

Finding the Key to Successful Rights Trade

By Qu Jingfan

Literary agency has played a crucial role in achieving successful book rights trade. In English-speaking countries, active literary agents are the key drivers of rights trade. Recently, we've interviewed two active literary agencies in the Chinese book market, to explore the successful experiences in rights trade that can serve as valuable references.

Archipel Press' story

Based on Shanghai writer Jin Yucheng's masterpiece *Blossoms* and directed by renowned director Wong Kar-wai, the TV series has been released on major Chinese TV channels and streaming media, sparking a national debate on various related topics and prompting a resurgence of interest in reading *Blossoms*. The reporter recently interviewed Jin Yucheng's rights agent and the founder of Archipel Press, Peng Lun, to explore the process of selling rights to *Blossoms*, and the successful practices of Archipel Press in selling the rights of Chinese literary works.

Peng Lun, the founder of Archipel Press, mentioned that the idea of acquiring the rights to Jin Yucheng's *Blossoms* originated from the recommendation of his good friend, another Shanghai writer, Xiao Bai. After leaving Shanghai 99 Reader's Culture Co., Ltd. in 2017, Peng Lun established Archipel Press, mainly focusing on planning and publishing contemporary foreign literary works. After about a year, he detected the huge demand for rights selling for Chinese writers, and noticed the need for professionals familiar with the international publishing industry and rights market to help manage literary rights. He has established relationships with editors and literary agents from various literary publishing houses worldwide. In 2018, he firstly sold the translation rights of his friend Xiao Bai's *The Lockdown* (《封锁》). Xiao Bai then suggested that Peng should contact Jin Yucheng to discuss the translation rights of *Blossoms*. After a successful meeting, Peng Lun gained



Peng Lun

Jin Yucheng's approval to represent the rights of *Blossoms*.

Peng Lun expressed his praise for the book, stating that *Blossoms* is well-written with high literary value. However, it is relatively long and has extensive use of Shanghai dialect, posing significant challenges for both rights selling and translation.

According to Peng Lun, a few years ago, with the introduction of renowned Swedish sinologist Göran Malmqvist (Chinese name Ma Yueran), Jin Yucheng invited American translator Professor John Balcom from the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey to translate some chapters of *Blossoms*. For Peng Lun, there have been English sample chapters available during his representation of the rights. Soon after, Peng Lun heard that Jeremy Davis, an editor at the prestigious American literary publishing house FSG, was interested in publishing Chinese novels. He swiftly recommended *Blossoms* to Davis. Davis also showed his interest and had his staff write a review report. What excited Da-

vis even more was the news that his idol, director Wong Kar-wai, has signed the rights to adapt *Blossoms* to TV series as early as 2013, just half a year after the novel's publication.

During that period, Jin Yucheng introduced Peng Lun to meet director Wong Kar-wai in Shanghai. Peng Lun asked the director if he would be visiting New York soon and whether he could meet Jeremy Davis, the editor from FSG. Wong Kar-wai readily agreed. Shortly afterward, Davis had the opportunity to meet his idol in New York, learning about the director's views on the novel and his suggestions. Davis quickly sent a quote to Peng Lun to purchase the global English-version rights of *Blossoms*. After that, Peng Lun took the opportunity of Wong Kar-wai's visit to Paris and invited him to meet with Antoine Gallimard, the president of the French publishing house, Éditions Gallimard, further contributing to the rights selling of the French edition.

"This is enough to illustrate Wong Kar-wai's strong influence as a world-class director in the international publishing industry. At the same time, he understands which foreign publishers are suitable for *Blossoms*. They may also be helpful for the overseas distribu-

tion of the TV series in the future." Peng Lun explained.

Peng Lun stated that Archipel Press mainly focuses on rights buying. However, for rights selling, it is still difficult to become a "business" in the short term. For him, the fundamental purpose of rights selling is to "serve Chinese writers", assisting them in finding professional publishing houses and excellent editors that are suitable for their works. Archipel Press has represented over ten Chinese authors, including Jin Yucheng, Xiao Bai, Shuang Xuetao, Zheng Zhi, and Lin Bai. In terms of the experiences and insights gained in the seven years of entrepreneurship, he mentioned that they have always hoped authors would endorse their steadfast principle of "putting quality before quantity". This is because once the author's work is translated and sold in the target market, there will be sales data, which can influence other publishers' decisions to import that writer's works.

When selecting overseas publishing houses, the focus is on the professionalism of the publishers and editors. We have to choose professional publishers and editors who are enthusiastic about the writer's work. "literary agents should know which publishing houses in a particular region publish translated literature and then make targeted recommendations."

Looking ahead, Peng Lun expressed a desire to pay more attention to the novels of female and young writers. This is because many foreign editors are interested in the works from China's younger generation, especially female writers.



The Korean and Japanese versions of *Blossoms*

Rightol Media's story

Located in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, Rightol Media has been a key player in the rights trading business since its establishment in 2006. Over the years, the company has collaborated with thousands of publishers worldwide, facilitating the rights trade of over ten thousand books. Their business initially focused on introducing rights to Chinese mainland, and has now expanded to cover global rights trading in nearly 30 countries and regions.

There is a growing interest overseas in Chinese books. With related policies promoting original publications, the quality of original Chinese books has risen, gradually making an impact on the international publishing market, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. Depending on the recognition gained by writers through authoritative awards and the popularity of adaptations in local television, the pub-

lishers in southeast Asian countries are actively participating in competitive bidding for the rights of these original works.

In the realm of rights selling, Rightol has consistently adhered to the path of commercialized rights selling. Through collaborations with overseas publishers, Rightol has progressively shifted towards a commercial model for rights selling cooperation. Currently, it is no longer rare to see cooperation projects with prepaid royalties of tens of thousands of Yuan or even more.

Since vigorously expanding its rights selling business in 2020, Rightol has currently sold more than 200 titles annually. The types of these books are mainly concentrated in the fields of popular science comics, children's picture books, contemporary literature, popular online literature, and domestic original comics. There has also been an

increased focus on topics in the domain of artistic creation, with several Chinese original books on painting techniques selling rights through Rightol in 2023.

Among the nearly 100 employees of Rightol, there are over 60 rights agents who are proficient in more than 10 mainstream languages. They are primarily divided into the Domestic Business Department, Asia-Pacific Business Department, and International Business Department based on their professional language backgrounds. They are responsible for communicating with the corresponding markets in different countries and regions. Rights agents maintain close contact with the local market in their native languages, and have a deep understanding of the readers' needs in each country. They also connect with the personnel in charge of rights selling from Chinese domestic publishers, enhance their understanding of domestic market for original works at the same time, and synchro-

nize the feedback of overseas market on translated books with editors of domestic publishing houses.

Rightol has strengthened high-level exchanges with domestic and international publishers. They have set up booths at major international book fairs, visited embassies and cultural centers of various countries in China to gather first-hand information about their local publishing markets. Besides, Rightol has vigorously expanded its global rights trade business by enhancing the construction of overseas offices. This involves strengthening overseas office operations by selling the rights from one overseas country to another. Currently, Rightol has established branches in Beijing and Guangzhou, and its first overseas office is located in Bologna, Italy, which is set to officially open this year. In the future, Rightol plans to include more overseas office constructions in its business plans, creating a global network for international publishing.