

From Corporate Executive to Literary Steward: Ding Li's Creative Journey and Shenzhen Narratives

Ding Li, Wang Zuyou

Abstract: This interview with the writer Ding Li, covering his cross-sector transition, creative practice, literary concepts, etc. Ding Li had diverse workplace experiences in his early years. Due to a career change in 2001, he started writing novels, specializing in financial and Shenzhen-themed works that combine professionalism and literary quality. He is prolific, and most of his works have been published in leading journals. He mentioned that his creative mentality changed with his professional titles and positions, shifting from pursuing bestsellers to focusing on human nature and literary responsibility. He also discussed the characteristics of Shenzhen literature and the differences between documentary and fictional creation. In addition, he shared his experiences in writing routine and inspiration management, his observations during his tenure in literary organizations after retirement, looked ahead to his future writing plans, and shared his hopes for younger writers.

Keywords: cross-sector transition; financial novels; Shenzhen theme; creative concept

1. Cross-sector Transition: The Starting Point from “Corporate Professional” to “Professional Writer”

Wang Zuyou: Your early life was rich in diverse experiences—you worked as a propaganda team member in a production and construction corps, a factory technician, a manager in a foreign-funded enterprise, and a core executive in a listed company. When you decided to try writing novels in 2001 (at age 43), did these non-literary professional experiences become your “confidence”? For instance, was there a specific workplace episode or observation that sparked the impulse, “I want to write this story down”?

Ding Li: Actually, I've loved literature since childhood, largely thanks to my family's influence. My father was an old soldier who fought in the War of Resistance Against Japan. What left the deepest impression was that after his retirement, he kept writing. My older sisters were all avid readers. They read, and I followed, picking up books after them. I once read through a small library. Very young, I felt the urge to create because of reading. I wrote back then but didn't know how to submit manuscripts, so of course, nothing was published. In 1977, when the national college entrance exam was reinstated, influenced by the publicity surrounding Chen Jingrun and the “Goldbach Conjecture,” I applied to study science. I left Guangde, Anhui, to study in Changsha, Hunan. After graduation, I worked in technical fields, first as a factory technician, later transferred to a design and research institute after further study and steadily publishing technical papers in professional journals. I won the Anhui Province Natural Science Award in 1988.

In 1991, I was transferred to Shenzhen Science and Technology Park to take a leadership role. Later, influenced by the economic tide, I “jumped into the sea” from the Science Park

and became a core executive in a listed company. As for trying to write novels in 2001, it was forced by circumstances. That year, due to financial system reforms, the listed company I worked for was delisted. Returning to the state sector was impossible. At 43, it was unrealistic to apply for high-level executive positions again, and applying for entry-level jobs was hard to adapt to. Feeling lost and filled with mixed emotions, I was forced to try writing novels. There was an impulse to write about my experience of blindly “jumping into the sea” and “stumbling into the corporate world,” and the frustration it brought.

Unexpectedly, my Shenzhen capital market-themed novels were very well-received, and I couldn't stop. The media even called me “China's most explosive financial literature writer,” probably because of my fast writing speed and high output. In 2003, I published seven full-length novels, with three more serialized in magazines like *China Writers*, Original Edition of *Fiction Monthly*, and *Woodpecker*, causing a sensation and becoming a “phenomenon.” This attracted major publishers like Zang Yongqing, who solicited manuscripts from me and subsequently published seven of my novels, becoming my literary benefactor.

Wang Zuyou: After publishing *Collateral* and *Limit Up, Limit Down* in consecutive issues of *People's Literature* in 2003, you chose to resign and write full-time. Besides the encouragement from the publications, was there also consideration for the “stability of full-time writing” behind this “reckless” decision? Did you face challenges in writing routine or finances in the initial period after resigning?

Ding Li: The situation was better than I expected. After the company was delisted, relying on my title as an executive of a well-known company (Shenzhen Jintian, code 003, one of Shenzhen's “old five”) and my reputation from frequently publishing articles in newspapers and periodicals—especially my “high theories” at the time advocating for “debt-to-equity swaps,” “financial leasing,” and “third-party guarantees”—I had accumulated some fame. So, I was quickly hired as the general manager of a private investment company.

Two years later, in 2003, the motivations for resigning to become a full-time “stay-at-home writer” were twofold: First, it was indeed “recklessness.” I thought that having two stories published consecutively in *People's Literature* and publishing seven novels already made me a “great writer,” so of course I should be “wholehearted.” How could a “great writer” hesitate to resign? It would be disrespectful to literature! Second, being a “General Manager” under a private boss was essentially no different from being a “laborer” doing physical work. The frustrations endured during that time, the things I had to do against my conscience, and the potential legal risks are indescribable. It was better to resign and focus on writing at home.

In the first year, I published seven novels and had three serialized, with income higher than being a GM at the private enterprise. However, such creative enthusiasm and output were clearly unsustainable, and I soon felt financial pressure. I regretted it again, but there was no turning back. After all, I was already past the “critical age” of 45 and no longer accepted by the job market at that time.

Wang Zuyou: The two key milestones of being assessed as “Literary Creation Level 2” and joining the China Writers Association in 2004, and being promoted to “Literary Creation

Level 1” and becoming Vice Chairman of the Shenzhen Writers Association in 2010—how did these impact your creative mentality and direction? Did you shift from “free writing” to writing with a greater sense of “literary responsibility”?

Ding Li: Yes. Before, I wrote novels out of impulse and desperation. After being awarded senior professional titles, especially the top-level literary creation title and taking on certain positions, I felt I was now a “National First-Class Writer.” I could no longer “write whatever is best-selling”; I needed to think about “being worthy of literature” and my title. My creative content gradually shifted from Shenzhen workplace “financial novels” to “urban literature and the essence of human nature.” However, this transformation might not have achieved my intended results because readers seemed to prefer my “financial novels.”

By the way, I encountered good leadership. In 2004, for the assessment of Literary Creation Level 2 (associate professor level), it was Mr. Xie Wangxin, then Chairman of the Guangdong Writers Association, who personally came from Guangzhou to Shenzhen to chase me down and get my signature on a form. It was around the summer of 2003, raining heavily. Chairman Xie cornered me in the lobby of the Shenzhen Federation of Literary and Art Circles, took out a pen, and asked me to sign, saying it was a rule—I had to join the provincial association first to be assessed for the senior title. It was pouring outside, so the scene is vivid, and I'll always remember Chairman Xie Wangxin's thin figure.

As for joining the China Writers Association, it was even smoother. A department head from either the Creation & Research Department or the Liaison Department of the CWA came to Shenzhen for research, learned about my situation, immediately had me fill out the relevant materials, and soon after returning to Beijing, mailed me the Membership Certificate. I remember paying a 200-yuan membership fee at the time. Unfortunately, I don't even know that person's name. So, whenever I hear people talk about favoritism in joining writers' associations or professional title assessments, I don't believe it, because hearsay can't compare to personal experience.

II. Creative Practice: Themes, Inspiration, and Writing Methodology

Financial Themes: The Fusion of “Workplace Experience” and “Literary Expression”

Wang Zuyou: Your works extensively cover financial fields (like stock markets, workplaces, corporate management), such as *the Getting Out at the Top series*, *Listed Company*, *Notes of a Professional Manager*, etc. Do the plots in these works (like “insider stock tips,” “zero-cost acquisition”) have shadows of real workplace cases?

Ding Li: Of course. Some even draw from my own experiences, which is why I've been criticized for “experience-based writing.” Moreover, my novels have a strong “sense of immersion,” leading many readers to believe they are all based on my real experiences. Even Teacher Ni Heping, an editor from *Qingming* magazine, bluntly advised me: “Writing novels relies on imagination; you can't just write about your personal experiences.”

But in fact, the skeleton of my novels is personal experience, while many details are “imagined,” or rather, “personal experiences enriched by imagination.” Real experiences are often simple and direct, not as tortuous and rich as imagined ones. Furthermore, even the

novel's skeleton isn't entirely my "own" personal experience; many are others' "personal experiences."

Before writing novels, I spent over a decade in business, immersed in that commercial and capital operation circle and atmosphere. There were almost constant social engagements, and everyone talked about business opportunities and experiences. So, many "experiences" weren't my "personal experiences" but rather others' experiences. Because the circle was unique, things heard in the business world felt different from those heard in literary circles—more real, more "unique." Mixed with my own experiences, I could discern the truth of what I heard, filtering out the false, making the novels feel authentic and immersive.

As recorded on the China Constitution Dissemination Network on February 1, 2022, in *What Makes a Good Chinese Story*: "Before starting the scriptwriting for *A Lifelong Journey*, Wang Hailing sought out novels by Ding Li, Zhou Meisen, and others to read." Thus, some say Ding Li's novels will become the "Unofficial History of Shenzhen."

Wang Zuyou: How do you balance "professionalism" and "literary quality" during creation—avoiding overly obscure financial jargon while maintaining industry authenticity? In 2021, China Literature and History Publishing House published *The Collection of Chinese Professional Writer Works • Ding Li Volume* financial novel series. What were the selection criteria for these "treasured" works?

Ding Li: Since they are novels, literary quality is naturally prioritized. But occasionally revealed professionalism can add authenticity and give readers a sense of "strangeness," making them feel fresh and believe they've gained "intellectual benefit." This can also have a good effect, an effect that writers from liberal arts backgrounds might find hard to achieve, thus establishing my own "characteristic." China Literature and History Publishing House likely valued this "characteristic" when publishing the series in 2021. Otherwise, judged solely on "literary quality," they probably wouldn't have chosen me.

Wang Zuyou: Compared to early financial novels (like *Limit Up*, *Limit Down* from 2004), what changes are there in the observation of the "financial ecosystem" in later works (like *Mr. Qianhai* from 2024)?

Ding Li: Early published works, like *Limit Up*, *Limit Down* and *Getting Out at the Top*, etc., reflected more "professionalism." Later works, like *Mr. Qianhai* and *Chinese-Style Shareholders*, etc., reflect more "literary quality." Two reasons:

First, early on I was a "free writer," only thinking about "bestsellers." Later, as a "National First-Class Writer" and Vice Chairman of Shenzhen Writers Association, I felt I needed to be worthy of my title and position. I couldn't just think about "bestsellers"; I had to write works "worthy of literature." The subjective requirements were different.

Second, there were objective changes. Early on, even though I wrote novels, I carried the genes of an engineer and corporate executive deep down, and these genes were strong, so the novels naturally had a strong "professional characteristic." Later, after being a first-class writer and literature professor for a long time, plus changes in reading habits, subtly, I gradually transformed from a science/engineering guy or businessperson to having a "literary

temperament.” The novels naturally shifted from emphasizing “professionalism” to emphasizing “literary quality.”

For example, in *Limit Up, Limit Down*, the proportion of matter-of-fact narrative is heavy, while in *Mr. Qianhai*, there's much more description of character relationships and psychology. The depiction of the “financial ecosystem” also gradually shifted from surface appearance to essence. Essentially, behind “financial phenomena” lies “human nature.”

Wang Zuyou: You've said, “Financial novels are not ‘financial instruction manuals’; they should write about ‘people struggling within finance.’” For instance, characters in *The Banker* (2023, *China Writer*) and *Shareholder* (2014, *Beijing Literature*)—do they all share common dilemmas of “workplace people”? How do you typically use character choices to reveal human conflicts within the financial field?

Ding Li: On one hand, “literature is the study of people”; “finance” is just the environment and background for the characters. People in different environments have different languages and ways of thinking. Religion holds that people come into the world to suffer or are born with original sin. Religion didn't emerge from nothing; it reflects social reality to some extent. So it can be understood that characters in any environment have their helplessness and struggles. As a writer forged from over a decade of experience in Shenzhen's business and capital operations, the struggles of my characters naturally manifest more as “people struggling within finance.”

Mr. Liao Lingpeng from the China Development Institute in Shenzhen noticed my approach. He once wrote in a work: Many modern writers, like Guo Jingming, write about the rich, but their wealth is inexplicable, as if it just floated to them. They never worry about money. In Ding Li's novels, when writing about the rich, he always clearly explains how they became rich, detailing the origins clearly, just like the precise accounting of silver taels for each character in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, leaving no doubts or regrets, making it convincing.

As for whether the protagonists in *The Banker* and *Shareholder* share common workplace dilemmas, I think they have both commonalities and individualities. The commonality is they all have “the troubles of the rich.” The individuality is that the causes and manifestations of each “rich person's troubles” are different.

I've also said: The troubles of the poor are hard troubles; the troubles of the rich are soft troubles. That is, the rich person's troubles are “self-inflicted worries.” If they can let go, they needn't worry. But the troubles of poverty are caused by poverty itself; no matter how the protagonist thinks, the troubles remain. Or put another way: the poor person's troubles are material; the rich person's troubles are spiritual. Spiritual troubles can only be addressed with spirit; material troubles must be addressed with material.

III. Shenzhen Themes: Writing “City Memory” and “Mirror of the Times”

Wang Zuyou: Having lived long-term in Shenzhen, your works heavily feature Shenzhen elements, such as *Shenzhen River, Unofficial History of Shenzhen* (2017, *Contemporary Era*), *Urban Village* (2018, *China Writers*), *Return to Qianhai* (2024, *China Writers*), and the already contracted works slated for 2026 publication: *Luckily It's Shenzhen, Shenzhen*

Connects to Tianlong Mountain, and Gazing at Shenzhen from Huangshan. What is the “Shenzhen literary characteristic” in your eyes? How do you avoid writing “Shenzhen” as a mere “geographical symbol” during creation, but instead make the city a “character” that drives the plot?

Ding Li: My article *Why Hasn't Shenzhen Produced Major Literary Works?*, published in the first issue of *Free Talk on Literature* in 2021, caused a sensation. It prompted leaders from the Publicity Department specifically called the Shenzhen Municipal Party Committee Propaganda Department to verify the situations mentioned in my article, such as “Special Zone Literature becoming the pure literary magazine with the lowest manuscript fees in the nation’s wealthiest city,” “Shenzhen publishing houses not being allowed to publish full-length novels” and “Shenzhen as a quasi-provincial-level city lacking a literature institute,” etc. Nowadays, these aspects have been improved and addressed. So I say Shenzhen is a city courageous in correcting errors.

However, the issue I raised about “major works being inherently at odds with Shenzhen culture” remains not entirely resolved. Because the core of Shenzhen culture is “efficiency culture”—“Time is money, efficiency is life.” Yet major works can only be the product of low efficiency; they cannot be produced through “Great Leap Forward” methods. So, to this day, Shenzhen writers still haven’t won the Mao Dun Literature Award, haven’t produced truly “major works.”

Almost all my novels are set against a Shenzhen backdrop, possessing a strong “Shenzhen characteristics.” Recently, some authoritative experts even said, “Only Ding Li’s novels best embody Shenzhen characteristics.” But after all, I only started literary creation at 43, and at 57 suffered a sudden stroke. Now I can only write with my left hand. During my physically healthy early creative period, my motives weren’t pure—I wrote for bestsellers and income, not pursuing literary heights. By the time I started receiving a pension and no longer worried about livelihood, I was a collection of “old, weak, sick, and disabled,” unable to do as I wished.

The “Shenzhen literary characteristic” in my eyes is still “efficiency culture.” After all, the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone is an “economic zone,” must center on economic development, and the essence of developing the economy is “efficiency.” So, some critics say: “Only ‘high-efficiency individuals’ like Ding Li writing ‘high-efficiency novels’ (high output, publishing several books a year; without accident, around 2006 will see seven or eight books—three from Shenzhen Publishing House, one from Masses Publishing House, three or four from China Yanshi Publishing House) can be considered true ‘Shenzhen novels.’”

As for your question about avoiding writing “Shenzhen” as a simple “geographical symbol,” that problem doesn’t exist for me. My novels are clearly “Shenzhen novels” at a glance; they don’t need “symbols.” Even if all the place names in my novels were replaced with other locations, people would still recognize them as “Shenzhen.” This is opposite to other writers. For the sake of a “literary Great Leap Forward,” Shenzhen once recruited nationally known writers from other parts of China. Some among them, to be worthy of Shenzhen, wrote many novels plastered with “Shenzhen” labels. But such symbols could be replaced with other places and the novels would still work. My novels aren’t like that because “Shenzhen” is a spirit, not merely a “place name.”

Wang Zuyou: Works like *Crossing the Shenzhen River* (2012, *Beijing Literature*), *Friends in Shenzhen* (2020, *The Great Wall*), *Old Friends in Shenzhen* (2025, *Woodpecker*) span over a decade, depicting interpersonal relationships among Shenzhen people. How do you think Shenzhen's "immigrant culture" affects emotional connections between people? Do these works contain implicit observations and reflections on Shenzhen's "city warmth"?

Ding Li: Let me answer "city warmth" first, as it's more important. I believe that besides "efficiency," another core of Shenzhen culture is "tolerance." This also relates to Shenzhen being an "economic zone." To develop the economy, efficiency must be emphasized, while also allowing for "trial and error" and "error correction." What the outside world sees today are world-renowned enterprises like ZTE, Huawei, DJI, Tencent, BYD, etc. But what I see are more failed ventures.

On one hand, when I first came to Shenzhen, I served as Assistant General Manager of the High-Tech Venture Center in Shenzhen Science Park, personally involved in supporting Huawei and BYD. In the end, only these two succeeded; the vast majority were failures. On the other hand, didn't the listed company I served as an executive also get delisted? And didn't the Zhongkezhi Guarantee company I helped establish also disappear? Otherwise, I wouldn't be writing novels. So, for economic development, efficiency and tolerance are equally important, and "tolerance" is the greatest "city warmth."

Now, regarding the influence of "immigrant culture" on emotional connections between people. I believe the essence of "literature as the study of people" in novels is mainly reflected in "interpersonal relationships." So my novels hardly ever begin with scenery; I regard this as a prose-writing approach. Novels go straight to human nature, primarily writing about interpersonal relationships. Therefore, my novels typically start directly with people, depicting direct and subtle relationships between them.

As for Shenzhen's interpersonal relationships, they are undoubtedly deeply influenced by "immigrant culture." If you observe carefully, you'll notice that people in a foreign land pay more attention to interpersonal relationships. For example, two people from Anhui, when in Anhui, aren't considered fellow townfolk and wouldn't claim that connection. But if they go to Guangdong, they naturally become "fellow townfolk." Why? Because people need self-protection. In a foreign place, everyone lacks a sense of security and needs the protection of fellow townfolk, huddling together for warmth.

When I first came to Shenzhen, I swore brotherhood with two fellow townfolk, mutually agreeing: if any of us met with misfortune, the other two must send him back to our hometown. Of course, none of us met with misfortune later, but that promise provided immense security and the confidence to strive in the Special Zone back then.

Thus, we come to the third core of "Shenzhen culture"—immigrant culture. Together with efficiency culture and tolerance culture, they form the three pillars of "Shenzhen culture."

Wang Zuyou: The full-length documentary literature *New Era, New Police* planned for publication in 2026—why did you choose the "police" theme? The creative logic of documentary literature differs greatly from fictional novels. What difficulties did you encounter while collecting material (like interviewing police, sorting cases)? How do you ensure a balance between "documentary nature" and "narrative appeal"?

Ding Li: Let me boast a bit—it’s not “planned for publication” but “already published.” The Ministry of Public Security’s magazine *Woodpecker* featured this full-length non-fiction work as its lead story in the first issue of 2026, and it will soon be published as a single volume by the Ministry’s Masses Publishing House.

The direct reasons the Ministry invited me to write this are twofold: first, *Woodpecker*’s Editor-in-Chief Yang Guifeng was the tutor assigned to me by the college 23 years ago when I attended the correspondence course at the Lu Xun Literary Institute; second, the protagonist of this work, Political Commissar Zhou Kewu, is from my hometown, Ma’anshan, Anhui. The combination of these two destinies led to me being tasked with writing this documentary literature.

Regarding the differences in creative logic between documentary literature and novels, they are indeed significant. Even during the writing process, I had to consciously avoid fiction. As for difficulties in collecting material, needless to say, any writer of non-fiction encounters this. I was quite lucky because, first, the Ministry of Public Security attached great importance. During my on-site interviews in Ma’anshan, Anhui, Editor-in-Chief Yang Guifeng and Editor Xie Xindan of *Woodpecker* specially came from Beijing to Ma’anshan, organized an interview symposium within the city’s public security system, and visited Commissar Zhou Kewu’s birthplace and the Longshanqiao Police Station where he served as a grassroots officer. The local public security and government in Ma’anshan also provided great attention and support, so the entire interview and material collection process was basically smooth.

The greatest difficulty lay in the creative process. The challenge was “readability,” or whether it’s “engaging,” or in your terms, balancing the relationship between “documentary nature” and “narrative appeal.” Frankly, such “thematic creation” works are hard to make engaging; some are even “unreadable.” So, despite official acclaim, even high praise like “Five Ones Project” awards, for the general reader, they often feel unappealing. Especially full-length works rarely make ordinary readers finish them in one go like novels.

Therefore, during the creation of this work, on one hand, I had to avoid fiction as much as possible and adhere to “documentary.” On the other hand, I had to create pleasant surprises and engaging points in structural design, character dialogue, scene description, background introduction, detail presentation, etc., striving to make it “readable” for ordinary readers, ideally making them “follow along” like watching a TV drama series.

For example, digging into the source of the protagonist’s qualities, I started from his childhood when a special forces unit of the PLA was stationed in his village, showing two movies a week. I explored how, although born in a small mountain village, contact with special forces soldiers from all over gave him no lack of insight. Two movies a week and a reading room provided him with more ideological nourishment than a city kid like me from a cadre family. Otherwise, readers wouldn’t believe a mountain village child suddenly having grand ambitions and perspective. Once readers disbelieve, thinking “thematic creation” is too fake, they won’t want to continue.

I made great efforts in this aspect, but whether the expected effect was achieved, I dare not say, only waiting for the test of time, including your evaluation.

IV. Writing Rhythm and Inspiration Management

Wang Zuyou: You have published over a hundred short and medium-length stories in pure literary journals and 50 full-length novels, with extremely high output. Could you share your daily writing routine? For instance, do you have fixed writing times (e. g., early morning/late night)? What is the idea-development cycle for each work (full-length vs. short/medium-length)?

Ding Li: Yes, some say I'm one of the most prolific writers of serious literary fiction in contemporary China.

As for my daily writing routine, it's divided into two stages. In the early creative stage, like 2003, 2004, I wrote in three sessions a day: morning, afternoon, and evening. Font size 5, over 1300 characters per page, producing over 4,000 characters on screen per day. So back then, I could almost write a 100,000-word short novel each month. I was determined to publish 100 full-length novels in my lifetime, surpassing Balzac.

But this was unsustainable. Towards the end, my mind felt numb; every evening, it felt filled with sawdust. My later stroke, cerebral infarction, might be related to overusing my brain during that period. After the stroke in 2015, I thought I could never write again, even dared not read. After leaving the hospital, the first thing I did was move part of my book collection from the study to the staircase entrance daily, letting the cleaning lady conveniently take them to sell as waste, even books personally signed and gifted by Mo Yan were among them.

Later, during a follow-up hospital visit, I told the doctor about this. The doctor said it wasn't necessary; if I could write novels, use my brain more, even play mahjong, it would instead be beneficial for recovery. Subsequently, Teacher Yang Xiaosheng took the initiative to help me publish my novel collection *Shareholder*. I needed to write a postscript, turned on the computer, found that I could type with my left hand, and gradually resumed writing.

The other stage is now. I write novels in the morning, play mahjong in the afternoon, and make sure I get in 10,000 steps in the evening. I write only once a day, from 6 a. m. to 9 a. m. At other times, I don't write at all—it's just leisure or exercise. I choose to write in the morning for two reasons: first, the mind is clearest; second, there are the fewest distractions, allowing high concentration. Now I'm very careful about protecting my brain, avoiding fatigue. Even during morning writing, after writing a paragraph, I play a round of Tractor, check stock trends, or watch WeChat videos, letting my brain rest, and only after a short break do I continue writing.

Ideas usually come during evening walks, but not always. When I travel and don't write at all, I often get more inspiration. But when I return, I often forget them. Sometimes after conceiving well, while writing, it completely deviates from the original idea.

For non-fiction, like the recently completed *New Era*, *New Police*, I can outline chapters first and write accordingly, so it won't go astray. But for novels, especially medium and short stories, I never have outlines. So, the final result often isn't what I first imagined. For full-length novels, in my case, most are expanded from medium-length novels. I treat my medium-length novels as "outlines" for full-length novels. The most obvious example is *Limit Up*, *Limit Down*, published in *People's Literature* in 2003, later expanded into a full-length novel of the same name. So, for me, there seems to be no such thing as an "idea-development cycle" issue. I write as thoughts come—going with the flow, with no

fixed rules.

Wang Zuyou: From *Remarriage (Fragrant Grass)* in 2001 to *Analects Hair Salon* (Original Edition of *Fiction Monthly*) and *Looking for an End-of-Life Companion* (Special Zone Literature) in 2025, your creation has continued for over 20 years. Have there been moments of “inspiration drying up”? For instance, getting stuck midway through a work—how do you usually break through?

Ding Li: In my early years, I did encounter situations where I got “stuck in the middle of writing.” I was so anxious that I walked around the garden in the community, racking my brains and wanting to talk to someone about it. But writers are inherently lonely. At that time, I was not well-known and had no friends in the industry. So, I could only talk to my wife about it. However, she would ask with a tone as if she was worried about my business failing, “Does that mean all the work you’ve done these days has been in vain?” It made me laugh and cry.

But now, this kind of thing no longer happens. Probably because I no longer pursue speed and no longer have the idea of “publishing 100 long novels.” Therefore, I understand that the so-called “inspiration dry spell” or “getting stuck in the middle of writing” is actually caused by one’s own inner anxiety and eagerness. If I now regard writing novels as a pleasure rather than a “task,” how can there be a “dry spell” or “getting stuck”?

The stories in novels are derived from life, and life is endless and inexhaustible. Especially in the present era, not to mention that I often go out or even travel abroad. During these trips, I don’t write at all, but every day I encounter new people and see new scenery, which is full of excitement and stimulation. Even when I stay at home, I only write in the morning, and spend the rest of the day relaxing—even watching videos. Every day, there are a large number of strange news and interesting stories on mobile videos, and the comments are quite incisive, which are more insightful than me. They directly refresh my understanding and inspire my inspiration.

I deeply feel that the speed of my left hand typing can’t keep up with my thinking. But I’m afraid of straining my brain again, so I have to reluctantly restrict my writing, which means wasting a lot of inspiration.

Wang Zuyou: Most of your works are published in core journals such as *People’s Literature*, *Contemporary Era*, and *China Writers*. Do the requirements of these journals affect your creative direction? For example, do you adjust the themes or language style according to the positioning of the journals?

Ding Li: Thank you for your compliment. In fact, I haven’t published many works in *People’s Literature* and *Contemporary Era*—fewer than 10 in total. Instead, I have published more in *China Writers*, *Beijing Literature*, *Woodpecker*, *Fragrant Grass*, *The Great Wall*, *Qingming*, *Anhui Literature*, and Original Edition of *Fiction Monthly*.

In the beginning, when I submitted manuscripts freely, I did pay attention to the style and tendency of the target journals, intending to “cater to their preferences.” Later, I found that this was useless because I am who I am and can’t change. My themes are related to Shenzhen, and my language style is uniquely “Ding Li’s style.”

Submitting a manuscript as a writer is similar to a “blind date” with an editor. If the editor likes it, the manuscript will be published; if not, it will be rejected. Some new writers complain that publishing works relies on connections. The “connections” in my understanding mean that even if a familiar editor doesn’t publish your work, he or she will tell you where the problem lies. I usually study the opinions given by the editor, revise the manuscript accordingly, and then submit it to another journal. Sure enough, it will be published.

Therefore, it’s not just *People’s Literature*, *Contemporary Era*, and *China Writers*—all editors of journals who can tell me the reasons for rejecting my novels are my good teachers. Because I can really revise and improve the quality of my works based on the reasons they provide for rejection.

V. Literary Concepts and Industry Observations: From the Perspective of a “Creator” to a “Chairperson of the Society”

Wang Zuyou: You put forward the idea that “new Chinese literature should be close to life, but not reduced to a ‘daily life log’.” How is this concept reflected in your creations? For example, in works like *Human Nature Test* (published in *Anhui Literature* in 2023) and *Face-Conscious* (published in *China Writers* in 2021), how do you reflect “grand themes” through “small entry points” (such as testing human nature and the issue of face)?

Ding Li: This concept has evolved over time. In the beginning, I focused on telling stories. Later, I shifted my focus to depicting characters. Now, I have started to pay attention to writing about “human nature.” However, I am inherently a person with a background in science and engineering—I used to be an engineer with an industrial design mindset. So, I have always not been good at pondering human nature.

But when it comes to telling stories, I basically do it flawlessly, and my works won’t have obvious loopholes like some domestic TV dramas. Sometimes, I even think that maybe the most suitable job for me is “script correction.” Scripts that I have reviewed will at least no longer have low-level loopholes. But why hasn’t anyone invited me to take on this job? Or is there simply no such job in China’s film and television market? If that’s the case, then aren’t many producers making “blind investments”?

As for the novels you mentioned, *Human Nature Test* and *Face-Conscious*, to be honest, I wrote them after being inspired by Xu Zechen’s novels and trying to learn from his style. But I didn’t fully grasp his approach, so I couldn’t reach Xu Zechen’s level. I think I will never reach it because he and I have different personalities.

As for “reflecting grand themes through small entry points,” I think you have hit the nail on the head. All “novels” use small things to reflect big issues; novels are about “conveying great truths in a soft voice.” This is especially true for short stories. However, I initially only wanted to write long novels, believing that “long novels are the canons of literature.” As a result, I tended to “use big frameworks to reflect small issues.” It was only after the stroke that I didn’t dare to write long novels easily. It was like when I couldn’t find a stable job and had to do odd jobs, I started to focus on writing short stories. Gradually, I found the feeling of reflecting “grand themes” through “small entry points” as you mentioned.

Wang Zuyou: You retired in 2024 and took up the position of Chairman of the Shenzhen Literary Creation Society. Shifting from “personal creation” to “industry organization work,” what do you think is the biggest challenge currently facing Shenzhen’s literary creation? What measures does the society plan to take (such as supporting new talents and building platforms) to promote the development of local literature in Shenzhen?

Ding Li: In fact, I was pushed into the position of “Chairman of the Literary Creation Society,” just like I am still a consultant to the Shenzhen Writers Association. Yesterday, on Christmas Day, December 25, 2025, I was also appointed as a consultant to the Southern Working Department of the China Socialist Literature and Art Society. In my opinion, these are all just honors, not real “positions” that require me to take specific charge of “industry organization work.”

As a professional writer, I have been writing novels both before and after retirement. I get up every morning to write novels, and spend the rest of the time relaxing or exercising. The latter two activities are also for accumulating energy for the first one or prolonging my creative career. Therefore, there is no substantial change in my daily life before and after retirement; it still centers around writing novels.

You asked me to talk about the biggest challenge facing Shenzhen’s literary creation. I think the current situation of Shenzhen’s literature has improved a lot compared to before I published the article “Why Has Shenzhen Not Produced Great Works” in *Free Talks on Literature*. The main reason is that this city has matured. It is no longer as obsessed with “time is money” as it used to be, and now people have the leisure to engage in literary or artistic creation. For example, the dance drama *Wing Chun* created in Shenzhen in the past two years can be regarded as a “great work.” Yesterday, I also received a call. They recommended me to write a long non-fiction work about *Wing Chun*, but I politely declined. Because I don’t want to put more pressure on myself; it’s good enough to write freely and “express my thoughts in a soft voice.”

I think the biggest challenge facing Shenzhen’s literature at present is the same as that in other parts of the country—the number of readers is decreasing sharply, or in other words, the actual time people spend “reading books” is decreasing at a visible rate. It’s not that people nowadays don’t like learning anymore; it’s just that the way modern people learn is not necessarily “reading books.” They spend more time looking at their mobile phones. Not to mention others, even I myself spend more time watching videos every day than “reading books” directly. “Fragmented” reading has become a trend and an irresistible one. Who will we sell the long novels we work so hard to write to? Therefore, no matter how hard I write now, I can no longer maintain a decent life in a city like Shenzhen by writing novels alone. Fortunately, I now have a house, a car, and a pension. Writing novels is no longer for the sake of remuneration, but purely a hobby and a way of life.

Wang Zuyou: As a distinguished professor at Jishou University, what creative advice do you most often emphasize when guiding young creators? For example, for young people who want to write “urban themes” or “financial themes,” would you suggest that they first accumulate relevant industry experience?

Ding Li: For me now, at the age of 66 and with hemiplegia, the so-called “university

distinguished professor,” “Chairman of the Literary Creation Society,” and various levels of “consultant” are all just honors, not real “positions” with rigid responsibilities and tasks. Therefore, I don’t have much to say to those young people who are determined to write “urban novels” or “financial novels.” Even if I say something, they may not listen, let alone follow it—unless he or she is my “student.”

This raises another question: Is there really a “teacher” for writing novels? Or to put it another way: Can writing novels be “taught”? The mainstream view is that writing novels can’t be taught. Otherwise, wouldn’t all graduates of the Chinese Department of Peking University become writers? But the fact is not the case. As for the group of writers like Chi Li and Chen Yingsong who graduated from Wuhan University, they shouldn’t be considered as examples of being “taught to be writers” by the university. Because they were already writers before being admitted to Wuhan University for further study. It seems that there are very few pure “writers” who are graduates of the modern and contemporary Chinese language major in the Chinese Department of a university. This fact already shows that universities can’t train writers.

Therefore, there is no such thing as a “literary teacher.” If we have to say there is, then I think “the first person who revises your novel and recommends it for publication is your ‘teacher’ in writing novels.” According to this definition, I have actually guided a few students.

The first one was a leader in charge of cultural affairs. She had a high level of quality—she was a full-time postgraduate student from a famous university in the last century. After taking office as the leader in charge of culture, she was often made things difficult by literati. Unwilling to back down, she wanted to become a literati herself, so she wrote a novel of 70,000 to 80,000 words. I helped her revise it into a 30,000-word work and recommended it for publication. It even made the headline of *Selected Novels*, which can be regarded as a success. However, she retired later and stopped writing novels, so she no longer acknowledges me as her “teacher.”

The other one was a young girl born in 2004. Her mother paid me to be her tutor. I encouraged her vigorously, telling her that her literary talent surpassed mine. Later, I revised her “long-winded writing” into a proper “novel” and recommended it to pure literary journals for publication. This child really had great talent. At first, I had to make a lot of revisions to her work, but gradually, the number of revisions decreased. In the end, she could get her works published with almost no revisions from me. Unfortunately, at that time, her mother said that in order for her to prepare for the postgraduate entrance examination and find a job more easily in the future, she would temporarily stop writing novels. Naturally, my role as her “teacher” only lasted halfway. Even if she resumes writing novels in the future, she may not come back to me as her “teacher.” If she does come back, I will suggest that she find a magazine editor with a greater reputation or someone who can directly help her publish her works to be her teacher.

VI. The Author and Works: Emotions and Regrets Behind Them

Wang Zuyou: Among your works, is there a particular one or a certain character that you have invested the most personal emotions in? For example, does the protagonist in *The Librarian’s Son* (published in *Contemporary* in 2019) embody your personal thoughts on the

“collision between knowledge and reality”?

Ding Li: You have observed very carefully and made an accurate judgment. *The Librarian's Son* was indeed written as my autobiography. What I most wanted to express through it is that “reading can really help a person turn misfortune into good fortune and thus change their destiny.” Unfortunately, I didn’t write this long novel well. The main reason is that I wrote it in a hurry and didn’t take enough care with it. Its length didn’t meet my own standard of a long novel, which is “more than 300,000 words.”

Later, I realized my mistake and made corrections by creating two long novels, *Inaction* and *Mr. Qianhai*, each with a length of more than 400,000 words. The former was indeed awarded the “key support” from Anhui Province, but due to its content involving too many historical issues of the older generation, it failed to pass the publication review in the end. I had no choice but to make a large number of deletions and try to publish it under a different title. As for *Mr. Qianhai*, the publishing house required me to delete 70,000 words before it went to press. This time, it wasn’t because of the content, but purely to reduce the publishing cost. I don’t blame the publishing house. Because in the current era of “fragmented reading,” publishing long novels is not profitable at all, and the longer the novel, the more money they lose. Nowadays, publishing houses, as “companies,” had no choice but to ask me to delete 70,000 words, and I understand that.

Wang Zuyou: Looking back on your more than 20-year creative career, is there a work that makes you feel “regretful”? For example, after its publication, you feel that a certain plot could have been polished more or a certain character could have been more vivid. Does this kind of regret affect your subsequent creations?

Ding Li: Yes, it is *The Librarian's Son* that we talked about earlier. If there is an opportunity, such as someone being willing to republish it, I will rewrite it to make up for these regrets.

Wang Zuyou: In 2026, you plan to publish three long novels with Shenzhen themes: *Looking at Shenzhen from Huangshan Mountain*, *Fortunately, It's Shenzhen*, and *Shenzhen Connected to Tianlong Mountain*. Do these three works form a “Shenzhen Series”? Is the original intention of creating them to leave a set of “era archives” for Shenzhen’s “urban literature”?

Ding Li: I signed the publishing contract for these three long novels with the publishing house in September 2025. I thought they would be published by the end of 2025, but now it seems that the publication will be delayed until 2026. Since they haven’t been published yet, according to the rules, I can’t reveal too much about them. As for whether they form a “Shenzhen Series,” I think they will. After all, they are like a “cluster bomb.” In fact, most of my dozens of long novels are written around Shenzhen, and together they form the “Shenzhen Series.” With your kind words, maybe they can leave a set of “era archives” for Shenzhen’s “urban literature.” I hope so.

VII. Future and Aspirations: Creative Plans and Literary Inheritance

Wang Zuyou: Apart from the several long novels you have already signed for publication in

2026, do you have any plans to try new themes in the future? For example, breaking away from financial themes or Shenzhen-related themes and turning to other fields (such as historical themes or rural themes)?

Ding Li: In addition to the “Shenzhen Trilogy” and the separate publication of *New Era Police Officers* in 2026, China Yanshi Press will also republish two of my works and publish two new ones. The republishing of the novel collection *Shareholders* has been signed. The republishing of the long novel *Renting a Friend* is waiting for the contract signing together with two other novel collections, *The Future Has Come* and *Iteration*. I am waiting for them to send the contracts to me by express mail. After I sign them, I will send them back, but I haven't received the contracts yet. I am also embarrassed to urge them. After the New Year's Day holiday, if I still haven't received them, I will call the editor to ask about it.

As for new themes, I have no plan to write historical themes or rural themes. I personally think that writers should play to their strengths and avoid their weaknesses when choosing themes. So I may write about new technology themes. Because I was originally an engineer in a design institute, and after coming to Shenzhen, I first worked as an assistant general manager in the High-tech Entrepreneurship Center of Shenzhen Science and Technology Park. Now, there are about 200 high-tech listed companies in Shenzhen Science and Technology Park. I think this theme is more worthy of being written and is also more suitable for me to write.

But I haven't decided whether to write it or not. Because as I mentioned earlier, in the current era of fragmented reading, the sales of long novels are not good, so publishing houses are unwilling to publish them. My bottom line is that “I will never pay for the publication of my own works.” Therefore, I would rather write medium and short stories than easily write long novels.

Wang Zuyou: As a representative writer of “Shenzhen Literature,” what kind of impression do you hope your works will leave on readers? For example, being a “window to understand Shenzhen” or a “mirror to understand human nature in the workplace”?

Ding Li: I have never really thought about this. In the early days, my true thought was just to have my works published and become bestsellers. Now, my thought is just “as long as my works can be published, it's good enough.” As for what kind of impression they leave on readers, it is probably as you said: first, an “impression of Shenzhen,” and second, an “impression of the workplace”—or it can be called a “financial impression.” In 2006, perhaps by writing stories about high-tech enterprises, I will leave readers with an “impression of Shenzhen's hard technology.” Let it be.

Sometimes, I feel that the evaluations of critics and theorists on novel works may not be consistent with the author's original creative intention. As a writer, what I actually think about is the publication, popularity, and release of my works. As for the impression readers have after reading them, it may be diverse. Different readers will have different impressions, just as “there are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand readers' eyes.”

Wang Zuyou: What aspirations do you have for the younger generation of literary creators? For example, how do you hope they will adhere to the essence of literature in the “era of

traffic”?

Ding Li: For the younger generation of literary creators, I hope they will let things take their course and believe that “writing is the absolute principle” and “publishing works in pure literary journals or publishing one’s own works through formal publishing houses is the absolute principle.” Literary creation, especially novel writing, is an “open-book exam” with no time limit. As long as one has enough patience, they will definitely be able to write better works.

In the “era of traffic,” I stick to traditional literary creation, or what is called “pure literary creation,” but I don’t require or even suggest that new literary talents or the next generation of young writers do the same.

First, novels are the most direct reflection of life, and life itself has changed dramatically now. How can we ask the new generation of young writers to “adhere to the old ways”? They live in the “era of traffic,” so they should create “traffic novels.”

Second, the reason why I stick to traditional literature or the so-called “pure literature” creation is that I am old, and my physical condition and time do not allow me to change my creative style, so I have to “stick to it.”

Third, the concept of traditional literature or “pure literature” is also advancing with the times. Recently, I met a new person engaged in novel creation named Yuan Youxing. What he writes is “pure literature in the era of traffic,” and I think it is very good. When you have time, I may send his “pure literature in the era of traffic” novels to you. Maybe you will also be surprised.

The Authors

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He has published more than 100 short and medium-length novels in literary journals, as well as 50 full-length novels and long-form non-fiction works. In 2021, China Literature and History Press published *The Collection of Works by Chinese Professional Writers • Ding Li Volume*, a series of financial novels.

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