

# "The three things I am looking for"

“我在寻找这样的中国作品”

*Sebastian Pirling, Editor of Heyne Fantasy & Science Fiction, Heyne Press, talks about his experience of publishing Chinese writers and he noted that he's looking for Chinese works with originality, which are successful and accessible for Western readers.*

Questions: Qu Jingfan

**During the course of acquiring the rights of *The Three-Body Problem*, do you have other competitors in Germany?**

Yes, there was one other competitor, if I remember correctly, but I think finally we had a better offer and publication concept.

**How did you find the translator for the book? Why did you insist on translating from a Chinese edition rather than from an English edition? Is there any successful or failed precedent before?**

Finding a translator was not that easy, though. There are not that many literary translators here, and their services are highly sought after. We started working with Martina Hasse who had translated Mo Yan before, to translate Liu Cixin's first novel, *The Three-Body Problem*, for us. But since translating from Chinese to German takes much longer than from most of the European languages, we asked Karin Betz, a highly acclaimed translator, too, to continue the trilogy.

While other European publishers translated from the English translation, we decided against this early on, although it cost us time. But for German readers, especially an audience that reads more literary works than genre fiction, the authenticity of a translation is very important. And we had quite a "scandal" (if you want to call it like that) some years ago when some very famous TV literary critics dismissed the translation of a Haruki Murakami novel because it was from English, not from the original Japanese text. We wanted to avoid such a discussion, so we had Liu Cixin translated from Chinese – and the overwhelming success proved us right.

**How many copies have the works of Liu Cixin been sold till now?**

Since its launch in Germany in 2016, *The Three-Body Problem* series has sold 150,000 copies and Liu's complete works sold 250,000 copies, it's certainly exceeded our expectations by far! I hope, however, that this success will open the door for new and younger voices from the Chinese science-fiction, such as Chen Qiufan.

**Which Chinese authors will Heyne publish next?**

We are going to publish Baoshu's supplement to Liu's *The Three-Body Problem* trilogy, *The Redemption of Time*, and then there will be a collection of short stories edited by Ken Liu, *Broken Stars*, with even more authors like Stanley Chen Qiufan, Xia Jia, Gu Shi, Regina Kanyu Wang or Ma Boyong. Beyond that? I am curious to see... There are always three things I am looking for: First, originality – that is, something that distinguishes their ideas, their point of view and their storytelling from the mostly Western tradition of science-fiction that we have had for the last five to six decades here. Secondly, are they successful? Authors like Chen Qiufan or Hao Jingfang are interesting to me because they already have won a massive Chinese audience. And thirdly, I also look for a certain accessibility for Western readers. Not all texts are as interesting or even relevant for an international audience – they must be able to understand the setting, the problems and the intentions of the story this author tries to tell.

**How do you find a suitable writer or work?**

In the case of Liu Cixin, it certainly helped that he turned out to be the most successful and the most famous Chinese science-fiction author. But the main reason German readers keep recommending him and the German press keeps applauding his works is the originality and scope of his thinking. His ideas and visions, how he leads his readers to the very edge of space and time and which questions about

humanity he lets emerge, that is what fascinates most readers here. In Oct 2018, Liu Cixin visited the FBF and had several public interviews and panel talks on that day. I remember one discussion with the German journalist, science-fiction writer and book critic Dietmar Dath, very vividly, when Liu Cixin and Dath delved into an exchange of thoughts on Hegelian philosophy, the future of humanity and its relation to technology. That was very inspiring to me as well as to the almost 200 people in the audience. It is exactly this mixture of speculative thinking and philosophical implications that makes science-fiction interesting beyond mere genre-stories of rockets and robots.

And I hope some of my new contacts and people I know in Beijing will help me find these new voices of Chinese speculative literature. We at Heyne have always tried to offer a wide variety of works in our science-fiction program that shows this bandwidth. Liu Cixin's success in Germany is a good sign.

**The market is strong in the category of translated works in Germany. Has the market share grown in 2018 because of *The Three-Body Problem*?**

The German book market has always been strong in publishing translations from a wide range of languages and literatures. Liu Cixin's works certainly opened the eyes of many for Chinese literature they did not know about before. From what I hear from my colleagues at many other publishers, it is encouraging to them to see that one can be successful with such a daring project. I really hope to see more, even from our competitors.

**Are German publishers getting more interested in Chinese titles and more editors are interested in learning Chinese?**

Well, I would love to read more comics, but when in doubt, I tend to grab a prose book rather than a graphic novel. As for the prose, apart from what I read for my job, I mostly read non-genre stuff, such as philosophical essays, biographies, contemporary novels or even poetry from time to time. In Germany, there is great interest in

novels and non-fiction books about Chinese history, mostly about the last decades up to the present, about the everyday life of ordinary people in big cities or rural areas. I hope to see more Chinese crime fictions in German, too.

**Can you recommend some German books Chinese readers deserve pay attention to recently?**

There are two of my authors here at Heyne I would love to see translated into Chinese. One is a novel called *Terra* by T. S. Orgel where an ordinary guy (he is half Mexican, half Chinese) on a space freighter from Mars to Luna discovers there is a bomb in one of his containers – and it is headed directly to Earth. Will he and his sister be able to stop the disaster? The second book is by Jens Lubbadeh, it is called *Transfusion*. In this novel, the author tells the story of a scientist in a pharma company who wants to save children that are being exploited for the big medical business.

**Can you give some advice for Chinese publishers on developing rights business with German counterparts?**

Nora Mercurio from Suhrkamp publishing explained that one thing is crucial for getting the interest of German publishers: a sample translation. We are only at the beginning of discovering more Chinese literature, but up to know it has been an academic undertaking to discover and translate texts from Chinese. I for myself are going to learn Chinese and I hope many of my colleagues will join me so that we can get a wider, more informed and more nuanced picture of Chinese literature. Until then, we need English (or French) samples to get a quick glance on what this text is about and how the author can write. I am looking forward to seeing more!

## There is no simple recipe for choosing a successful book

发现一部好书没有一个简单的答案

Dr. Michaela Röhl, Literary agent, Petra Eggers Agency, Germany, says three factors are critical: good story-telling, right subject and precise timing.



**In 2016 you made a super bestseller named *Gut* by Giulia Enders, how many copies has the book been sold till now?**

It has sold several millions of copies worldwide and translated into more than 40 languages. It was a number one bestseller in many countries and a Top10 bestseller in other countries.

**Please talk about your agent work right now?**

I am a German agent, running an agency in Berlin. I sell books on the German book market: mainly books written by German authors, but there are also international authors amongst the writers that I am agenting.

Three years ago, I came to China, while living in Beijing, I came to appreciate Chinese culture and literature very much. I am learning the Chinese language and hopes to be able to read Chinese books in Mandarin in the future, without having to

rely on translations. I am open to Chinese authors who are interested in publication in Germany. I found the online influencer Afu and encouraged him to write a book about his father-in-law, the book has just been published this year in Germany and became a bestseller. Afu and his wife Li Ping both have an enormous talent for storytelling. They are both extremely funny, witty and skilled narrators. Therefore, it was very gratifying to work with Afu. Of course, the texture of a book is very differently structured than that of a video blog. Therefore we took our time in crafting the storyline for the book.

Afu is more well-known in China than some famous German Football stars. You just have to walk through Shanghai with him to see how often he is recognized and addressed by friendly Chinese fans. The German public was curious to know why someone they had never heard of before was so popular in China.

(Continued on F16)

