

# Chinese Comics: Embracing Traditional Culture and High-Quality IP

By Wei Ke

As a universal “language” of international cultural exchange, comics convey rich emotions and ideas through their unique artistic expression and distinct visual elements, becoming a shared medium for readers worldwide. In recent years, the Chinese comic publishing industry has seen rapid growth. Major publishing companies and comic platforms have simultaneously focused on “introducing” and “creating” original content, leading to the publication of a series of outstanding works. According to the *2023 Annual Report on the Book Retail Market* released by Beijing Open-Book, the trend of “comics+” became an important content display mode in 2023, with a significant emergence of new comic works for both adults and children covering various themes. At the same time, Chinese comic publishing companies have strengthened collaborations with overseas counterparts, bringing a substantial number of Chinese original comic works onto the global stage.

## The Rise of Chinese Original Comics



Kuaikan Comics is one of the first platforms in China to venture into the global comic market, with its first comic work published in South Korea as early as 2015. According to the platform’s data, Kuaikan now has over 340 million users, with 120,000 creators and more than 11,000 comic works. The platform has

licensed 504 works for overseas distribution, ranking among the top sellers on major comic platforms in Southeast Asia, Europe, and the United States. Kuaikan’s founder, Chen Anni, compares comics to “technological chips” that carry a nation’s culture and values. She hopes to promote more excellent Chinese comics worldwide through the platform’s internationalization.

Tianwen Kadokawa is a joint venture under Tianwen Animation, a subsidiary of Hunan Juvenile & Children’s Publishing House. Tianwen Kadokawa focuses on nurturing domestic comic artists, creators, and editors. Together, they develop products such as light novels, comics, and youth fashion readings, as well as films, TV programs, and new media content. According to Luo Liujun, deputy general manager of Tianwen Animation, their “X-Venture” series of science comics has sold over 10 million copies across Asia. The full-color pages, rich in detail, help children broaden their knowledge and horizons. Data shows that in 2023 alone, Tianwen Kadokawa published 40 comic titles, ranking top among comic publishing institutions.

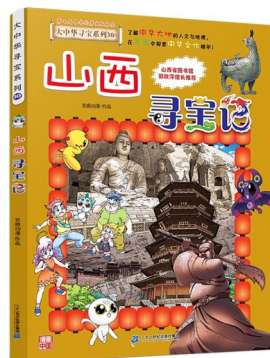
Cheng Ji, director of the Beijing Editorial Office of Sichuan Children’s Publishing House, stated that the company has adhered to its distinct characteristics and positioning in recent years, publishing a range of best-selling comic books. These are broadly categorized into two types. The first one includes works based on various high-quality IPs, such as the popular original literary figure “Mi Xiaoquan” and internationally popular animated characters like “Ultraman” and “Catch!

Teenieping”. The second features traditional culture-themed works such as *A Comic View of History* (《漫眼看历史》), *Comics on National Treasures* (《漫话国宝》), and *The Legend of Young Su Dongpo* (《少年苏东坡传奇》). Many of these books achieve monthly sales exceeding 10,000 copies, with titles like *Mi Xiaoquan’s Comic Idioms* (《米小圈漫画成语》) and *A Comic View of History* remaining perennial bestsellers.

Cheng believes that the continued growth of children’s comics in the Chinese market partly thanks to their ability to meet children’s psychological entertainment needs. Additionally, it is easy for comics to combine with cultural, psychological, educational, and encyclopedic content, building a bridge between parents’ expectations and children’s interests. Speaking of content, Cheng highlights the role of comics in shaping children’s minds. He asserts that outstanding comic books must first be excellent by nature, offering healthy content that benefits children, so as to relieve their stress, boost their spirits and provide new knowledge and inspiration. Publishers should not be swayed by market factors, as publishing comic books that lack useful substance could lead to long-term issues.

Since 2012, 21st Century Publishing House has developed the *Great China Treasure Hunt* series, publishing 31 books in the series to date. In August 2024, the latest installment, *The Jilin Treasure Hunt* (《吉林寻宝记》), was released with an initial print run of one million copies. The series has collectively sold 78 million copies. Its author, Taiwan-based comic artist Sun Jiayu, aims to showcase China’s stunning landscapes, rich resources, and cultural customs through comics. These works not only disseminate geographical, historical, and scientific knowledge, but also help children learn about their homeland and cultivate their patriotism. “We consulted a large number of documents and spent considerable time conducting field research to present China’s human geography authentically to readers,” said Sun.

## Focusing on Traditional Culture and Creating Influential IPs



Comic publishing companies should draw inspiration from traditional Chinese culture. Li Kunwu, a renowned comic artist from Yunnan, is one of China’s leading comic artists, with a large overseas readership. His works have been published in over ten countries, including the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and South Korea, and have been especially well-received in French-speaking countries and regions. Li attributes his success abroad to his focus on China’s rich traditional culture. “Many overseas readers are eager to learn about China, and my works are highly intelligible to readers globally, because they integrate traditional Chinese painting techniques with popular Western graphic novel styles and comic storyboard style.”

Renowned comic artist Cai Zhizhong also places great emphasis on exploring traditional culture. His comic series *The Hundred Schools of Thought* (“诸子百家”) has been translated into 49 languages worldwide, with 40 million copies sold. Cai believes that although he is simply a comic artist, the international appeal of his works lies in his ability to convey Eastern philosophies via comics. Jin Cheng, deputy director of the Animation Art Committee of the China Artists Association and chairman of the Guangzhou Animation Artists Association, suggests that comic artists and publishers should draw nourishment from traditional culture and identify distinctive Chinese elements, so as to showcase Eastern aesthetics and values in their works.

IP-based operations are crucial to the internationalization of comic works. Since its publication in 2023, the *Three-Body Problem* (《三体》) comic has caused a market sensation, securing print publishing rights in France, the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom, and Italy, as well as traditional Chinese editions in Hong Kong and Taiwan, China. Within a year, it set a new record for “Chinese comics going global”. The comic’s overseas copyright agent, China Education Books Import & Export Corporation and China Copyright Service Corporation, stated that the comic book *Three-Body Problem* faithfully adheres to the original novel, earning praise from overseas publishers for its adaptation quality, which reflects the high standards of Chinese comics. Dai Haoran, deputy general manager and product director at Baguangfen Culture company, one of the comic’s producers, noted that the project cost six years to complete, with two years dedicated to studying the text. Each team member has read the original *Three-Body Problem* at least three times on average, resulting in a meticulously crafted final product.

On August 8, People’s Literature Publishing House (PLPH) launched the eighth volume of the comic *My Cat Hates Me* (《就喜欢你看不惯我又干不掉我的样子》) across all major online platforms. The series has garnered over 10 billion reads online, with over 6 million copies of its print books sold. Additionally, the series has been translated into more than ten languages, including English, French, Korean, Hungarian, Czech, and Vietnamese, for international publication. PLPH attaches great importance to developing the series’ “Supremo Cat” character, creating a range of figures and cultural products and showcasing the plush toy at international book fairs, which attracts attention from foreign readers and publishers.

Jieli Publishing House (JPH) has released a series of original comics, including *Soldier Bighead* (《大头兵》), *Cool Bug School* (《酷虫学校》), and *The Tahirian Chronicles* (《塔希里亚故事集》). Tang Ling, executive deputy editor-in-chief of JPH, noted that IPs have a significant impact on comic works. Overseas IPs like “Marvel Universe” and “Slam Dunk” have substantially boosted the sales of related comic works. Currently, domestic publishing companies are highly focusing on developing original IPs, such as Fei Zhi’s *When History Meows* (《如果历史是一群喵》), I Am Bubaichi’s *Bubaichi* (《白吃漫画》) series, and the Hunzhi team’s *Half-Hour Comics* (《半小时漫画》) series. “An increasing number of publishers are consciously developing original IPs, which is now an important trend in the domestic comic market,” said Tang.