

Books

Author Profile

Liu Zhenyun

The bestselling author on his new all-conquering novel, the expansion of the 'Yanjin Universe' and the benefits of cross-cultural exchange...

Liu Zhenyun has had more than his fair share of success over a glittering literary career. He is one of China's bestselling and critically lauded contemporary authors with his clever, touching and humorous novels of "ordinary people" (more on this later) – often set in his native Yanjin, a rural county in Henan province – touching a chord with readers and reviewers alike. Coming into last year, Liu had won armfuls of prizes, shifted around 15 million copies of his books across 30 languages, with sales boosted by a number of internationally successful film adaptations including director Feng Xiaogang's *I Am Not Pan Jinlian* – known to Western audiences as *I Am Not Madame Bovary* – taken from Liu's *I Did Not Kill My Husband*.

But the bar has been raised considerably with Liu's most recent novel, *Salty Jokes*. Released in China at the end of 2025 by People's Literature, it has been a rapturously received, runaway bestseller, with more than one million domestic units rung up through the tills.

Salty Jokes is in many ways a very modern story, partly concerning a social media furore. Set again in what has become known as Liu's



"Yanjin Universe", its main story arc centres on awkward outsider Du Taibai, who becomes an online public spectacle after being caught up in a sexual scandal.

Liu describes Du's dilemma as: "Like a flying insect caught in a spider's web – except this web is newly spun by humanity itself: the internet. In the secretions of our age, truth is still putting on its shoes while lies have already travelled across the world. People no longer care about truth; what they believe in is emotion. When people throw stones at strangers, they do so with both outrage and righteousness."

The million-copy-and-counting success of *Salty Jokes*, Liu deadpans, "has been good news for both me, the author, and of course the publisher", but he insists he is pleased less about the sales, more how the audience has responded, with an outpouring on social media from readers who have been deeply engaging with the text. People's Literature also did a clever bit of guerilla marketing, putting an



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extract from the book – "On every street, in every country, around the world, every person hides their hurt, carries their wounds. We are all the same. No one has it easy." – on chalkboards outside convenience stores, inviting the public to continue the passage. The response to the "Convenience Store Literature Festival" was overwhelming, with thousands sharing their hurts and difficulties.

This dovetails with one of the reasons that Liu thinks *Salty Jokes* has touched a nerve. He says: "In life, people show an A side and a B side, but hidden underneath – or neglected by everyday life – are their C and D sides. *Salty Jokes* is really about those hidden dimensions. "People often tell me: 'You write about ordinary people.' I reply: 'No, I don't.' They may appear ordinary, but within them are extraordinary things – and these hidden qualities are precisely what sustain their humanity and their lives."

Masters of the universe

Liu has long had a close relationship with the Beijing International Book Fair (BIBF), having been its reading ambassador – a role much like other nations' literature laureates – since 2017. Liu's many activities at BIBF 2026 include an Ambassador's Salon, a panel discussion with a handful of his international translators. Liu says the process is actually not very

complicated: "My collaboration with translators is very simple: they read my books, decide they would like to translate them into their own language, and then contact either me or my literary agent. After a few conversations, we usually reach an agreement."

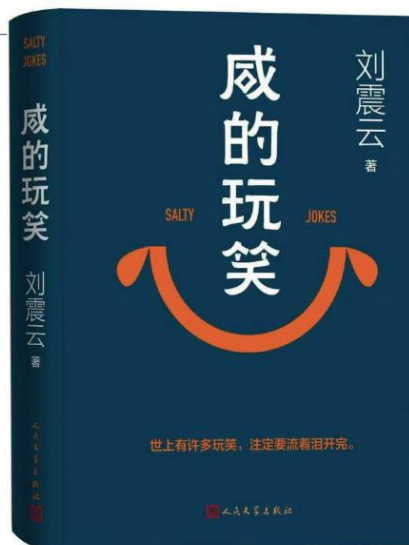
Complicated or not, it sounds very convivial. "Over time, many of these translators have become close friends," Liu says. "When they come to Beijing – or when I visit their countries – we eat together and drink together. Although they work in different languages, they all share one thing in common: they can drink quite well. As for the actual translation process, I follow a principle of 'non-interference in internal affairs'. If they don't ask questions, I don't offer answers."

On those China trips, many of his translators try to become au fait with Liu's Yanjin Universe, making a point of visiting Henan and Liu's home village. "This helps them better understand the human environment and linguistic atmosphere of the novels. After visiting, they all tend to reach the same conclusion: the hot pepper soup and braised mutton noodles in my home town are indeed very delicious."

More than a few critics have likened Liu's Yanjin to other fictionalised versions of real-life places such as James Joyce's Dublin, Thomas Hardy's Wessex or William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. Liu insists he is not trying to emulate Faulkner's Mississippi "literary postage stamp" or Joyce's building of Dublin from memory. He sets his books in his home province, he says, with perhaps more than a bit of tongue in his cheek, "simply for convenience. The characters in a novel have to live somewhere; stories need a place in which they happen. If I set a story in Yanjin, then that hot pepper soup, braised mutton noodles, sesame flatbread – all these things come naturally to hand. I never have to worry about what my characters should eat. I know their faces, the dust caught in their wrinkles, their laughter and tears, the way they speak, the things hidden in their hearts. Writing them requires no extra effort from me."

Border crossing

Whatever the reason, Yanjin continues to gain literary visitors from the wider world as Liu's books are being translated into more and more territories, no doubt aided in part by his hitting the international festivals and book-fair circuit pretty hard over the past couple of years. He has also scored some silverware on his travels, too, including being



▲ *Salty Jokes*, Liu Zhenyun's latest novel – a satirical work concerning a social media furor – has sold more than a million units in China since its release at the end of last year

awarded the 2026 Premio Internazionale Nord-Sud, the prestigious Italian gong that celebrates individuals across literature and the sciences whose work impacts society for the better.

Liu finds life on the road cheering and, ultimately, beneficial artistically: "Readers from different countries often have completely different responses to the same character, plot point, detail or line of dialogue. Sometimes, a single offhand remark from a reader will set me thinking. Of course, such insights are no use for a book that has already been published – but they can be very valuable for the next one. In this world, sameness has little value; it is difference that matters. If there is one thing readers from different cultures share, however, it is their concern with universal values and human nature."

"Only through cross-cultural exchange can you come to understand others; only by understanding others can you understand yourself; and only by understanding yourself can you truly understand others. And what do we discover about ourselves? Our shortcomings. What do we discover about others? Their strengths. By learning from others' strengths to remedy our own weaknesses, people can continue to grow."

REPORTING Tom Tivnan

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Beijing International Book Fair