

Chapter 3: Development of Internet Applications

In 2025, internet applications actively explored integrating artificial intelligence into their services to improve quality and user experience. Applications across digital tools, digital consumption, digital entertainment and digital services developed vigorously, providing a digital engine for high-quality development.

1 Overall development

China's internet application sectors continued to develop in 2025, with further growth in the user bases of major applications. Online food delivery, short video and online games recorded the largest increases: 37.48 million, 34.50 million and 15.73 million users respectively compared with December 2024, representing growth of 6.3%, 3.3% and 2.8%.

Table 5. Internet application users and usage rates, December 2024-December 2025

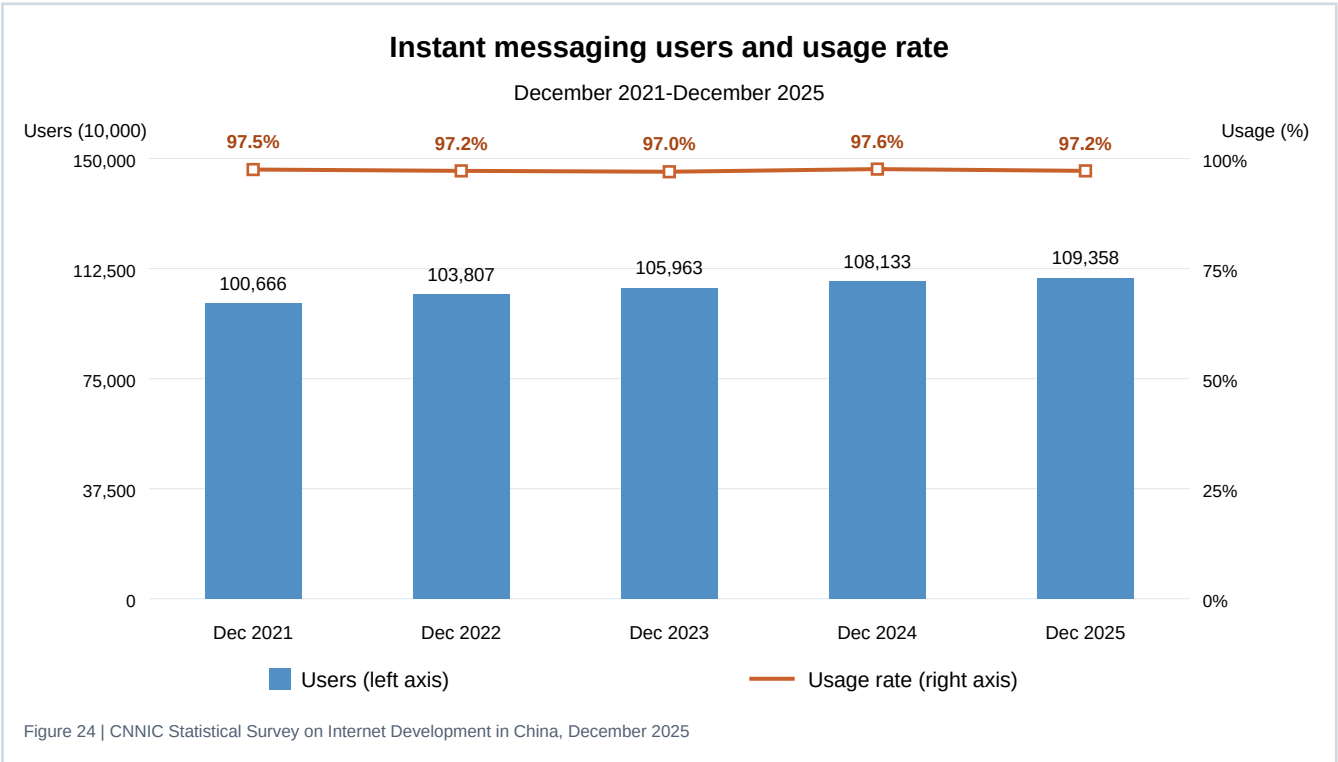
Application	Dec 2024 users (10,000)	Dec 2024 usage (%)	Dec 2025 users (10,000)	Dec 2025 usage (%)
Instant messaging	108,133	97.6	109,358	97.2
Online video [30]	107,018	96.6	109,261	97.1
Short video	103,953	93.8	107,403	95.4
Online payments	102,891	92.8	101,655	90.3
Online shopping	97,443	87.9	93,689	83.2
Livestreaming	83,303	75.2	81,359	72.3
Search engines	87,782	79.2	78,206	69.5
Online music	74,795	67.5	73,043	64.9
Online food delivery	59,231	53.4	62,979	56.0
Online games	55,727	50.3	57,300	50.9
Ride-hailing	53,945	48.7	53,908	47.9
Online literature	57,491	51.9	52,595	46.7
Online travel booking	54,836	49.5	51,529	45.8
Internet healthcare	41,765	37.7	41,053	36.5

[30] Online video user figures include micro-drama users.

2 Digital tools

2.1 Instant messaging

By December 2025, China had approximately 1.094 billion instant-messaging users, an increase of 12.25 million over December 2024, representing 97.2% of all internet users.



In 2025, instant-messaging providers focused on intelligent transformation and upgrading. Companies continued to improve core functions and used AI to move their products towards intelligent assistants.

Continued improvement of product functions

WeChat improved video communication by increasing the maximum length of videos posted to Moments from 30 seconds to five minutes and allowing live photos to be sent in chats. These changes supported users' needs to share experiences and information through video. In March, QQ announced changes to its short-video feature, ending support for users to publish personal works or browse other users' short videos. It streamlined its functions and introduced features including Classic Mode and QQ Flash Transfer towards the end of the year, seeking a differentiated direction from WeChat.

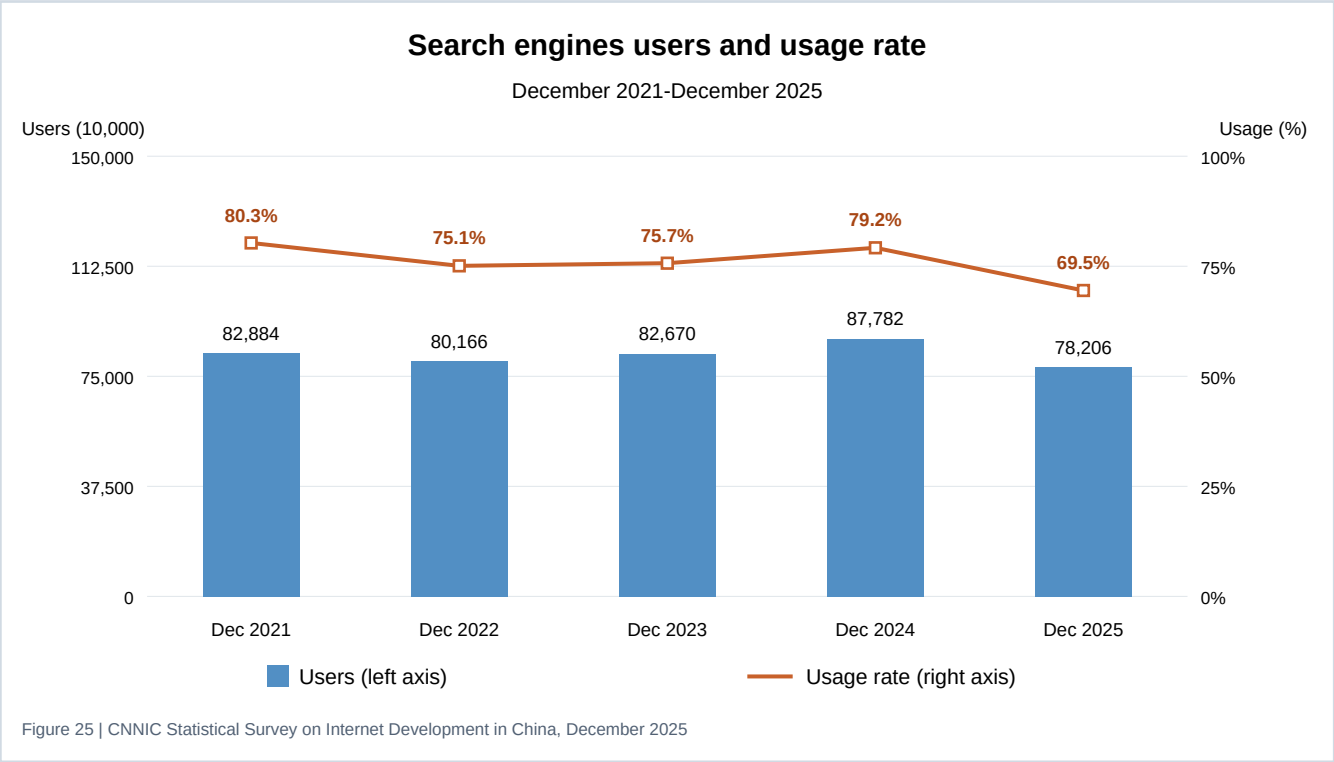
Faster transition towards intelligent assistants

WeCom launched version 5.0 in August, introducing AI-powered search, summaries and bots. It repositioned itself from a basic communication tool to an integrated intelligent office platform, aiming to improve information processing and decision-making within organisations.

Building on functions such as AI transcription, AI search and Q&A, and AI spreadsheets, DingTalk introduced the Agent OS intelligent operating system and the enterprise AI hardware device DingTalk Real, extending intelligent office capabilities into operating systems and hardware.

2.2 Search engines

By December 2025, China had approximately 782 million search-engine users, accounting for 69.5% of all internet users.



Search-engine companies actively adopted AI in 2025, accelerating the shift towards intelligent search. This brought new opportunities as well as challenges.

Search providers embrace AI

Traditional search engines mainly present links. AI-powered intelligent search can organise and summarise online information and answer questions directly. Baidu upgraded its conventional results pages to Baikan pages with AI-generated summaries, turning results into a visual, multidimensional magazine. Quark, Nano Search and other platforms also introduced intelligent search, renewing competition in a previously mature market. These changes improved user experience while disrupting established market positions, potentially enabling providers with smaller market shares to overtake competitors.

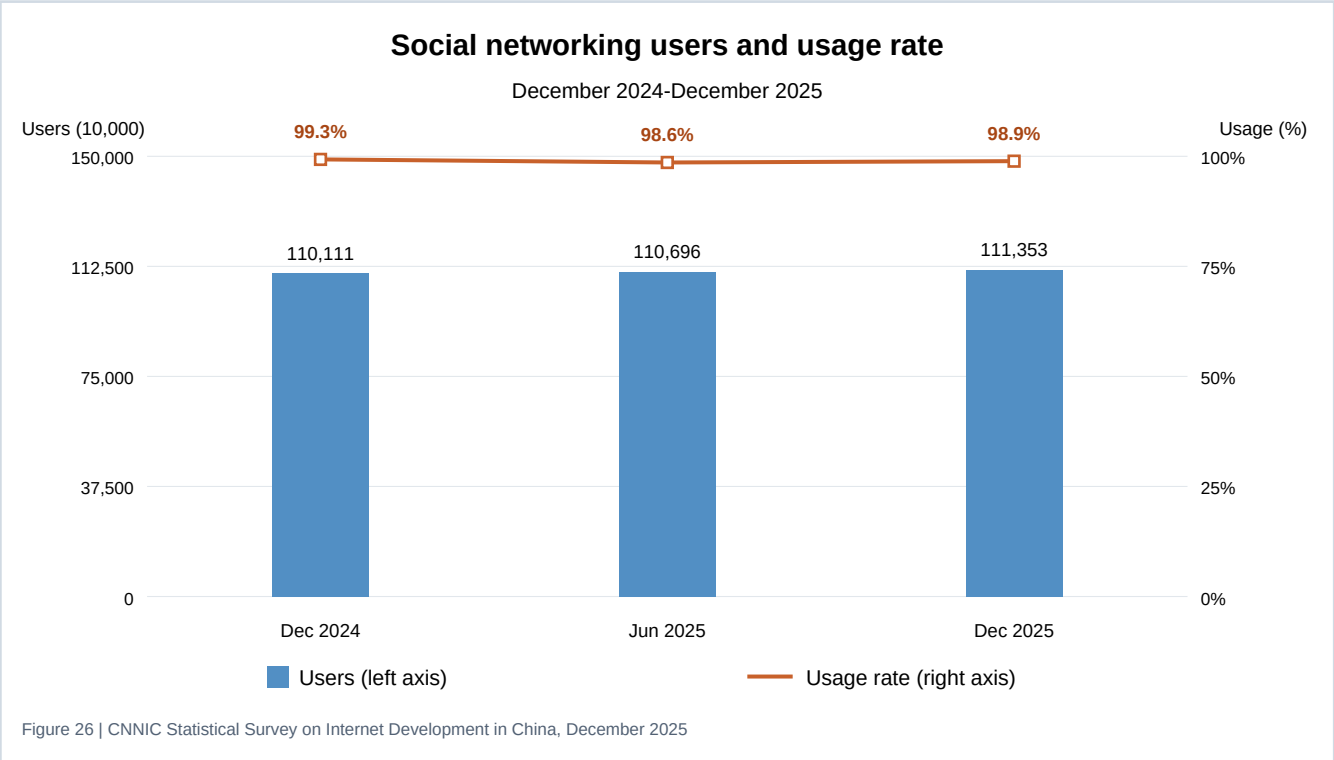
According to the data cited in the report, Google's market share fell below 90% in the fourth quarter of 2024 for the first time since 2015 [31].

Revenue challenges for search engines

Although intelligent search has taken shape as a product, its business model remains under development. Conventional search engines charge advertisers according to clicks, whereas intelligent search provides answers directly and makes the old model harder to sustain. The report states that the industry had not yet found an appropriate way to embed advertising in these results. Intelligent-search products also affected the user bases of traditional search engines, contributing to declining revenue.

2.3 Social networking

By December 2025, China had approximately 1.114 billion social-network users, an increase of 12.42 million over December 2024, representing 98.9% of all internet users.



In 2025, social platforms used AI to improve interaction, explored new revenue models and strengthened the moderation of harmful content. First, they competed to introduce AI-enabled interaction. In September, WeChat launched intelligent replies for public accounts, enabling AI to learn from an account's historical content and respond automatically to readers' private messages.

Weibo's AI account "Comment Robert" had nearly two million followers, and Weibo Intelligent Search exceeded 70 million monthly active users in the third quarter [32].

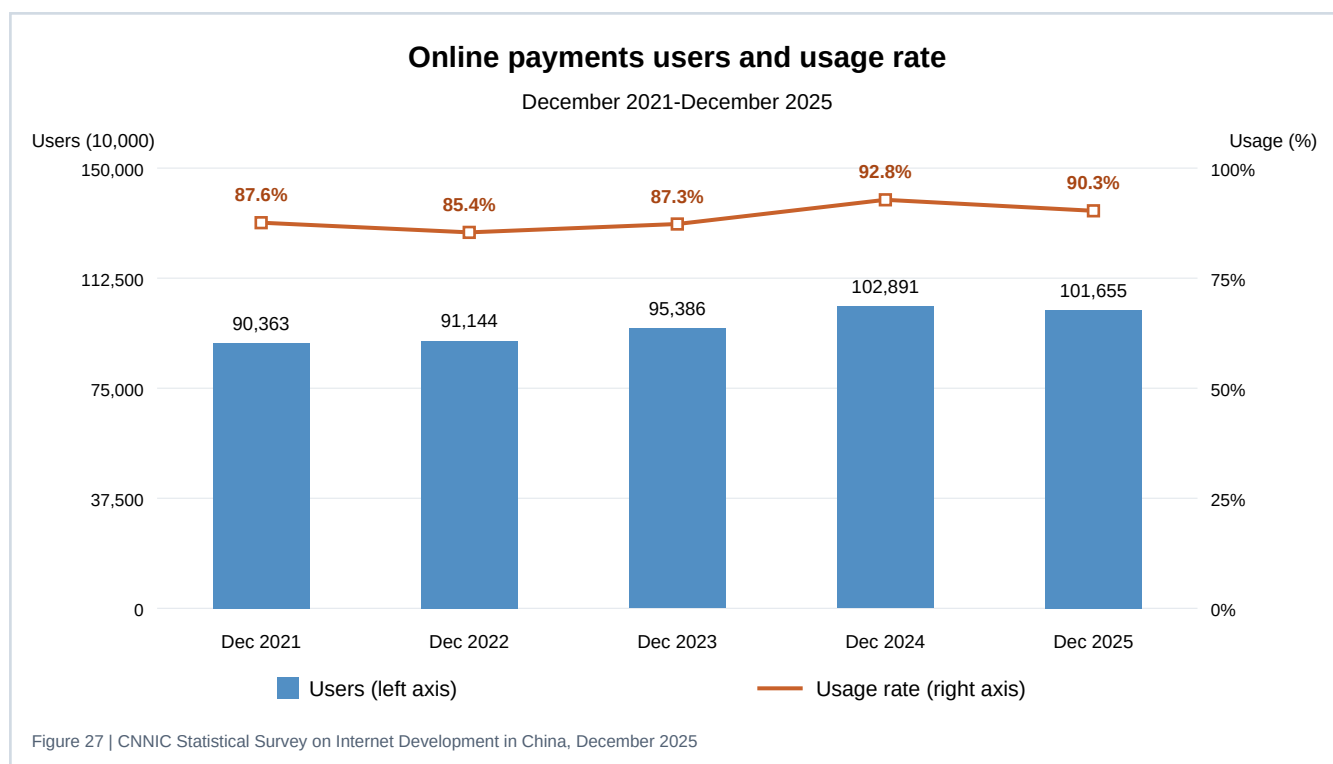
Second, closer integration with e-commerce strengthened monetisation. Xiaohongshu introduced Marketplace as a top-level entry point, bringing together product posts, shopping livestreams and other formats. Combining content marketing with community interaction enabled users to browse and shop within the platform.

Third, platforms strengthened moderation and improved the social environment. In 2025, authorities targeted AI misuse [33], misleading self-media information [34] and malicious attempts to stir negative emotions [35]. They urged platforms to fulfil their responsibilities, improve community rules and user agreements, and foster healthier online communities. Weibo, for example, increased transparency around trending-search algorithms and published ranking and data rules. Through technical interception and manual patrols, it had closed 6.2 million fraud-related accounts, sent 4.4 million targeted anti-fraud private messages and blocked five million high-risk conversations.

3 Digital consumption

3.1 Online payments

By December 2025, China had approximately 1.017 billion online-payment users, accounting for 90.3% of all internet users.



Online-payment transaction volumes remained high in 2025. In the first three quarters, banks processed 54.408 billion online-payment transactions worth RMB 2,169.66 trillion, and 170.382 billion mobile-payment transactions worth RMB 426.23 trillion [36]. Progress continued in cross-border connectivity, the digital renminbi and new payment scenarios.

Cross-border connectivity improves inbound payments

Under the guidance of the People's Bank of China, a unified cross-border QR-code gateway began trial operation in late July. It created a unified national interface for cross-border QR payments, an important step in providing Chinese payment standards and technical solutions internationally. It also marked a new phase in two-way opening of the payment market: overseas visitors could use their home electronic wallets to scan merchant QR codes in China. By 11 September, the gateway had handled 1.981 million transactions worth RMB 427 million [37].

Digital renminbi pilots deepen and interest payments begin

The breadth and depth of digital renminbi (e-CNY) pilots expanded in 2025. In late December, six major banks, including ICBC and Agricultural Bank of China, announced that from 1 January 2026 balances in their verified-name digital renminbi wallets would earn interest at their published demand-deposit rates. The report describes this as a shift from a cash-like role to deposit money, encouraging individuals and enterprises to move from passive use to active holding.

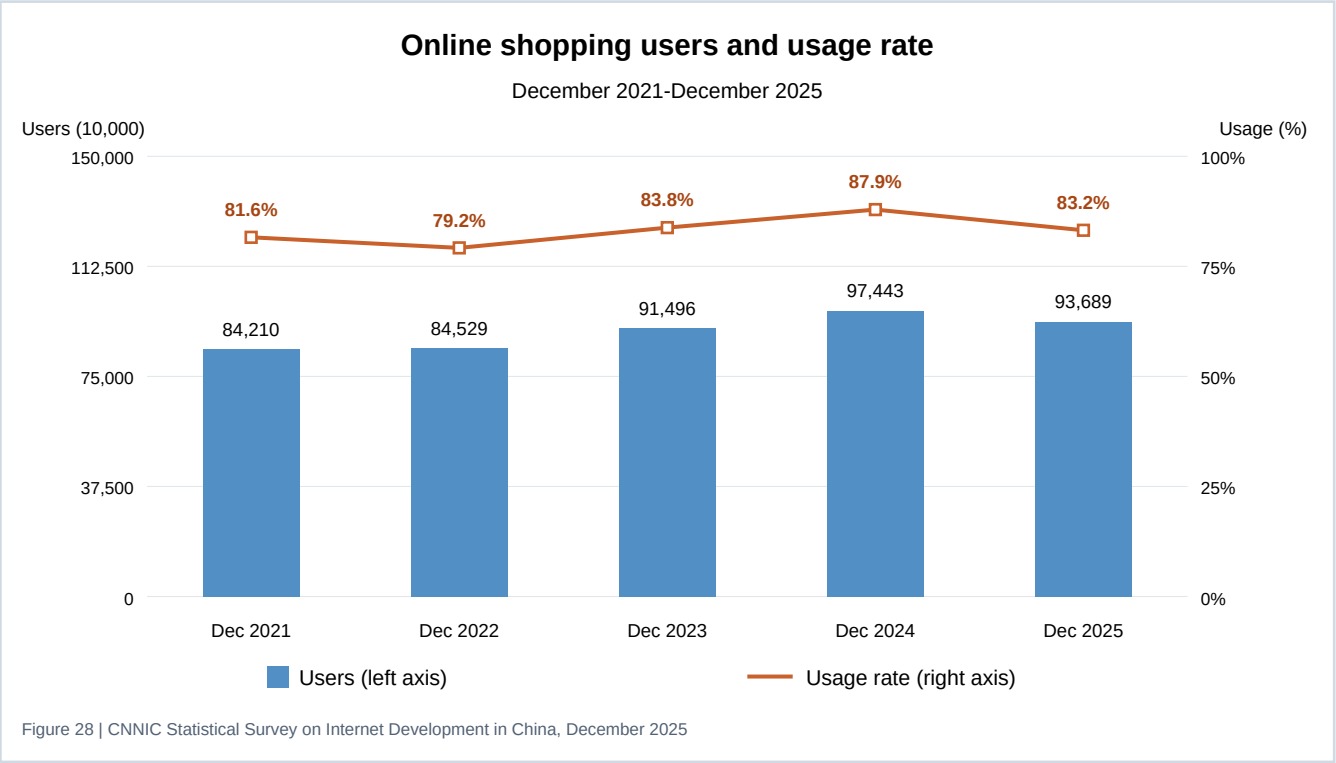
This also opened possibilities for smart contracts, conditional payments and financial products based on the digital renminbi, while offering a potential new channel for more precise and efficient monetary policy.

New payment scenarios and biometric public services

Payment technologies became more closely integrated with specific industries in 2025. In healthcare, more than 1.2 billion people nationwide could settle medical-insurance payments by QR code or facial recognition, addressing problems caused by forgotten physical cards and lengthy payment queues. Meanwhile, AI-enabled payments moved into practical use. China UnionPay launched intelligent payment services based on the MCP protocol, and Alipay introduced AI Pay, enabling payments during conversations with large AI models and moving payment access from standalone apps towards widely available AI assistants.

3.2 Online shopping

By December 2025, China had approximately 937 million online shoppers, representing 83.2% of all internet users.



Online shopping continued to develop in 2025, supported by policy, technology and upgrading consumption.

Policy support strengthens market growth

Supportive policies for digital consumption and AI-enabled consumption provided guidance and support for improving the online-shopping market. The State Council's Opinions on Further Implementing the "AI Plus" Initiative promoted consumption upgrading, while the Ministry of Commerce and other departments jointly issued guidance on developing digital consumption and improving life in the digital era.

With policy support and technological progress, online retail continued to grow steadily. National online retail sales reached RMB 15.97 trillion in 2025, up 8.6% year on year. Online retail sales of physical goods reached RMB 13.09 trillion, up 5.2%, and accounted for 26.1% of total retail sales of consumer goods [38].

Smart-product consumption creates new growth

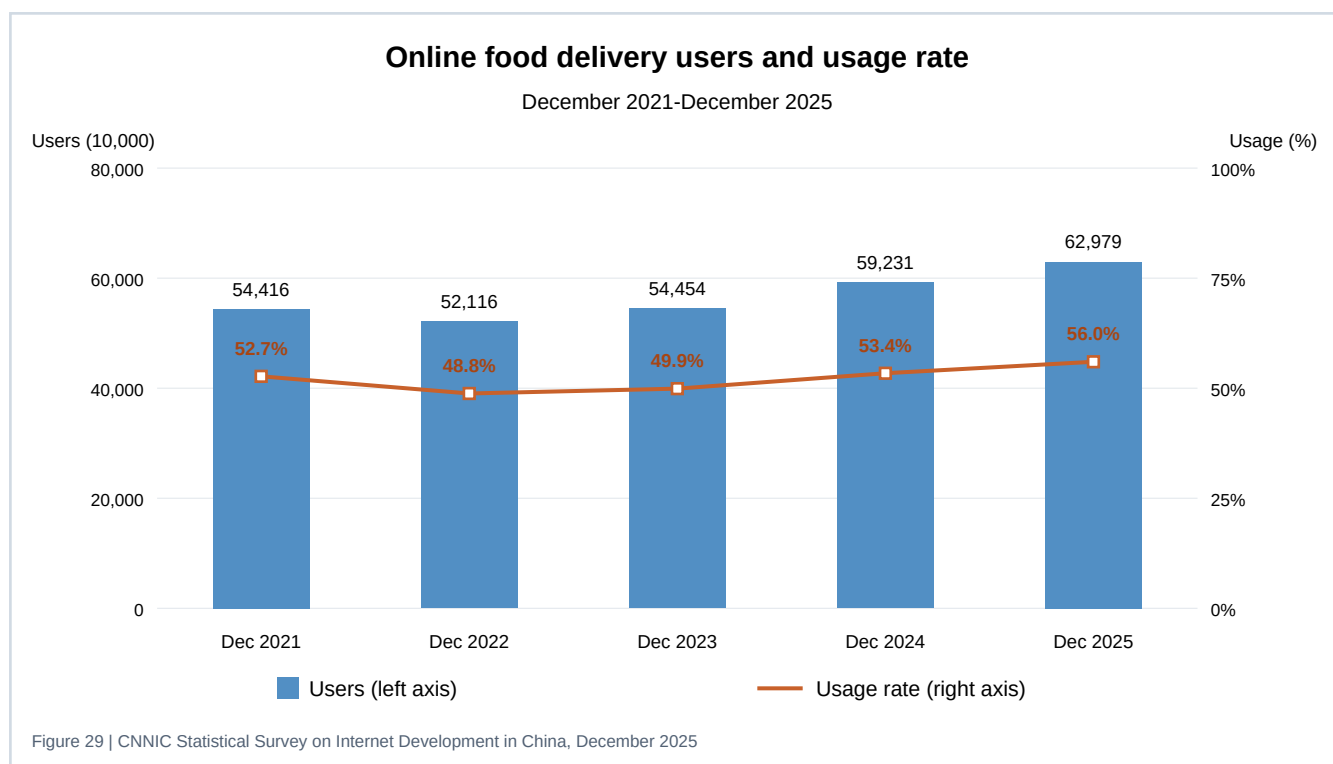
AI-enabled products and continuing innovation made smart-product consumption a new driver of online shopping. By December, 444 million people had bought smart products online during the preceding six months [39], representing 39.4% of internet users. Estimated annual spending reached RMB 1.94 trillion. The source reports category shares of 13.3% for smart wearables, 12.0% for smartphones and digital devices, and 9.7% for smart furniture and appliances. By spending bracket, 35.9% spent less than RMB 1,000, 49.5% spent RMB 1,000-5,000, and 14.6% spent RMB 5,000 or more.

Trade-in schemes broaden consumption

Under policies encouraging large-scale equipment renewal and consumer-goods trade-ins, 326 million users had participated in trade-in consumption-promotion schemes by December, representing 29.0% of internet users. Among participants, 71.7% used online channels such as shopping platforms, banks/payment platforms and local platforms. Meanwhile, 40.6% of internet users wanted more targeted subsidies for service consumption. Reported expectations covered education and healthcare (17.5%), childcare and elderly care (15.7%), catering (14.9%), and tourism and entertainment (9.7%). Digital, inclusive service-consumption subsidies could further release demand as physical-goods trade-in policies took effect.

3.3 Online food delivery

By December 2025, China had approximately 630 million online food-delivery users, an increase of 37.48 million over December 2024, accounting for 56.0% of internet users.



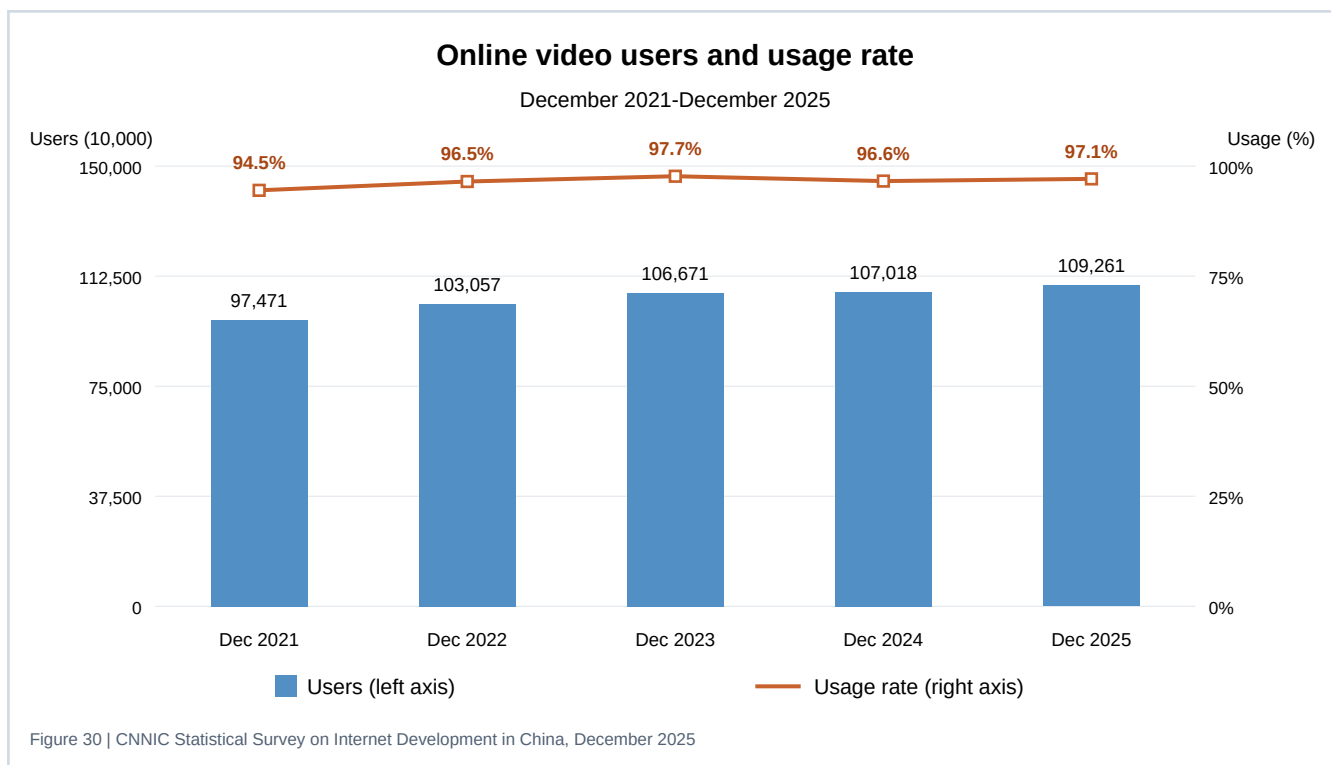
In 2025, regulatory guidance shifted the focus of the food-delivery market from subsidy competition towards business-model innovation. First, policy responded to public concerns and encouraged orderly development, addressing excessive subsidies and related competition. On 1 August, three major platforms issued a joint statement opposing destructive competition in response to regulatory requirements.

Second, platforms accelerated their search for sustainable models. They strengthened local-life service ecosystems, linking food-delivery traffic to instant retail to expand high-frequency retail activity. By December 2025, the instant-retail app sector had 565 million monthly active users, with reported growth of 3.3% [40]. Platforms also explored shared and cloud kitchens, traceable supply chains and more transparent operations. Examples included Meituan's Raccoon Canteen and Douyin's food-delivery livestreaming, intended to improve food-safety transparency.

4 Digital entertainment

4.1 Online video

By December 2025, China had approximately 1.093 billion online-video users, an increase of 22.43 million over December 2024, accounting for 97.1% of internet users. Long-form video had approximately 730 million users (64.8%), short video 1.074 billion (95.4%), and micro-dramas 664 million (59.0%).



In 2025, long-form video platforms built offline entertainment ecosystems, short-video platforms improved recommendation algorithms, and the micro-drama ecosystem developed, supporting higher-quality online-video services.

Long-form platforms become broader entertainment platforms

Product functions increasingly supported interaction. Bilibili introduced an AI assistant for intelligent search: a request such as a postgraduate-entrance mathematics study plan could produce staged recommendations for courses, exercises and schedules, including labels for material suitable for users with weaker foundations.

Platforms extended the value of intellectual property (IP) into offline settings. Tencent Video combined OpenDay with the JUMP PARK music festival, adding interactive stages based on its drama, variety-show and animation IP and a BOUNCE market. The two-day event attracted nearly 70,000 participants [41]. Platforms also linked online viewing to offline consumption; Mango TV, for example, enabled membership points to be exchanged for cultural products and music-festival tickets. By December 2025, long-form video users' average monthly viewing time had risen to 22.9 hours [42]. Competition was moving beyond content alone towards ecosystems built around user experience across multiple settings.

Short-video platforms improve recommendation algorithms

Platforms systematically improved functions covering positive-content recommendations, user choice, content diversity and algorithmic transparency.

To increase transparency, platforms published operating rules and helped users understand recommendations. Weibo's short-video module disclosed trending-search ranking and data rules and added labels explaining what drove a topic's popularity. To counter filter bubbles, platforms introduced functions such as filter-bubble assessment and one-click breakout. Kuaishou used algorithms to identify more positive, useful, warm and trustworthy content.

Recommendation moderation also improved. WeChat Channels combined friend recommendations with algorithmic recommendations and updated detection and enforcement models to keep vulgar and other harmful content out of recommendation pools. Platforms strengthened users' control through interest settings and negative feedback. Kuaishou, for example, provided detailed controls over the intensity of different content recommendations.

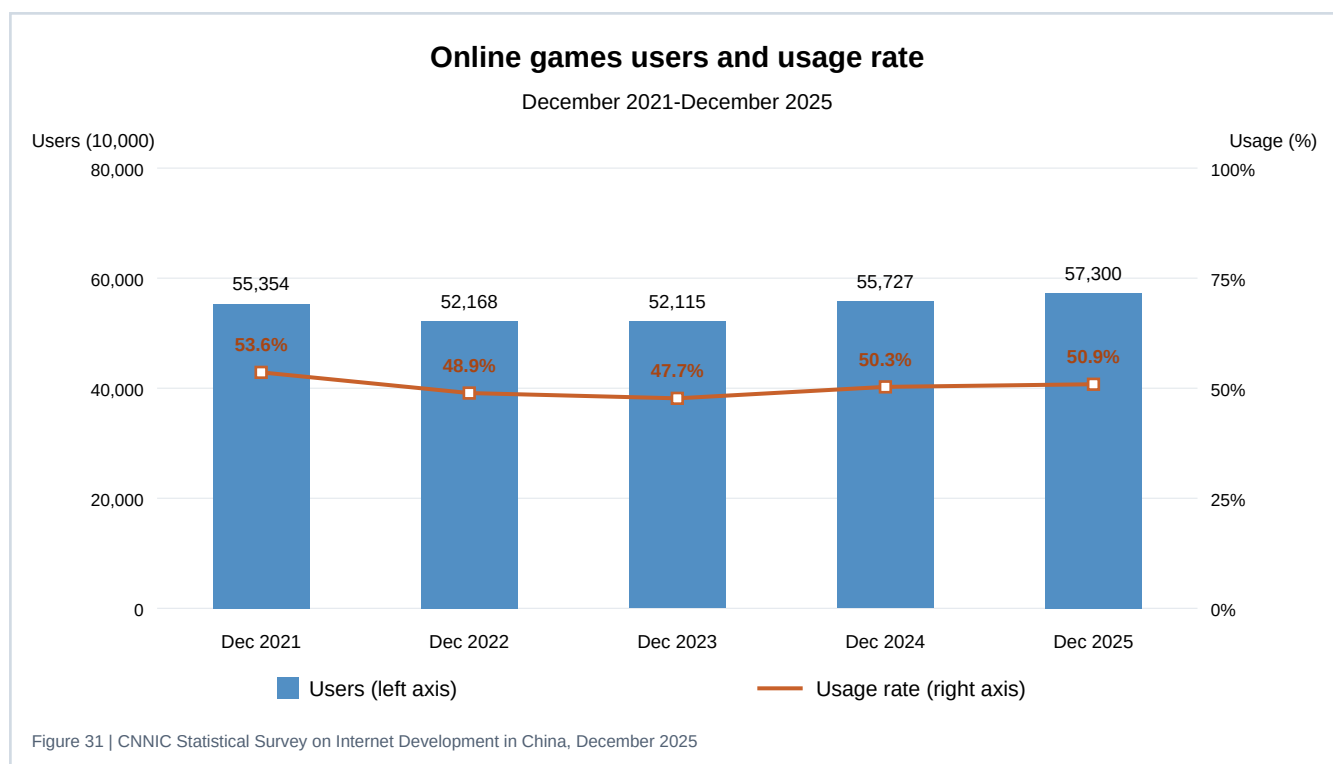
The micro-drama ecosystem improves

Policy, platform support and industry coordination encouraged higher-quality micro-dramas. The Micro-drama Plus action plan promoted integration with brands, legal education, intangible cultural heritage, tourism and science communication, with an emphasis on positive values. Platform initiatives such as the Wanxiang short-drama programme, quality animated-drama incentives and short-drama growth plans offered investment support, traffic allocation and guaranteed revenue sharing to help good scripts secure production funding and good works find audiences.

Across the industry chain, closer cooperation improved efficiency. Tomato Novel opened access to more than 60,000 online-literature IP properties [43]. Platforms such as Ju Cha Cha used copyright-popularity indicators and audience profiles to make creative value measurable and traceable, moving the industry from experience-led to data-driven decisions.

4.2 Online games

By December 2025, China had 573 million online-game users, an increase of 15.73 million over December 2024, representing 50.9% of internet users.



Online games developed through integration with culture and tourism and through cross-platform access. According to information published by the National Press and Publication Administration, 1,771 game approvals were issued in 2025 [44], up 25.1% year on year and the highest total in nearly five years.

Games and tourism create event-and-city consumption ecosystems

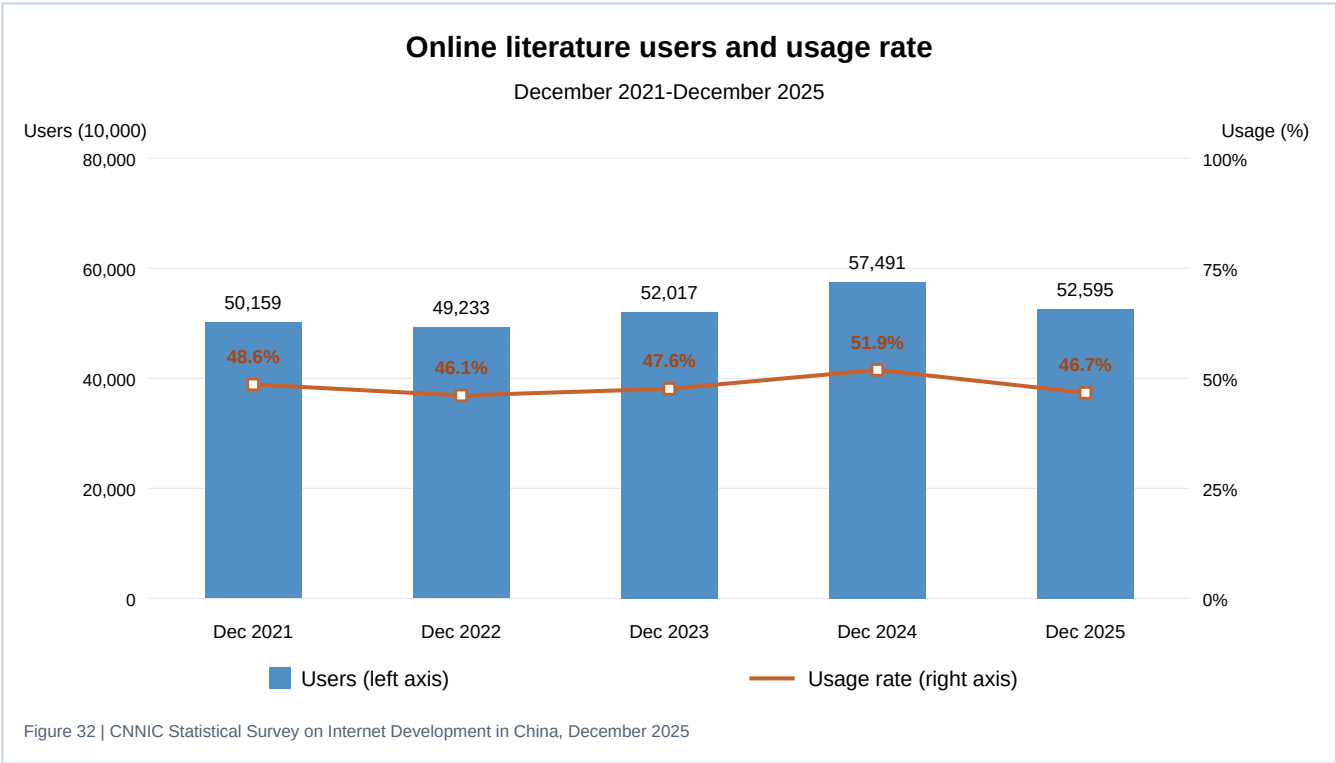
Gaming events increasingly became vehicles for cultural and tourism spending. Major competitions moved into prominent venues, while local events drew on regional culture. Audience attraction, spending and cultural promotion supported both tourism and city branding. The KPL Honor of Kings annual grand final at Beijing's National Stadium, the Bird's Nest, drew more than 60,000 spectators, 85% from outside Beijing [45]. Nearby commercial areas and cinemas offered secondary viewing venues, while ticket-linked offers extended to accommodation, food and transport.

Cross-platform access becomes a new trend

Developers moved beyond single platforms towards simultaneous mobile, PC-client and console releases. Tencent's cross-platform Delta Force entered the top three games by gross billings in its domestic market. NetEase's Where Winds Meet surpassed 15 million players worldwide within a month of its overseas launch [46]. In 2025, actual sales revenue in the console and PC-client game markets grew by 86.33% and 14.97%, respectively [47].

4.3 Online literature

By December 2025, China had approximately 526 million online-literature users, accounting for 46.7% of internet users.



Overseas expansion, cross-sector integration and technology created a fuller chain from content development to global distribution and wider commercial value. First, global influence increased. By November 2025, WebNovel had recorded more than 400 million cumulative visiting users worldwide, with 529,000 writers producing over 820,000 works, up 20% year on year [48]. Alongside exporting Chinese works, platforms introduced established paid-VIP reading and writer-development systems overseas to foster local original content.

Second, integration between IP and tourism opened new revenue opportunities. Universal Studios Singapore used Dao Gui Yi Xian IP for a themed adventure attraction, described as the first Chinese online-literature IP to enter an overseas theme park. Switzerland Tourism partnered with The King's Avatar on a visit programme based on the novel's Zurich storyline, attracting more than 10,000 fans to Switzerland.

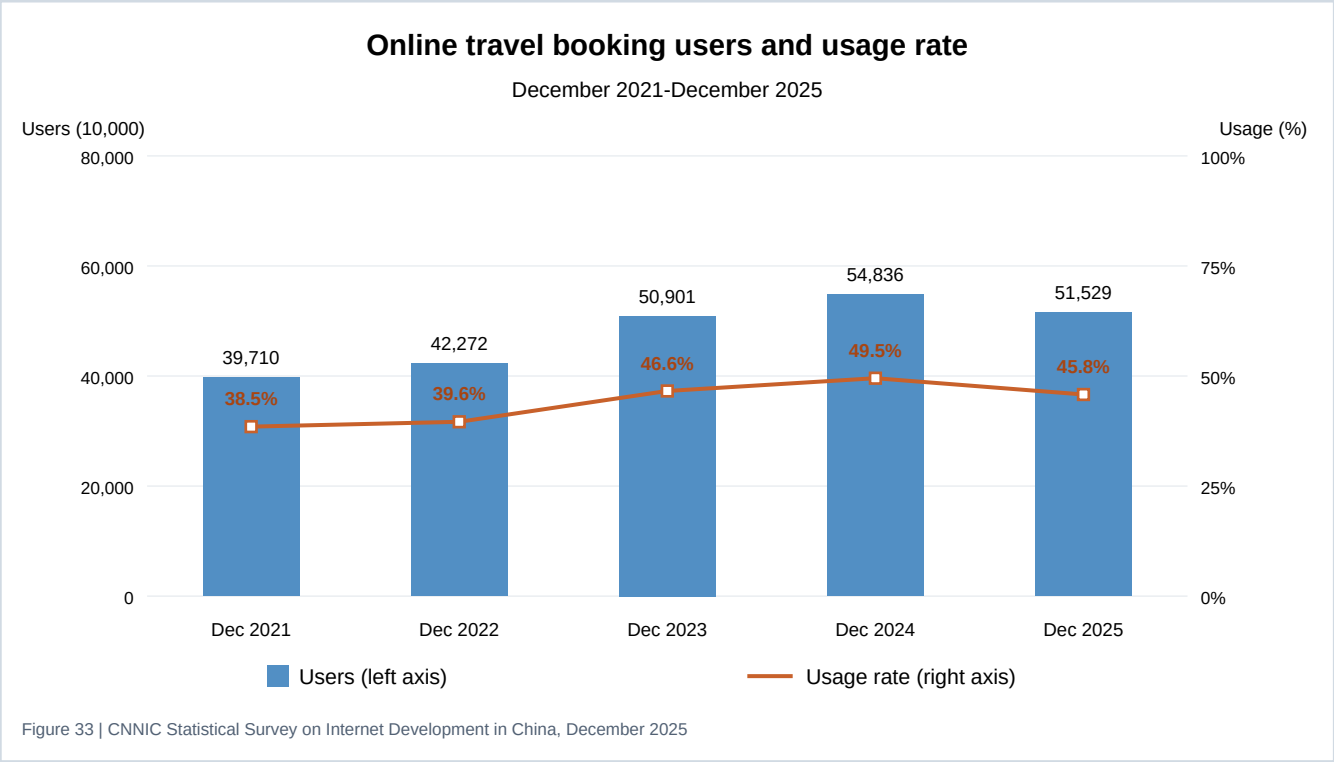
Third, AI tools became widely used in script generation, character design, multilingual translation and visual pre-production, improving adaptation efficiency and reducing early-stage costs so that more works could be developed in different formats.

China Literature introduced AIGC tools such as an animated-drama assistant to improve adaptation from novels, while Kuaishou's Dream Expert 2.0 platform offered AI support across multiple stages of IP development [49].

5 Digital services

5.1 Travel and tourism

By December 2025, China had approximately 515 million online travel-booking users, representing 45.8% of internet users.

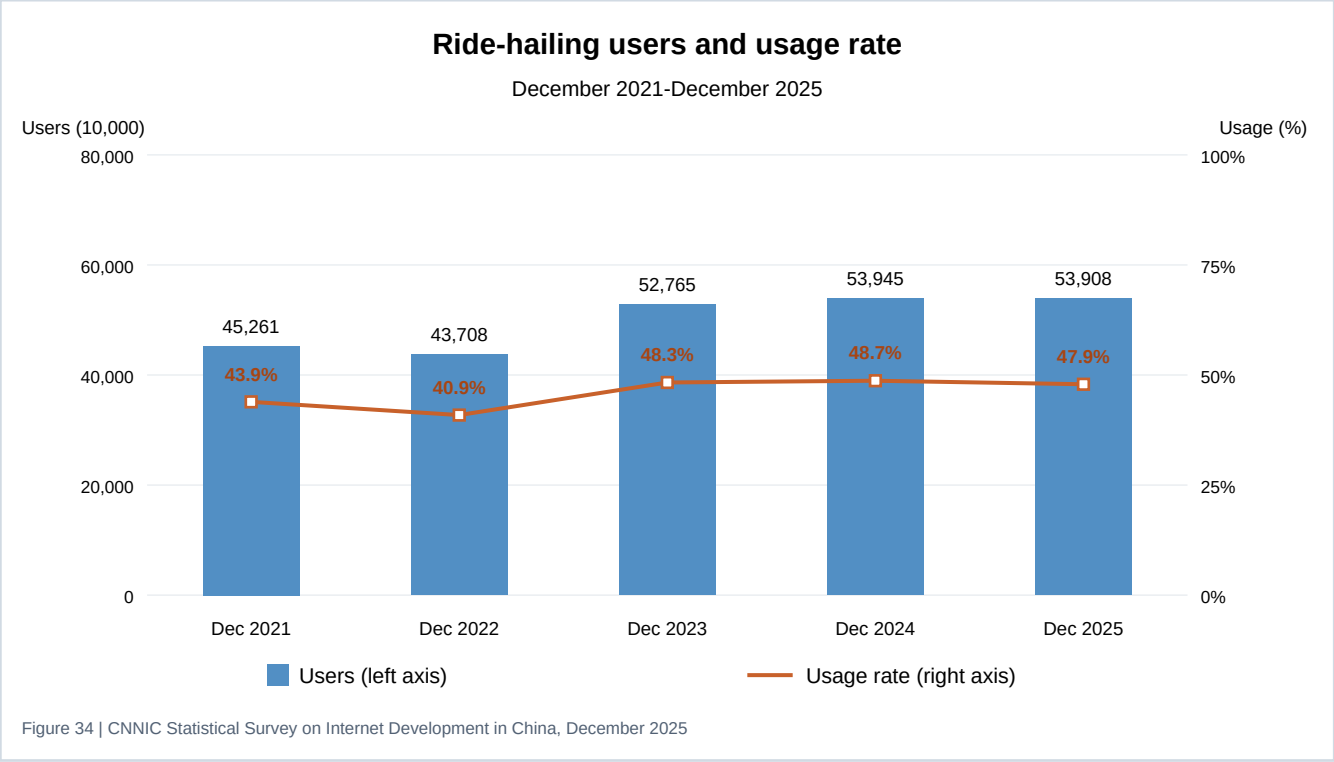


Closer integration of AI and online travel created more efficient, coordinated cultural and tourism services. First, personalised travel experiences improved. Mafengwo launched AI Roadbook for customised itineraries, while Fliggy introduced Ask, using AI to make trip planning more efficient. Beijing South Railway Station introduced the Nan Xiaoyue agent, integrating metro-station navigation with cultural and tourism recommendations so visitors could begin exploring immediately on arrival.

Second, city-level tourism agents emerged. Hangzhou's Hang Xiaoyi digital human integrated DeepSeek and covered more than 40,000 service points across the city, providing personalised directions, hotel booking and attraction guidance [50]. Shanghai's Hu Xiaoyou offered AI-generated itineraries and travelogues, connected more than 45,000 cultural and tourism resources, and had served around 13 million user visits, becoming a central one-stop information gateway [51].

5.2 Ride-hailing

By December 2025, China had approximately 539 million ride-hailing users, accounting for 47.9% of internet users.

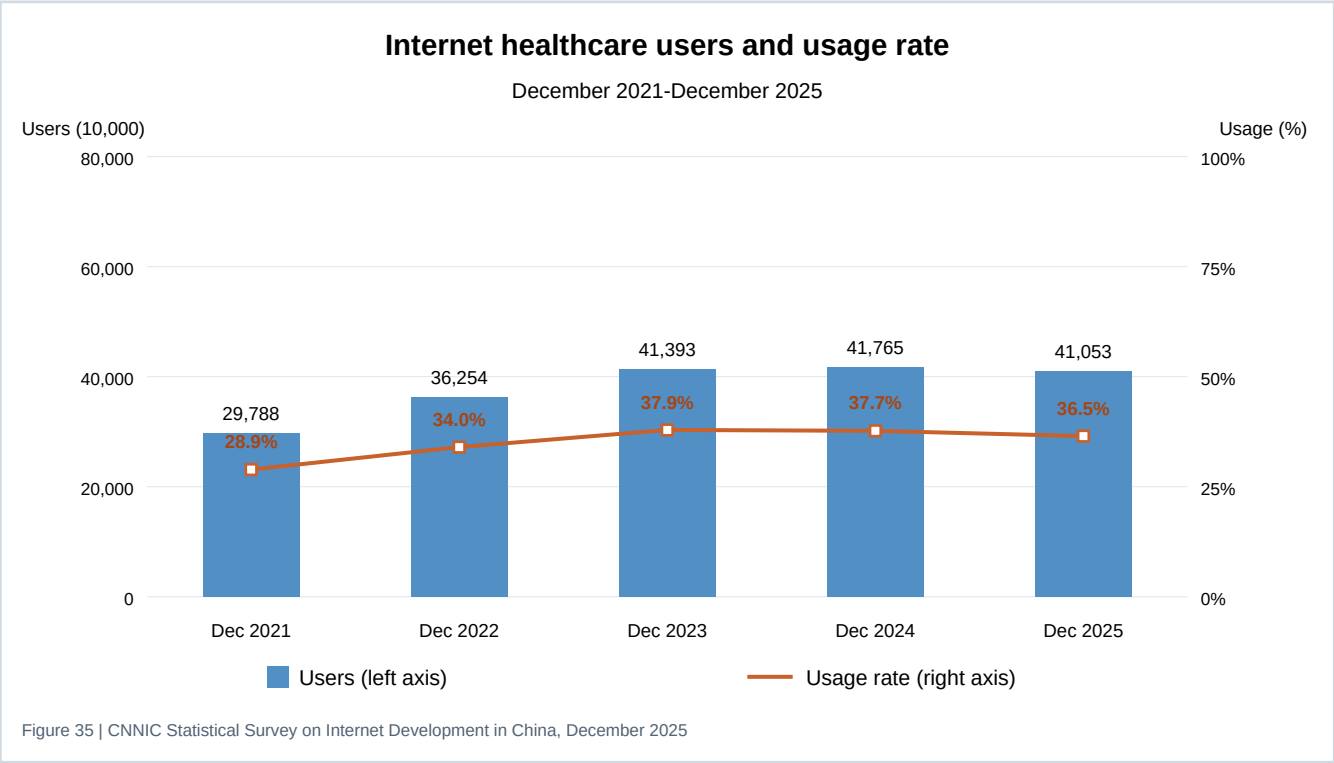


The ride-hailing industry accelerated its transition towards higher-quality development. Aggregation platforms remained prominent, while autonomous driving moved towards commercial deployment. First, aggregation became a major direction. By the end of December 2025, 395 platform companies held operating licences. December orders totalled 963 million, including 292 million fulfilled through aggregation platforms, up 5.6% month on month [52]. Amap, Meituan, Tencent Mobility and others integrated smaller operators' capacity into service networks, enabling passengers to compare options and prices in one place while reducing drivers' customer-acquisition costs and matching capacity more efficiently.

Second, high-level autonomous driving entered a pivotal commercial phase. In December 2025, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology announced China's first approvals for L3 conditionally automated vehicle models, permitting trials in designated areas [53]. Robotaxi operations expanded. By November 2025, Baidu's Apollo Go had completed more than 17 million autonomous-driving orders [54]. Shanghai and other cities issued further demonstration-operation licences supporting paid commercial services by connected autonomous vehicles.

5.3 Internet healthcare

By December 2025, China had approximately 411 million internet-healthcare users, representing 36.5% of internet users.



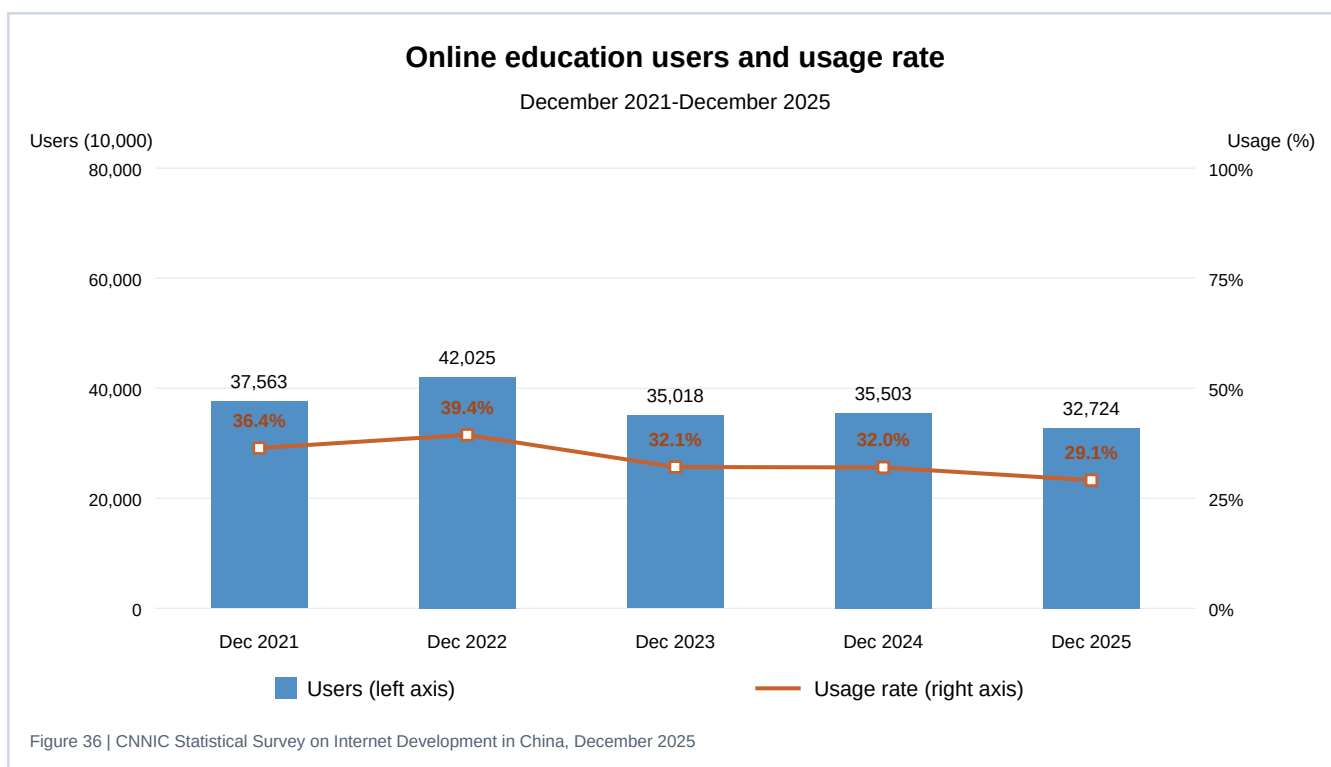
Digital technologies and AI supported wider access to quality medical resources and stimulated internet healthcare. First, gaps in resources narrowed. In 2025, the National Health Commission and four other departments issued implementation opinions on promoting and regulating AI-plus-healthcare applications, calling for widespread intelligent diagnostic assistance in primary care by 2027.

By December 2025, every province had more than 200 examination and laboratory-test items eligible for mutual recognition between medical institutions within prefecture-level jurisdictions [55]. County-level shared-resource centres for imaging and electrocardiography, and central pharmacies, had become widespread. Differences in medical resources across eastern, central and western China were narrowing and cooperation among institutions strengthened.

Second, internet healthcare became a new growth engine for businesses. Online consultations, medicine purchases and health management spread rapidly, bringing convenience while supporting new business models. JD Health's revenue in the first half of 2025 reached RMB 35.3 billion, up 24.5% year on year, and its internet hospital handled more than 500,000 consultations a day [56]. Alibaba Health reported a 64.7% year-on-year increase in net profit for the six months ended 30 September 2025 [57]. Its services extended from medicine launches and patient education to consultations, deliveries and medication management. AI amplified this growth: JD Health's AI Jingyi agents had cumulatively served more than 50 million users [58], and Ant Group's AI health app Ant Afu exceeded 30 million monthly active users [59].

5.4 Online education

By December 2025, China had approximately 327 million online-education users, accounting for 29.1% of internet users.



Digital technology and teaching became more closely integrated, accelerating educational transformation. First, online education moved towards greater collaboration between people and AI. The Outline for Building a Strong Education System (2024-2035) emphasised digital support for personalised teaching at scale and AI-enabled educational change. Zhejiang advanced an AI Plus Education initiative throughout the province, with differentiated general AI courses covering all first-year undergraduates in its universities [60]. Beijing developed a model-platform-data approach, introducing a specialised foundational-education model and AI Education Application Supermarket 3.0.

Second, the international influence of digital education increased. The national smart education platform had more than 178 million registered users and 72.6 billion total visits, reaching over 220 countries and regions [61]. The report describes it as the world's largest digital education-resource centre and platform, demonstrating the results of China's educational digitalisation and providing a bridge for international resource sharing and experience in addressing digital divides.

Sources and notes

[30] Online-video user figures include micro-drama users.

[31] Huanqiu, 16 January 2025. [Source](#)

[32] Weibo, 18 November 2025. [Source](#)

[33] Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, 30 April 2025. [Source](#)

[34] Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, 29 July 2025. [Source](#)

[35] Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, 22 September 2025. [Source](#)

[36] Compiled from the People's Bank of China reports on payment-system operations for the first three quarters of 2025. [Source](#)

[37] Xinhua, 24 September 2025. [Source](#)

[38] National Bureau of Statistics, 19 January 2026. [Source](#)

[39] Smart products covered by the survey mainly include consumer digital devices such as smartphones and tablets, smart wearables, intelligent education/health devices, smart security equipment, connected intelligent vehicles and accessories.

[40] QuestMobile, TRUTH China Mobile Internet Database.

[41] Sina Finance, 21 August 2025. [Source](#)

[42] QuestMobile, TRUTH China Mobile Internet Database.

[43] The Beijing News, 13 November 2025. [Source](#)

[44] Securities Times, 25 December 2025. [Source](#)

[45] Xinhua, 15 November 2025. [Source](#)

[46] Securities Daily, 29 December 2025. [Source](#)

[47] China Audio-video and Digital Publishing Association, 2025 China Game Industry Report, 29 December 2025.

[48] China Audio-video and Digital Publishing Association, Report on Trends in Chinese Online Literature Going Global, 18 December 2025.

[49] Xinhua, 9 January 2026. [Source](#)

[50] Hangzhou Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television and Tourism information website, 4 March 2025. [Source](#)

[51] Xinhua, 30 December 2025. [Source](#)

[52] Ministry of Transport, 20 January 2026. [Source](#)

[53] High-level autonomous driving refers to levels L3-L5 under the recommended national standard Taxonomy of Driving Automation for Vehicles, approved and released by the State Administration for Market Regulation and the Standardization Administration of China.

[54] Xinhua, 14 November 2025. [Source](#)

[55] China National Radio, 21 December 2025 (date as printed in the report). [Source](#)

[56] JD Health, Interim Results Announcement for the Six Months Ended 30 June 2025, 14 August 2025.

[57] Alibaba Health, Interim Results Announcement for the Six Months Ended 30 September 2025, 26 November 2025.

[58] JD Health, Interim Results Announcement for the Six Months Ended 30 June 2025, 14 August 2025.

[59] Ant Group, 15 December 2025. [Source](#)

[60] Zhejiang Online, 18 September 2025. [Source](#)

[61] Chinese Government website, 12 May 2025. [Source](#)

Unofficial English translation of CNNIC's 57th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development, Chapter 3, PDF pages 31-48 (printed pages 23-40). Claims, dates and source references are translated as published, not independently verified. Rounded narrative figures and exact chart/table values are retained. Charts use the published values; the right-hand usage-rate axis is consistently 0-100% for comparison.