

# SF Novel Unveils a New Era of Chinese Books in Germany

Although the pandemic affected Chinese-German cooperation in publishing during the past years, new deals are also emerging continuously. For example, Zhejiang University Press sold the German rights to *Liangzhu Civilization Series*, which will be announced at FBF this year. Regarding recent changes in Chinese-German publishing cooperation, especially what Chinese books are popular in Germany and future plans, CPMJ interviewed two experienced professionals in Germany.

Q: Qu Jingfan

## Keep as the leading publisher for Chinese genre literature in German Area

A: Sebastian Pirling (Editor for science fiction and fantasy literature at Heyne Publishing House)



Ever since buying *The Three-Body Problem*, Pirling has sold almost 600,000 copies of Chinese SF and fantasy novels.

Q: Could you please talk about the recent publications by Liu Cixin and other Chinese SF writers in Germany?

A: Since January 2017, Heyne has published eight books by Liu Cixin and five ones by other Chinese SF writers, including Liu Cixin's world bestselling novels *The Three-Body Problem* (*Die drei Sonnen*), *The Dark Forest* (*Der dunkle Wald*), and *Death's End* (*Jenseits der Zeit*), as well as his story collection *The Wandering Earth* (*Die wandernde Erde*), his novellas *Mirror* (*Der Spiegel*) and *Devourer* (*Weltenzerstörer*) and his two earlier novels *Ball Lightning* (*Kugelblitz*) and *Supernova Era* (*Supernova*). Finally, we published all three *Trisolaris* novels in one big deluxe hardcover volume (*Trisolaris – Die Trilogie*). Of all the Liu's books, we now have sold over half a million copies in print, e-book and audio editions!

Besides our Da Liu editions, we published Stanley Chen Qiufan's *The Waste Tide* (*Siliziuminsel*), Baoshu's sequel to *Trisolaris*, *The Redemption of Time* (*Botschafter der Sterne*), and Wang Jinkang's *Ant Life* (*Die Kolonie*). Furthermore, we published the story collections *Broken Stars* (*Zerbrochene Sterne*) edited by Ken Liu, and *Quantum Dreams* (*Quantenträume*) edited by Jing Bartz. Although other publishers also started translating SF fictions from China, Heyne is now the leading publisher for Chinese genre literature in the German-speaking book market, since we have also published Jin Yong's fantasy novels.

Q: What changes have occurred in German market since the outbreak of the pandemic and the BookTok buzzing globally?

A: The book market in post-pandemic times reveals three significant insights. Firstly, the demographic group most interested in buying and reading books and also willing to pay more money for are those aged 18-24, who mostly prefer print books. This is, in my opinion, strongly influenced by the book recommendations on TikTok. Although they mostly recommend YA and romance fictions instead of SF novels.

Secondly, we see a surge in book prices. The prices are being raised quickly after long years of rather stable prices. More expensive raw materials and shipping costs are the prominent reasons. On the consumer end of this, we see a shift from books as commodity to books as luxury products – when you can buy hundreds of hours of TV streaming for a couple of Euros, you want to get as many books as possible for your buck. Expensive, high-quality hardcover editions are highly sought after.

Thirdly, there is a shift from SF back to fantasy and romance, together with an interest in the classics. The other day, my daughter (16 years old) asked me about Franz Kafka's works, whether I have an edition of *Homer*, and wanted to start reading *Dune* by Frank Herbert – and there are many more teenagers like her, voraciously diving into classical literature as well as genre entertainment. That makes me rather happy and hopeful.

Q: What kind of promotion and marketing activity have you made for the new books? And how is the response from the market?

A: Our book promotion for Chinese science fiction has always been aimed at three goals: reaching the big newspapers, interesting the book sellers for this relatively new segment (new in the West, at least), and catering to the SF fans. The response to our presentation of Liu Cixin's work has been overwhelming – his books surpassed anything a genre author has achieved in the last years, by far. Other authors and story collections have not been that successful, but that may be in part because short fiction is not very popular (or at least selling as well as longer novels). All in all, we have sold almost 600,000 copies of Chinese science fiction and fantasy.

Q: Please talk about your new publishing project about China. How about your FBF meeting plan with Chinese peers?

A: Our next project is to publish the *Hospital* trilogy by Han Song. I am very much looking forward to having the Big Three of Chinese science fiction published in German then! In Oct FBF this year, I will meet with my Liu Cixin agents, at CEPIEC and FT Culture (Beijing) Co., Ltd. (漫传奇文化传播有限公司).

## "We're Launching a New Chinese-German Publishing Project"

A: Cai Hongjun (General Manager of Hercules Business & Culture Development GmbH)



Before Günter Grass won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1999, Cai Hongjun had already become the sole agent of Grass's Chinese rights for works such as *The Tin Drum* (*铁皮鼓*) and *Cat and Mouse* (*猫与鼠*). He introduced Cao Wenxuan's picture books to Germany and received high ratings on Amazon. He's also planning a new project for co-publication of a picture book in China and Germany.

Q: Recently, what Chinese books are bestsellers in Germany? How are Chinese literature and children's books received in Germany?

A: *Die drei Sonnen* (*三体*) by Liu Cixin is undoubtedly the bestseller in Germany. And novels by Mo Yan, Yu Hua, Yan Lianke, Bi Feiyu were also translated into German, but haven't sold well. Chinese novels' lengthy narratives and multiple characters have become an obstacle to translation. This is due to different historical culture, social backgrounds, authorial concepts, and readers' habits, etc. A comparison of German versions with its Chinese ones reveals that German translators or editors have made significant cuts and adjustments.

Regarding Chinese children's books, the German editions of Cao Wenxuan's *Bronze und Sonnenblume* (*青铜葵花*) and *Das Schilfhaus* (*草房子*) have received 5-star ratings on Amazon. His picture books *Ein ver-rücktes Huhn* (*痴鸡*), *The Last Der letzte Leopard* (*最后一只豹子*), and *Sommer* (*夏天*) have also been published in German but haven't sold well. Over a decade ago, we managed the German rights for Yang Hongying's *Diary of Smiling Cat* (*笑猫日记*) series to Schneider, a German publisher that produced *Ein fall für dich und das Tiger-Team* (*冒险小虎队*). The first two books after publication didn't sell well, and the last two, even after translation, were not published. We have also recommended works by several well-known writers of Chinese children's literature, but unfortunately, none have achieved successful results in German market.

Q: What're the new marketing ways that German publishers usually adopt?

A: Most German publishers stick to conventional approaches. Typically, they distribute book catalogs, advertise in related newspapers and magazines, deploy their sales representatives for in-person sales, and participate in various types of book fairs and bookstore events. Recently, Germany also embraced TikTok for book promotion, posting short videos on BookTok and mainly recommending women's and YA novels. Since April 2023, publishers have been releasing BookTok's bestseller lists.

Q: Could you share the latest news in Hercules' Chinese-German publishing collaboration?

A: As Chinese original books become increasingly mature, we have hired Chinese staff with overseas work experience and familiarity with the domestic children's book market to recommend books for export. Leveraging our accumulated resources over the years, we aim to establish a cooperation platform for publishers in both China and Germany. We've managed the German rights for Cao Wenxuan's picture books published by Tomorrow Publishing House and 21st Century Publishing Group (21CPG), including *Ein verrücktes Huhn*, *Der letzte Leopard*, *Sommer*, and *Im Kindergarten ist ein Monster* (*幼儿园有个怪*), a picture book by Zhou Suolan. These books have been published in German. In the past few years, we have endeavored to facilitate an international publishing project between 21CPH and Leipziger Kinderbuchverlag, a German children's book publisher. This project features the first Chinese winner of Hans Christian Andersen Award for Writing, Professor Cao Wenxuan, and the first German winner of Hans Christian Andersen Award for Illustration, Professor Klaus En-sikat. Information about their co-published *Ich hab mich verlaufen* (*迷路*) is already on Amazon.de. Currently, both the text and illustrations for this book are complete, and it's expected to be published simultaneously in Chinese and German at the end of this year. Both publishers share the rights and can authorize the publication of versions in other languages. Additionally, we're actively identifying promising original projects and nurturing young talented authors in China, facilitating collaboration between publishers in China and Germany once these projects mature.