

The East is read

The internet is changing Chinese literature

DIGITAL books are changing traditional publishing models everywhere. In America and Britain, the rise of electronic books is the cause. China's revolution is different.

"I can't identify any popular literary trend that didn't originate online," says Jo Lusby of Penguin China. Although e-readers are still scarce, the internet has greatly affected reading habits. Chinese people increasingly read books on phones, tablets and laptops. People under 30, who are most likely to own such devices, are the most avid readers, says Eric Abrahamsen, a Beijing-based publishing consultant.

The result has been an outpouring of mass-market fiction, written (and read) on websites, not in print. Five years ago internet publishers were typically informal, back-room outfits, but Shanda, an online gaming company, seized the commercial opportunity and now owns most of the literary sites. It sells subscriptions by the chapter or book, by the week or month. Online novels start at around five yuan (\$0.80) compared with 30 yuan for an average printed volume.

Some of the newly popular online genres, such as romance, exist everywhere. Others could be termed fiction with Chinese characteristics: grave-robbing stories, for example; official corruption fables involving scheming cadres; and time-travel books where 2,000-year-old warriors pop into a contemporary Beijing disco.

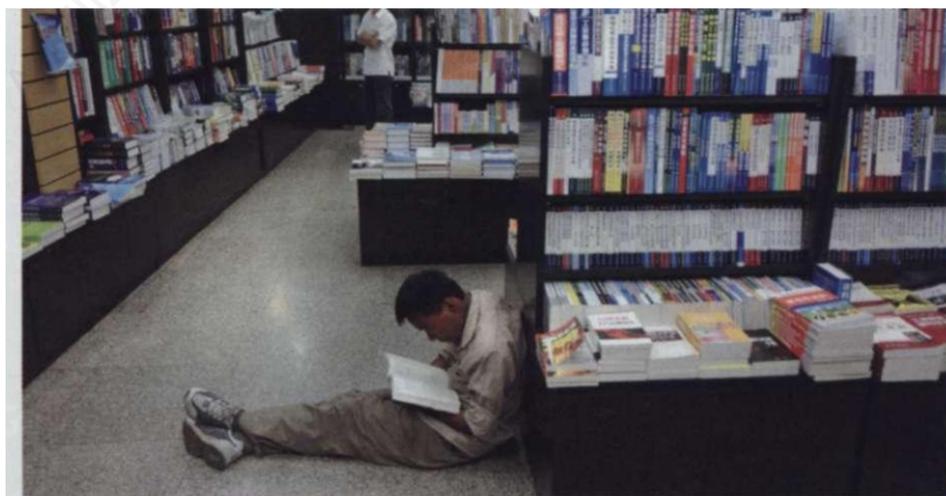
Some of this online material makes it into book form. Print sales, dominated by the country's 580 state-owned publishing houses, are now worth 44 billion yuan (\$7

billion). But growth has slowed from 10% a year in 2007 to around 5% according to Yang Wei of OpenBook, a market-research firm. Like many online start-ups, Shanda is not yet making money out of web books, although revenues are growing.

The internet has also changed the way that books are promoted. China has relatively few bookshops so cultural networking sites such as Douban.com have proved good at targeting new readers. Few writers make much money, online or in print. The handful of stylish novelists who do have become celebrities. Guo Jingming, a 28-year-old with six novels in 2011's top 20 list, manages a group of young writers whose magazine *Top Novel* sells 400,000 copies a month. Han Han, a 29-year-old novelist turned racing-car driver, has a popular blog. Mr Han rose to fame cleverly tweaking the authorities without running foul of the censors. Today's edgy writers, such as Murong Xuecun, can steer around the censors with their online writing, then make necessary cuts in their print editions. Most authors give the censors no trouble. They know where the line is drawn.

The proliferation of television channels has created a new stable of authors, and books by television hosts populate best-seller lists. Many are self-help titles. Bai Yansong, a state television presenter, shot up the charts with "Are You Happy?"; and the popularity of "Why is our Life so Hard?", a book by a talk-show host, Lang Xianping, says much about people's concerns that they are not better off, despite a booming economy.

Some foreign titles win commercial success. Stieg Larsson's "Girl with the Dragon Tattoo" trilogy has sold more than 100,000 copies in Chinese. Yet publishing is a local affair, and even translated titles may be trumped by more popular Chinese imitations. Dan Brown's "The Da Vinci Code", for example, has been outstripped locally by his Chinese counterpart, He Ma, whose ten-part "Tibet Code" unearths ancient Tibetan Buddhist secrets. ■



There's more online