



BOOK LIST

What China’s Reading: Outside the Awards

We recommend five books from China that deserve more recognition, from an internet novel about the fashion industry to a star reporter’s study of how Germany reckoned with its wartime past.

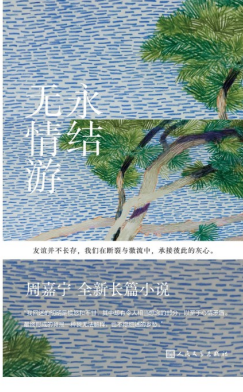
NA ZHONG — SEPTEMBER 22, 2026

FICTION



It’s awards season in the Chinese literary world. The Blancpain-Imaginist Literary Prize released its [longlist](#) in early August, with 18 titles published over the past 12 months contending for one of mainland China’s most influential literary prizes. (Three of the nominees — *Phoenix Seeds*, *Crossings* and *Wind and Rain* — were previously [recommended](#) by this column.) In late August, the Lu Xun Literary Award [announced](#) its winners. The ceremony opened with a lengthy video commemorating Lu Xun, the father of modern Chinese literature, who has become a “cute Communist mascot” [according](#) to *The New York Times*; merch that replicated his famous burgundy knit vest went viral among younger audiences following last year’s Shanghai Book Fair.

Awards are vital in publishing: they boost domestic sales and serve as literary quality control for international acquisition. While we applaud the deserved recognition of great works, many exceptional books also slip through the cracks. In this column, I’m recommending five titles that have yet to receive any formal recognition from major awards in China: a novel about lost friendship and idealism by a veteran writer hailed as the voice of her generation; a serialized internet novel republished as a trilogy about women wielding power in high fashion; a short story collection about women grappling with their father’s Alzheimer’s and Kung Fu masters; a journalist’s book of reportage on how Germany reckons with its difficult past; and a claustrophobic short story collection portraying dark academia. Happy reading!



Buy the book >

1. Ethereal Bonds That Never End

永结无情游

ZHOU JIANING 周嘉宁 | MAY 1, 2026 | PEOPLE’S LITERATURE PUBLISHING HOUSE

Born and raised in Shanghai, Zhou Jianing published her first novel at 19 and has since become one of the most influential voices of the post-80s generation, penning over 10 novels and story collections. Known for her introspective, sometimes passive, characters, Zhou has turned her gaze outward in her recent work. Now, her characters use inertia to resist the oppressive, materialistic milieu around them. *Ethereal Bonds That Never End* is her most successful attempt yet. After losing touch with her best friend from high school, a woman reflects on a failed education experiment she participated in in the early 1990s. A loose pattern of lost youth, thwarted idealism and broken friendships emerges. Spanning the 1990s to the end of the pandemic, this slim, taut novel is steeped in Zhou’s signature clarity and ennui, and serves as a therapeutic read for those looking to better understand China’s Lost Generation.



Buy the book >

2. LINO

零诺

XING YANYAN 行烟烟 | JULY 1, 2026 | CMC PRESS GROUP

Imagine *Succession* meets *The Good Wife*, set in contemporary China’s fiercely competitive fashion industry. The trilogy of novels *LINO* follows three strong-willed women from three generations as they navigate careers at LINO Fashion, a Chinese conglomerate. Song Lingnuo is a recent graduate, hard up financially and desperate to keep her job in a stagnant economy. Shi Jin, in a bid to prove herself, switches departments, only to find her new boss behaving inappropriately toward her. Ji Xia, in her late forties, leaves a senior position at an international brand to launch her own consultancy. What ties these women together is their relentless drive, unapologetic ambition and unconventional views on relationships. While *LINO* is a fictional brand, the novel is so steeped in industry insider details that it could only have been written by a true veteran. Written under the pen name Xing Yanyan, the books were originally serialized on online literary forums and the author’s WeChat blog. With solid characterization, efficient pacing and snappy dialogue, this hefty trilogy is a compulsive read you’ll want to pass along to your friends the moment you finish it.



Buy the book >

3. She and Her Resolution

她和她的决心

DONG LAI 东来 | MARCH 1, 2026 | RELURE

You may recognize Dong Lai’s name from my last [column](#), but this short story collection, published within a year of her debut novel *Phoenix Seeds*, marks a departure from her past work. Growing up, Dong was haunted by her female identity. Her family favored boys and she witnessed relatives trapped in unhappy marriages. She wrote from the male point of view as an escape, but upon turning 30 she chose to confront questions about marriage, motherhood and career. Her self-reflection inspired the six stories collected here, all featuring female protagonists. These women lead ordinary lives until circumstances catch them off guard. One is unexpectedly reunited with a younger sister given away at birth. Another tries to reconnect with her mother after her father’s Alzheimer’s diagnosis, only to discover the painful truth about her parents’ emotionally estranged marriage. One story that stands out follows a young woman who becomes a kung fu master’s disciple, an experience that leaves a lifelong impact. “Fear is an illusion,” Dong writes in the afterword: the best way to defeat fear is to look it in the face and move on.



Buy the book >

4. Another Country

另一个国度

YANG XIAO 杨潇 | JUNE 1, 2026 | IMAGINIST

In his latest nonfiction book, *Another Country*, acclaimed Chinese reporter Yang Xiao retraces his travels to Germany over the last 13 years in order to answer a central question: how do a country and its people reckon with a dark past, as well as their own role in it? During his visits in 2012, 2019 and 2024, Yang toured war museums, historical landmarks and Nazi concentration camp memorial sites across Germany, interviewing researchers, writers, curators and descendants of eyewitnesses. The more places he visited and people he spoke with, the more he realized that the 20th century is not over: we are still living in its fallout. Interweaving personal travelogue, testimonies, writers’ reflections and academic research, the book unfolds like a well-paced documentary, following the author’s journey in rough chronological order while maintaining a clear thematic thread throughout. Yang is one of many Chinese journalists turning their gaze globally and contributing to China’s booming travel-writing scene. One must wonder if his grappling with Germany’s historical memory is an attempt to answer questions that are much closer to home, but not so easy to write about.



Buy the book >

5. The Exquisite Pagoda

玲珑塔

SU ZHENSHU 苏枕书 | MARCH 1, 2025 | LUCIDA

The literary subgenre of dark academia has been all the rage in recent years. In this short story collection, it finds a new iteration that’s quieter, yet no less dark. In Su Zhenshu’s hands, dark academia is less about gothic aesthetics and obsession with knowledge than regimented social orders, entrenched sexism and power struggles. A historian by training based in Kyoto, Su is alert to the challenges faced by female intellectuals across time and place. Populating her first collection in 11 years is a cast of sidelined women: young researchers struggling to survive; a Qing dynasty female scholar with no outlet for her talent; a Kung Opera actress with no hope of advancement; and an overeducated female PhD stuck in a career limbo. The title is taken from a traditional tongue twister in which an old monk takes his disciples to admire the Exquisite Pagoda, counting all the way up to the 13th level. Suddenly, a fierce gust blows everything apart: the stars are scattered all over the sky, the monk and his disciples are gone, and the scriptures are torn apart — a fitting symbol for a book about a broken academic system and false hope. ■



Hailing from Chengdu, Na Zhong is a New York-based fiction writer and literary translator. She is author of the novella *Three* (2026). Her work has appeared in *Guernica*, *A Public Space*, *Lit Hub* and others. Na co-founded the bilingual creative community, [Accent Society](#), and co-hosts the Mandarin literary podcast [半岛FM](#). Na is a 2021-2022 Center for Fiction Emerging Writers Fellow, and a 2023 MacDowell Fellow.