by Wan Quan/*China Pictorial*

Mickevičienė: I think we should be very particular about safeguarding the old town. Vilnius is protected by UNESCO. It is valuable to the world because the Old Town of Vilnius is one of the largest surviving medieval old towns in Eastern Europe. You cannot build a new structure within the limits of the Old Town. The city will engage in extensive discussions on locations for new modern developed zones. We seek a delicate balance because a high-rise even blocks away can destroy a landscape. We're very proud that we allow our citizens to have a say in development. The government and city authorities listen to the citizens to ensure that they are the masters

of the city.

China Pictorial: A consistent highlight of trips to Vilnius is the Republic of Užupis. Could you talk more about this bohemian district?

Mickevičienė: Užupis means "beyond the river" in the Lithuanian language, in reference to the Vilnia River. That area has been popular with artists for some time and compared to Montmartre in Paris. Many structures there were built centuries ago for industrial purposes. When we got independence 30 years ago, many artists moved in. The picturesque and well-situated place has inspired extensive art emerging from chaos.

The district declared itself an



The Hill of Three Crosses, one of the tallest points in Vilnius. Legend goes that seven Franciscan friars were beheaded atop this hill. Wooden crosses were erected in the location as early as the 17th century. Opposite the hill is Castle Hill overlooking the city of Vilnius. by Laimonas Ciūnys



A Polish-Lithuanian style Catholic church in Vilnius. The old town of Vilnius has preserved many Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Jewish churches. by Laimonas Ciūnys

“independent republic” in 1998. It upholds the spirit of freedom and independence. Užupis Republic has a constitution, a president, and a 10-member army. The symbol of Užupis is a palm with a hole in it. You use your palm to give and take, and the hole means you don’t keep money or other resources for yourself. Whoever arrives here, rich or poor, is asked to follow the philosophy. Everyone is free to express himself, and no one should fight over differences. That is somewhat of a sacred place. It started off as a sort of artistic joke, but everyone respects its values now. You need to leave your fame and fortune at the door to become part of that interesting community.

China Pictorial: Lithuania has experienced many ups and downs in history. How did the country build its national identity and resilience?

Mickevičienė: Our national identity consists of many layers, but one important aspect is the Lithuanian language, a very small but unique language that has an authentic structure of an archaic European language. Ordinary people have preserved so much of the language because they like keeping it authentic, traditional, and classical. Urbanites tend to make things simpler and easier. Educated elites attempted to introduce other languages including the Slavic language of the former Grand Duke and Latin when it was central to western European culture, later substituted by Polish and French languages.

What subsequently happened was very important for European and even global culture: Lithuania and Poland merged in one country under the first democratic constitution in Europe in 1791. It was, unfortunately, very short-lived because later we were occupied and divided by Russian, Prussian, and Austrian empires. It became a catastrophic situation for almost 200 years, but the spirit of that democratic constitution, which was probably overly ambitious for the era, has survived. This year, Lithuania will celebrate the 230th anniversary of the constitution shared with Poland.

Lithuania contributed different cultural elements to the



A time-honored street in Vilnius, capital of Lithuania. Vilnius, a city with historical profundity and attractive cultural flair, celebrated its 698th birthday on January 25, 2021. courtesy of Embassy of Lithuania in China


world in different eras. We are very open to receive the best the outside has to offer, which keeps us resilient to external trials and tribulations.

China Pictorial: This year marks the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between Lithuania and China. In what areas do you think the two countries can promote cooperation?

Mickevičienė: I think the two countries have achieved a lot in various areas. During the pandemic, the logistics flow between the two countries actually increased. We're happy to see that even COVID-19 couldn't disrupt trade.

But I have been most inspired by developments in cultural and

art exchanges. It is difficult to find a Lithuanian theater troupe that has not been to China. Our performances in China have all been very well-received, and Lithuanian performers are always impressed by the passion of the Chinese audience. Chinese patrons appreciate art and are eager to learn. A Lithuanian director is even organizing joint performances with a Chinese team while the pandemic prevents travel. The project will be quite different and fuse the best each country has to offer.

I think the best way to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the diplomatic relationship is to strengthen cultural and art links and promote trade and transportation cooperation between the two countries. 

Transformation and Self-rescue:

Post-pandemic Outlook for the Publishing Industry

Text by Wang Lei



Wang Lei

The author is president of Dolphin Books. Established in 1986, Dolphin Books specializes in publishing children's books, educational materials, humanities, and popular science.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic's severe impact on the global economy did not spare the book industry. The entire industry chain, including publishing, printing and distribution, was badly hit.

On January 7, 2021, China's leading provider of data and information services for the book industry OpenBook released its annual report on China's book market in 2020. Through analysis of more than 10,000 physical bookstores and online bookshops, the report showed that the total sales revenue in 2020 fell to 97.08 billion yuan (US\$14.9 billion), a 5.08 percent drop from the previous year. From 2015 to 2019, China's book retail market maintained an annual growth rate of more than 10 percent. The year 2020 saw the first negative growth of China's book retail market in 20 years.

Dolphin Books is a prime example. The publishing house originally aimed to achieve an annual growth rate of 30

percent in 2020. However, the sudden pandemic made such a number seem like a pipe dream. To prevent and control the epidemic, half of its employees worked remotely for three months, which affected its overall publishing efficiency greatly. A traditional labor-intensive industry, book printing plants closed or reduced production for the same reasons, and many books failed to be printed as scheduled. Most bookstores in China shut down for three to six months, and the sales of publishing houses declined sharply. Dolphin Books had to settle for an annual growth of only 16 percent.

Finding new opportunities in the crisis became the common aspiration of the book industry in 2020. Among measures to deal with the pandemic, livestreaming became central. This trend even changed the business focus of the entire publishing industry.

Due to the pandemic, many have to stay at home and access information through the internet.

With the gradual popularization of 5G technology in China, livestreaming saw an upsurge. The publishing industry caught up with this trend. Many publishing houses quickly set up special marketing teams to organize live broadcast activities. Some editors who previously worked at a desk editing manuscripts have now started to broadcast live.

In 2020, Anhui Children's Publishing House cooperated with Weiya, a famous livestreamer, to sell the book *Chinese Classic Animation Collection Edition*, which became one of the biggest livestreamed book-selling events of 2020. During the livestream, Weiya sold more than 30,000 sets in just a few minutes, with the total sales volume hitting five million yuan (US\$768,500). From February to March 2020, CITIC Press Group organized 151 livestreams and 40 live voice group broadcasts, embracing more than 300 online communities in the process. Dolphin Books arranged a special video studio and organized 62 livestreams throughout the year, with its president appearing more than 10 times.

Compared to pre-pandemic activities organized by publishing houses such as reading groups, reaching out to readers through livestreaming shows many advantages: First, it is highly interactive. During a live broadcast, every viewer can freely interact with the host. Second, a massive number of participants



October 4, 2020: The 2020 China Children's Book Expo is held at Tianning No.1 Cultural and Technological Innovation Park in Xicheng District, Beijing. In 2020, the share of children's books in the market continued to climb, ranking first in all categories. VCG

can be gathered. Hundreds of people gathering for an offline activity create quite a scene, but online activities allow much more people to join. Performing a book reading for 100,000 people online is not something that can happen in person.


Livestreaming is only one aspect of the changing landscape of the book industry. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, publishers are making many more adaptations.

Investment in digital publishing and e-books is growing rapidly while first-print paper books are declining. Publishing houses are more cautious when publishing new books. About 170,000 different new books were published in 2020, a drop of nearly 12 percent year-on-year.

The share of the long-time best-sellers ("old books") in the market is increasing. Among the many sales lists released at the end of 2020, the number of new books that made the list was pitifully small. For example, no new book made the top 10 on the 2020 children's book list.

In 2020, schools generally shortened teaching hours, making parents more interested in buying books for their children to study at home. The share of children's books in China's book market has continued to increase. In 2020, children's books accounted for more than 30 percent of the total book market, ranking first in all categories.

With regards to book sales channels, physical bookstores were significantly affected by the pandemic in 2020, with their total sales declining by 33.8 percent from the previous year. The overall share of book sales of physical bookstores continued to decline. In contrast, online retail channels sustained a 7.27 percent growth. Over the next few years, the gap between physical bookstores and online bookshops is likely to expand further.

Whether navigating technological advancement or sociological variables such as a pandemic, the publishing industry has been constantly evolving since the first printing. The goal of all transformations is to provide readers with richer nourishment for the mind. As long as human pursuit for knowledge continues, publishers' explorations will not stop. 

Gao Ke and His 1,008 Bears

Text by Zhou Xin Photographs by Wan Quan

“Bear Mountain Bear Sea: Gao Ke and His 606 Be@rbrick Bears” is not just an exhibition of Bearbricks, but also a collection of pop culture memories.

“Those ‘bears’ in your collection do not belong to you—they belong to everyone.”

These words from a friend once jolted Bearbrick (rendered Be@rbrick) collector Gao Ke awake. Instead of keeping them in a storage room where they couldn’t be seen by anyone including himself, he realized it would be better to display them for the public.

In 2005, 25-year-old Gao Ke fell in

love with Bearbrick toys while in Hong Kong. Although they were expensive, he bought one for 1,000 Hong Kong dollars (US\$128). It became the first of a huge collection. Over the decade that followed, he continued buying them one after another.

In December 2020, Guinness officially certified Gao Ke as the person with the most Bearbricks in the world. His collection of 1,008 bears was a world record. Currently, this array of bears is being exhibited at the Yidian Space in Beijing’s 798 Art District.

From Be@rbrick to Guinness

Bearbricks are produced by the Japanese company Medicom. It offers bears in three sizes: 100 percent (7 cm tall), 400 percent (28 cm tall), and 1,000 percent (70 cm tall). “The 1,000-percent size takes up too much space and the styles are limited,” Gao says. “The details on the 400-percent size are exactly the same as the 1,000-percent size, and you can find many designs.” The bulk of Gao’s collection is the 400-percent size.

Gao Ke has been collecting Bearbricks for 16 years. As time passed, his collection slowly sprouted from dozens to hundreds



February 28, 2021: Gao Ke poses with his first Bearbrick in the exhibition zone of “Bear Mountain Bear Sea: Gao Ke and His 606 Be@rbrick Bears.”





The exhibition zone of “Bear Mountain Bear Sea: Gao Ke and His 606 Be@rbrick Bears.”



Bearbricks designed by renowned designers.

and finally to more than a thousand. The numbers became so large that except for a few favorites displayed in his home and studio, most of Gao’s Bearbricks were wrapped in a box and stashed away in the warehouse. Over time, he forgot about some of them.

If a collector doesn’t even know what is in his collection, what is the point? “It really was a pity,” Gao says frankly. So he

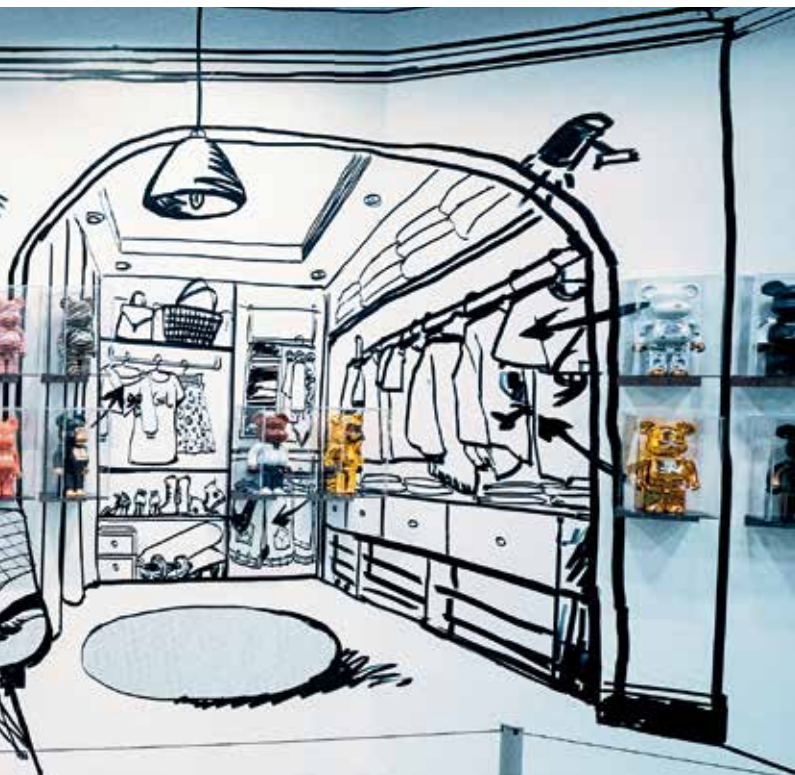
planned to exhibit them, and the 798 Art District had space.

His collection expanded with each passing day, and fewer and fewer Bearbrick collectors could be compared with him. “I was curious whether I had the most,” Gao recalls.

However, Guinness certification required far more than counting the bears. “I had to prove that every bear was mine and an authentic product.”

For more than a month, Gao sorted out the receipts for more than a thousand bear purchases and ensured he had certificates of authenticity for every Bearbrick toy since the first. All this was quite expensive. The exhibition commenced on December 20, 2020, just after a Guinness World Records adjudicator declared that Gao’s Bearbrick collection created a new Guinness world record.

After the certification, Gao Ke continued to collect Bearbrick bears, but stopped keeping track of whether he owned the most. “I would love to see someone break the record,” he beams. “I want more



people to know about Bearbrick bears and fall in love with them.” He claimed that he would never seek to update his Guinness record on Bearbrick bears.

Bears and Life

Why is Gao so obsessed with Bearbrick bears?

“Bear Mountain Bear Sea: Gao Ke and His 606 Be@rbrick Bears” was the name chosen for the exhibition. Due to limited space, he carefully selected 606 bears of the 400-percent size to display.

The bears are traditionally sold in “blind boxes” which prevent the buyer from knowing the contents, making certain models featuring characters from animation, movies, music, sports, fashion, lifestyle, designers, and artists highly sought. Gao Ke loves not only the bears themselves, but also the pop culture represented by the exquisite designs.

Bearbricks come in different types, and the exhibition area is divided into eight sections. Renderings of Superman, Robocop,

and Marilyn Monroe can be found in the film and television section. Ultraman, Mickey Mouse, and Ninja Turtles can be found in the animation section alongside many other nostalgic cartoon characters. The music section is headlined by Elvis Presley, Michael Jackson, and The Beatles.


The exhibition space is like a “who’s who” of landmarks of modern and contemporary pop culture. Iconic decoration of the single-shaped, big-bellied bears often creates a funny look.

For the lifestyle section, Gao Ke designed the display area to resemble a shopping street and a living room. The bears capture trademark elements of fashion brands and other common items.

What was once a stowed-away collection became a cornucopia of popular world culture when placed under the spotlight. The exquisite designs and patterns function like any other art by conjuring subconscious emotion in the beholder. The final product is interaction between an individual’s past and its pop culture backdrop.

This is an important theme of the exhibition: “Every bear here represents something from life,” says Gao. “I’m just shining light on connections that are already there.”

Today, the first Bearbrick bear he bought is worth 10 times as much, but he has never considered selling it. “These toys are about culture. They’re not an investment tool. You have to really love them before starting a collection.”

The exhibition will continue till April 30. Will the 606 Bearbrick bears go back to storage after the four-month “performance”? Gao Ke certainly hopes not. A coffee house? An exhibition hall? He is still brainstorming a better place for permanent presentation. Gao hopes his bear friends can brighten other lives just like a fraction of what they have done for him. 

Wang Tongren: The Ox Painter

Text by Gong Haiying

“Man should aspire to an ox’s spirit of dedication.”

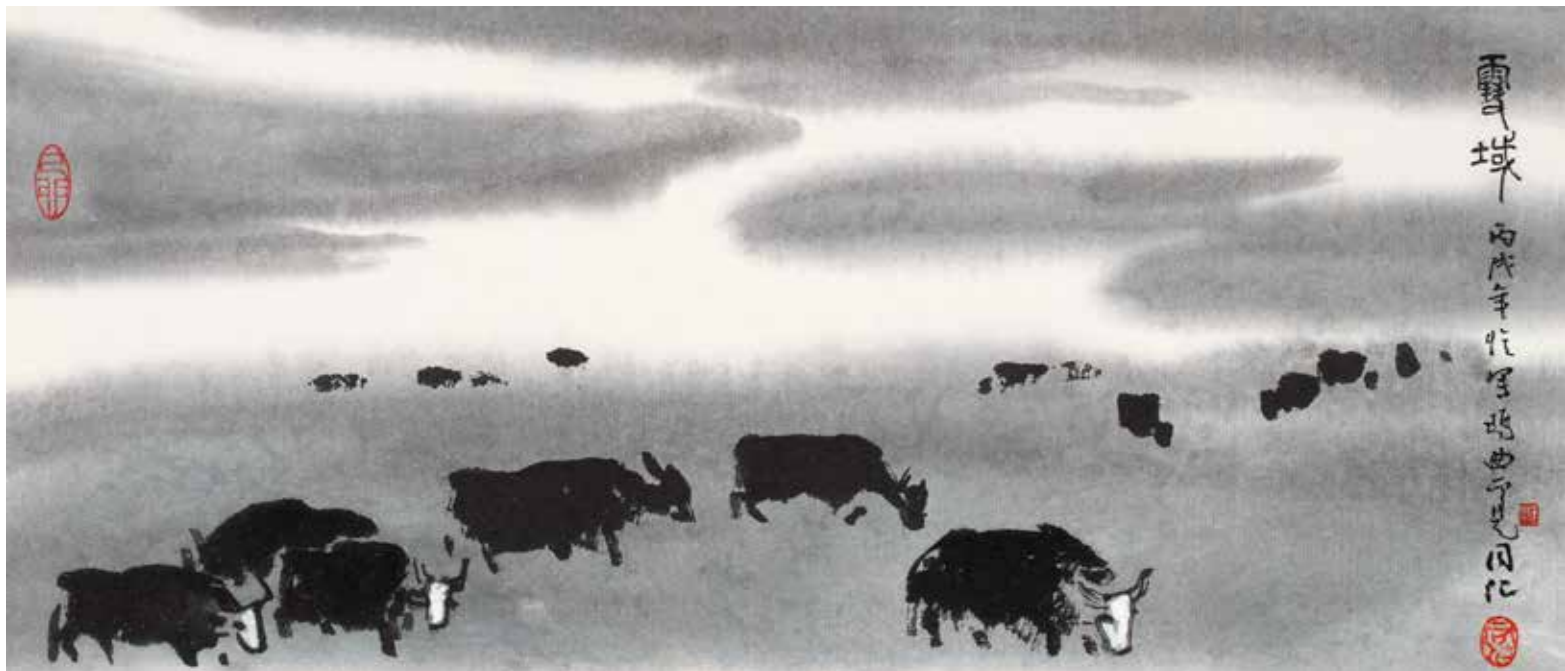
The Moon Tower in Beijing Purple Bamboo Park is now adorned with an impressive variety of ox paintings all over its walls. The oxen in various positions with different expressions all seem lifelike. According to the Chinese lunar calendar, 2021 is the Year of the Ox. The venue organized a two-month solo exhibition of Wang Tongren’s ox masterpieces to welcome the new year.

Born in 1937, Wang Tongren is a renowned Chinese ink-and-wash painter. When he was young, Wang studied under traditional Chinese painting master Huang Zhou (1925-1997). In

1961, he graduated from the Traditional Chinese Painting Department at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA). Thanks to tutoring from famous artists like Ye Qianyu (1907-1995), Jiang Zhaohe (1904-1986), Li Keran (1907-1989), and Li Kuchan (1899-1983), Wang acquired a solid grasp of the composition and basic



Gallop, 453×335mm, 1997.



Snow Plateau, 133×310mm, 2006.

skills of ink-and-wash painting. Influenced by the popularity of Western oil painting in China, he also created many realistic oil paintings.

After the beginning of China's reform and opening up in the late 1970s, the influx of Western art ideas sent Wang Tongren, who was then teaching at the CAFA Traditional Chinese Painting Department, into a period of confusion and reflection like it did to many other Chinese artists at the time. He became enamored with the unique charm of Western art, but also realized that art should be based on profound cultural tradition, which fueled a stronger desire to create traditional Chinese paintings.

In the subsequent years, Wang constantly drew inspiration from traditional Chinese arts while seeking innovation, and eventually formed his own artistic language. In 1988, his first painting album was published. In the preface of the album, Huang Zhou wrote: "He has never blindly copied modernist or Western painting styles, but dedicated himself to learning



Mother Cow and Her Calf, 98×186cm, 1991.

from traditional art and drawing inspiration from real life, gradually forming his own expressive techniques and style."

Wang excels at a variety of subjects, especially figures and animals. He has also completed notable landscape and flower-and-bird paintings. But most of all, Wang loves painting oxen. Nearly 30 of the 87 paintings displayed at the solo exhibition feature oxen: Some appear good-natured



Wang Tongren, 84, remains committed to painting every day. by Ma Gengping/
China Pictorial



Deer, 334×339mm, 1981.

and diligent, some appear brave and fearless, and others are innocent calves with their mothers. All are lifelike, which has been attributed to the painter's "careful observation of everyday life."

In 1979, Wang won global fame for his *One Hundred Oxen*, which Li Kuchan, a Chinese freehand flower-and-bird painting master, praised as a "pioneering innovation" of traditional Chinese painting.

Wang began to paint oxen in 1962 during a visit to the Tibet-Qinghai Plateau to sketch. At the time, he painted many yaks. Touched by primitive and unsophisticated local folk customs, Wang made up his mind to "depict the plateau." In the subsequent decades, he traveled to places including Tibet, Sichuan, and Gansu to paint the colorful lives of Tibetan people. Such works as *Lassoing Horses* and *Returning Home* capture the painter's sincere love of the plateau.



Ambition to Travel Far, 331×339mm, 2008.

Keiko Miyano,
460×740mm, 1998.


The exhibition also presented a group of figure paintings with a unique artistic touch. Most are portraits, but they adopt different expressive techniques. For instance, *A Yemeni Man* highlights the subject's eye expression and facial features. The painter used simple but bold lines to vividly depict a resolute, masculine man. Keiko Miyano, however, showcases a tender and beautiful Japanese lady with elegant lines and moderate colors.

These two contrasting styles manifest the trajectory of Wang's art creation as well as his pursuits as an artist. The simpler the strokes, the broader the profundity a traditional Chinese painting can capture. Wang has long striven to achieve the goal of "depicting sincere feelings with simple strokes." He pursues creation of profound connotations with simple concepts, techniques, and form. His works perfectly combine traditional cultural aura with modern aesthetic concepts, which has earned him a solid reputation both at home and abroad.

Wang also believes that calligraphy and painting share the same foundation. To enhance the expressiveness of traditional Chinese painting, he has suggested artists "start by imitating works of ancient calligraphy masters and continue honing calligraphy and painting skills day after day, year after year." This is what he has done over decades. As a result, his painting and calligraphic skills continued to improve



and more deftly complement each other. Several of his most celebrated calligraphic works were also displayed at the exhibition.

Good painting requires a combination of mind and skill. These paintings don't just show oxen standing in leisure or a herd of yaks galloping freely across the plateau, but also a down-to-earth and noble painter. "Man should aspire to an ox's spirit of dedication," said Wang. 

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