

How these German Books Create Buzzes in China?

■ By Qu Jingfan

More German books were translated and entered Chinese market, and many of them have become popular in China. How about the inside stories of these German books on positioning and marketing in China? Let's hear the voices from several Chinese publishers.



Duan Qigang

Academic books

In 2018, the Social Sciences Academic Press (SSAP) established the "Thorn Bird" Book brand. In recent years, SSAP has imported several German academic books which received positive responses around China, including biographies such as *Bismarck: Ein Preuße und sein Jahrhundert* (《俾斯麦：一个普鲁士人和他的世纪》), *Metternich: Strategist and Visionary* (《梅特涅：帝国与世界》), *Jürgen Habermas: Eine Biographie* (《哈贝马斯：知识分子与公共生活》), etc. These books have sales of 10,000 to 30,000 copies, with most of them continuously in print or reprinted.

The founder & director of Thorn Bird, Duan Qigang, introduced that the protagonists of these biographies are globally renowned figures in their respective fields during their times. The popularity of these books reflects the huge interest of Chinese readers in biographies of famous individuals. Moreover, all these biographies were written by authoritative experts of certain fields, which certainly fits the expectations of readers for professionalism and authority in such books.

Duan Qigang mentioned that when selecting books, he values the themes and content, as well as the professionalism and authority of the authors in the relevant arenas, and prefers to publish long-selling books written by scholars from academic institutions that are aimed at a broad readership.

Thorn Bird primarily focuses on themes related to world history. In recent years, market for books of this genre has been relatively stable. Duan Qigang explained that more than ten years ago, books related to world history were extremely popular. Therefore, numerous publishing institutions entered this field, leading to a rapid increase in the number of products and thus, bringing about intense competition. This gave rise to a rich variety of books, but the sales of individual book declined slightly. After over a decade of development, the readership for world history themes has gradually grown and become stabilized, with students in their twenties and white-collars in their forties as main customers.

Recently, the sales channels of books in China are shifting towards livestreaming for product promotion, posing a significant challenge for publishers. In response, Thorn Bird has established its own livestreaming and short video platforms, which are also actively cooperating with social media influencers and organizations. Short video and livestreaming platforms tend to favor the promotion of top products, which also poses a challenge for publishers. The development of those platforms has brought about changes for sale platforms, making it increasingly challenging for books to have long-term sales. Yet, on the other hand, they can also provide opportunities for certain books that may not have been bestsellers before.

In response to new media, Thorn Bird has posed an image of professionalism, authority, and being the most influential brand on the bookshelf. To promote the high-priced German book series *Born to be King* ("生而为王"), Thorn Bird had an in-depth collaboration with the WeChat official account "Book List is Coming" (书单来了). The series was selected as the "Most Anticipated Books for the H2 of the Year" and a distribution partnership was established. Within one week, 700 sets were sold, generating significant attention and laying a foundation for the follow-up sales.

Children's books

Children's books in German have a vast market in China. One of the bestsellers from Germany is *Über Land Und Durch Die Luft* (《一粒种子的旅行》). Since first being introduced in 2010 by New Classic Culture Co. Ltd., its sales have exceeded one million copies to date. Another picture book by Anne Möller, *Nester Baun, Hohlen Knabberm* (《世界上最最温馨的家》) is also very popular. When selecting picture books, New Classic said they would first consider the content, whether the text is suitable for children's perspectives, and whether it possesses uniqueness.

Works by the 21st Century Publishing Group (21CPG), such as the *Colorful Crow Series*, *Michael Ende Series* and the picture book *A Stubborn Tortoise* (《犟龟》) have been well-received by Chinese readers. To build the *Colorful Crow Series*, 21CPG gathered contemporary, classic, and interesting German children's literature, including representative works by numerous German literary masters such as Paul Maar and Paul Biegel. Sun Reimin, editor of the *Colorful Crow Series* of 21CPG, mentioned that over 18 million copies have been sold to date. In the near future, they will reprint the *Colorful Crow Series* (20 volumes in total), not only upgrading the print quality and binding design but also enhancing reading services, including a reading map, instructional videos, audio readings, extensive readings, and guidebooks, making German literary works more diverse. Furthermore, this series will continue to incorporate more outstanding German works.

Sun pointed out that the main characteristic of German children's literature is their unique geographic and cultural environment. As the German literature translator Li Shixun once stated, "German literature is different from other European and American ones. It always has a philosophical depth and tends to be not that shallow." Take *A Stubborn Tortoise* as an example: Reading it during childhood might give you the impression that it's just a story about perseverance in life goals. Reading it as a young adult, you may understand the courage needed to stay determined in the face of mockery and discouragement along your life. Reading it in middle age, you may grasp the understanding of the tortoise's mindset about how he can generously fulfill itself and others despite regretting missing its original goals. German children's books possess this artistic and philosophical ideal, making them a literary gift that offers insights for readers at different stages of life.

In children's literature market, E-commerce and livestreaming platforms have taken over most of the sales channels. Many livestreaming platforms only allocate three to five minutes for recommending a set of books, which is far from sufficient for literary books. "To promote and popularize children's literature, we are taking a dual approach through new media and offline operations," Sun said, in terms of new media operations, they engage with anchors, influencers, and communities that are willing to slow down and provide detailed explanations of book content to attract readers. By demonstrating high-quality content, they continuously enhance the brand's reputation and influences. At the same time, they plan various online



Sun Ruimin



Guo Jiahui

reading activities to encourage readers to share book reviews on platforms like Douban, Xiaohongshu, and Weibo. Regarding offline operations, they emphasize cooperation with school teachers and bookstore personnel in charge of reading promotion. They provide teaching videos, power points, course syllabus, and training services for children's literature books, reducing the difficulty of promoting children's literature and encouraging more people to participate in it!

When selecting books, Sun said, the content is the priority. Sometimes, works without much fame or international awards are more likely to be recognized by readers and recommended by professional organizations. Secondly, they value works recommended by authoritative institutions for rights. Many of the German literary works purchased by the 21CPG have been recommended by the German Youth Literature Research Institute, which has recommended multiple works in the *Colorful Crow Series*.

In recent years, Beijing Science and Technology Publishing Co., Ltd (BSTP) has translated and published several German books. For example, the sales of *Stomach has a Train Station* (《肚子里有个火车站》) and *Dental Street novelty* (《牙齿大街的新鲜事》) have exceeded one million copies. And most of the German books have seen continuous reprints. Guo Jiahui, the deputy director of the Second Children's Book Department of BSTP, stated that German children's books share many common things with Chinese ones in terms of themes and storytelling methods, making readers resonate easily. For example, *I Don't Pee My Pants* (《我不尿裤子了》) received positive feedback from readers like, "My child kept wetting his pants, no matter how many times I've talked to them, this book was a great help!" There are also some unique German children's books that leave readers with endless reflections, both adults and children could find resonance in *The Fox Eats Books* (《吃书的狐狸》). In addition, the German-speaking region is the birthplace of western classical music. Books like *Children's Classical Music Picture Books* (《儿童古典音乐绘本》) and *World Masters of Music Series* (《世界音乐大师系列》), which readers can both listen to and read, have received unanimous praise for years.

Guo Jiahui mentioned that in a market where channels are changing, the most important thing is to prioritize readers' demands, unearth the content value of books, understand the underlying logic of each channel's operation, and gain an in-depth understanding of the characteristics of each KOL. Finally, to create high-quality content by leveraging high-quality KOLs, they achieve continuous and effective exposure for books.

BSTP principally values two aspects when selecting children's books. First, whether there is market demand in China for the themes. And the second is the book's content value, as well as the author's background and award-winning history. Creating bestsellers depends on numerous factors, and editors need to approach each book with the goal and attitude of making it a bestseller. Only then can books have a long and stable market.