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BIBF 2026: When China's biggest novelist met its biggest tech entrepreneur

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On the final afternoon of the 2026 Beijing International Book Fair, two of China's most influential cultural figures shared the stage.

One was Liu Zhenyun, Mao Dun Prize-winning novelist, BIBF Reading Ambassador and one of China's bestselling contemporary authors. At 68, Liu has found a remarkable new audience on social media, where his wit and observations on modern life resonate with millions of younger readers.

The other was Lei Jun, billionaire founder and CEO of Xiaomi, the global consumer technology and electric vehicle company. One of China's best-known tech entrepreneurs, Lei has built an enormous online following of his own, regularly livestreaming product launches and sharing reflections on innovation, leadership and everyday life.

Their conversation drew huge crowds at BIBF and was livestreamed to millions online.

At first glance, it seemed an unlikely pairing.

But they were not discussing smartphones or bestsellers. They were discussing social media, public opinion and what happens when private lives become public entertainment, which is precisely the central theme of Liu Zhenyun's latest novel, *Salty Jokes*, and it has sold more than one million copies in China within six months of publication.

In many ways, that conversation captured the mood of this year's BIBF better than any rights statistics ever could. For decades, international publishing has largely understood China through the lens of rights trading and export sales. Walking through Beijing this year, it felt clear that something bigger is taking shape.



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China is no longer simply asking how to sell more books. Increasingly, publishers are thinking about how stories travel between formats, communities and technologies — and how audiences discover content in entirely new ways.

This shift was visible everywhere at BIBF.

The fair's new IP Licensing Zone sat alongside traditional rights meetings. Publishers spoke openly about AI-assisted editorial workflows, multilingual localisation and marketing automation, treating AI less as a future disruption and more as part of the industry's infrastructure.

Meanwhile, children's publishing, which now accounts for almost 55% of China's retail book market by value, increasingly feels less like a publishing category and more like an innovation laboratory. Books, toys, illustration, animation, licensing and experiential retail are becoming part of the same conversation.

Perhaps nowhere was this convergence clearer than in Liu Zhenyun's new novel *Salty Jokes*.

The novel explores how social media can transform private suffering into public spectacle. Lei Jun's own experiences of life in the spotlight gave the discussion particular resonance.

As he observed during the conversation: "In the age of traffic, praise brings traffic, criticism brings traffic, and mockery brings even more traffic." For many international visitors, BIBF can still feel like a traditional book fair. Increasingly, however, it resembles something much broader: a meeting point between publishing, technology, entertainment and cultural IP.



That was reflected not only in the conversations happening on stage, but in many of the international headlines emerging from Beijing this year, from AI and publishing workflows, to webnovel, microdramas and cross-media storytelling ecosystems. For international publishers watching from the sidelines, the message is clear: China is no longer a market you learn about in reports. It's a laboratory you need to observe directly.

The future of publishing will not look exactly like Beijing. But for anyone serious about understanding where publishing is headed, it's becoming difficult to ignore what's already happening there.

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