

4 TWO SESSIONS

Belt and Road opens new chapter for authors

China's contemporary wordsmiths are gaining a wider audience through the development of the 'modern Silk Road'. **Mei Jia** reports.

Prior to 2011, kung fu, Jackie Chan and pandas were the images readers in the Arab world associated most with China, according to Ahmed Elsaid, an Egyptian publisher who operates from a base in the Ningxia Hui autonomous region.

Six years later, the list has grown and writers such as Liu Zhenyun, Xu Zechen and economist Justin Yifu Lin have seen their popularity grow with readers in the region.

"Before 2011, even Chinese language majors at universities in the Arabic-speaking world didn't understand Chinese society, the people or history very well. At the time, there were very few books about China in English, let alone Arabic," said the publisher and translator, who majored in Chinese at the Al-Azhar University in Cairo and now operates from Yinchuan in Northwest China.

"When I was a student, only about 50 titles had been bought and translated from Chinese for decades. It was really difficult to get Chinese books, which partly stimulated my plan to become a publisher," Elsaid noted.

The situation improved after the advent of the Belt and Road Initiative, proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013, which saw more Chinese books, covering a wide range of subjects, appearing in Egyptian bookstores.

Sinologist Marine Jibladze, from Georgia, had a similar experience. She said until recently there were very few books about China in the former Soviet state, with the exception of a small number of foreign translations about traditional Chinese culture.

"The Belt and Road Initiative offers a great chance for more cultural and educational exchanges between the two countries. Recently, we have seen books in Georgian about Chinese literature, history and language," she said.

Multilingual approach

Zhao Haiyun, deputy department chief at the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, said since the Belt and Road Initiative began providing funding for translations of Chinese literature, the administration has supported multilingual versions of 980 titles, aiming to reach readers in countries and regions along the routes of the "modern Silk Road".

Liu Xinlu, an academic and translator at Beijing Foreign Studies University's department of Arabic studies, said many people in the Arab world are unfamiliar with Chinese society and vice versa. "To improve understanding, Arabic-speaking people want to read books about our core values and how China perceives the world," he said. "The Arab world used to look to the West for development experience, but now it is more impressed and enlightened by what China has

achieved in the past 30 years. People are now more willing to look to the East, and Chinese publishers are eager to introduce more titles to them."

Unlike years gone by, when the Arab world was interested in traditional Chinese culture, such as literary classics, people are now fascinated by contemporary issues, such as the country's development model and modern authors.

Through his research, Liu discovered that people in the Arab world love reading, and they are especially keen on humorous romances.

That point was echoed by Elsaid, who said Liu Zhenyun's use of humor and realism — displayed in works such as *Cell Phone* and *I am not Madame Bovary* — is the key to his popularity.

"The contemporary writers introduced to the Arabic-speaking world differ in style, but what they write reflects how Chinese people live their lives, which is attractive to Arab readers," he said.

Opportunities

In the early 2000s, China began a campaign to encourage domestic publishers to compete on the global stage and work with international publishers. While some are looking to the English-language market, others, such as the China Intercontinental Press and Beijing Normal University Press, are seeking opportunities along the new trading route.

The two publishers are among 16 that have established branches in countries within the scope of the Belt and Road Initiative, according to Zhao: "In addition to copyright trades, localization operations are an important and effective way of 'going out'."

Jing Xiaomin, deputy director of the China Intercontinental Press, believes Chinese books should reach out to all readers, not just people combing the shelves of university libraries.

To ensure that readers are easily able to locate Chinese-themed books, her company has established special "China Shelves" at two of the biggest bookstores in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

"One big surprise came with our digital book platform called That's. We set out to offer an e-book system for our Arabic partners to learn about Chinese titles. In appreciation of our technology, 40 local publishers have offered the platform 10,000 titles in Arabic, accounting for 70 percent of the total," Jing said. "We're pleased to see our e-book standards have been accepted internationally."

One of the current darlings of the Chinese publishing world is spy novelist Mai Jia, who is being promoted heavily in the international market.

"One of our secrets is to take the

writers to meet the readers, not only at international book fairs, but also in Chinese departments at universities or China Study Institutes, where we are received warmly every time," she said.

Jing believes that the younger generation of up-and-coming Chinese writers will have few problems gaining global recognition because they are more internationalized than previous generations and most of them speak excellent English.

"They write about topics that prompt sympathy, such as starting businesses and the pressures of everyday life," she said.

Beijing Normal University Press has also tasted success with three series of books covering ancient classics, contemporary literature and China's development model, as part of an extended project called The Zayed Collection. The press is also introducing the works of contemporary poet Hai Zi to the poetry-loving Arabs.

Translation challenge

Xie Xi, who leads the press's international business department, said a lack of qualified translators poses a big challenge for Chinese publishers working on books that will appeal to a global audience. To resolve the problem, many publishers are now working with Chinese universities, the Foreign Ministry and international organizations to nurture more talent.

Both Intercontinental and the university press use at least two

translators for each book, one from China and one from the target market, which ensures both precision and originality.

At the same time, an increasing number of Chinese publishers are participating in international book fairs held in countries along the routes of the Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese publishers were out in force at last year's Cairo International Book Fair, at which China was the guest of honor. Next month, Abu Dhabi will host a book fair featuring Chinese books.

And it isn't just books, the Arabic version of Pathlight, a leading Chinese literary magazine, gained pop-

ularity at book fairs after its publisher, the People's Literature Magazine, issued the translated version.

Some of the books destined for Chinese-Arabic exchanges — such as *Civilisational Repositioning: China's Rise and the Future of the Arab People* by the Jordanian writer Samer Khair Ahmad — have proved so popular that English versions are now being produced.

Meanwhile, the Foreign Languages Press and the New World Press are maintaining momentum by introducing the aims of the Belt and Road Initiative in English and other languages. *Bright Prospects for the*

Belt and Road Initiative, published by the Foreign Languages Press, introduces the project in easy-to-read brochures, while *Biking the Silk Road* tells the story of a 6-year-old girl and her family who travel along the route by bicycle for 80 days.

"I hope there will be more enthusiasm about China in countries along the routes of the initiative, so more books will provide better knowledge about our country and nourish greater understanding," said Liu Xinlu, from the Beijing Foreign Studies University.

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Zhao Haiyun, deputy department chief at the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television



LI MIN / CHINA DAILY

Voices from the two sessions

Ma Huateng (Pony Ma), a deputy to the National People's Congress from Guangdong and chairman of Tencent



Digital content products have become increasingly important in culture exchanges on the global stage.

As China has become one of the largest producers and consumers of digital content, we should promote the rapid development of the industry in the country and facilitate promoting Chinese culture and Chinese enterprises overseas.

Xi Meijuan, an NPC delegate from Shanghai and vice-president of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles



Some scandals, such as exaggerating box-office numbers, have triggered heated discussion among the public recently.

If the fickle (financial) atmosphere in film and television circles remains unchanged, it will be hard for artists and workers behind the scenes to produce awesome works and it will be a challenge to produce first-class work that represents the country's highest standards for overseas promotion.

Social capital has poured into the cultural industry, and in most cases the reason for selecting a project is click-through rate. So, in most films the leading actors are young, good-looking men, "little fresh meat" as it is known in Chinese. However, good actors require time and experience to mature.

A bonanza for bookworms

By **MEI JIA**

Since March 2013, the Chinese public's passion for reading has undergone a big change.

Slogans promoting the activity are plastered across bus stops, next to adverts for the newest movies. Meanwhile, Line 4 of the Beijing subway has been turned into a reading wonderland: the cars carry posters bearing illustrations and selected paragraphs from books. Passengers can scan a code with a smart device and receive selected chapters of featured books so they can gauge the content.

More reading spaces, public and privately owned, have sprouted in cities, and while most are small, they are cozy, chic and full of bookworms. Bookstores are also drawing larger numbers of customers, and extending their opening hours as a result.

"We've witnessed rising sales of printed books recently," said Zang Yongqing, a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and president of the People's Literature Pub-

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The average number of books each Chinese person read in 2015, according to the Chinese Academy of Press and Publication

lishing House.

In April last year, the Chinese Academy of Press and Publication announced that every person in China read an average of eight books in 2015, a small increase compared with previous years. Last year's data will be released next month.

President Xi Jinping has said that he regards reading as a healthy hobby, and he wants all Party cadres and leaders to foster the habit.

The reading movement started during the two sessions in 2013, when more than 110 members of the committee put forward a proposal to promote the activity as an important asset for the country's future and urged government backing.

"We will work hard to foster a love of reading among our people," said Premier Li Keqiang, when he delivered the Government Work Report to NPC deputies and CPPCC members on Sunday.

The aim, previously referred to as "building a country of avid readers", has been included in the country's 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-20).

In March last year, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television drafted a regulation on the promotion of reading and encouraged members of the public to air their opinions.

"Last year, my proposal was about enacting the regulation as quickly as possible," Zang said, referring to the project to open more libraries and reading spaces for all age groups, host more reading events and ensure that children read as much as possible. The regulation also includes proposals to punish people who damage reading facilities.

He expressed concerns about migrant workers in cities, suggesting that they should be

offered free book coupons to encourage them to spend more time reading.

Zang is not opposed to fragmented reading, such as on social-media platforms such as WeChat or Weibo, and he believes book lists offered by professionals and academics will help to improve readers' tastes in literature.

"Reading is the origin of creativity. We only get a glimpse of life through direct experience, books can offer more," he said.

The Beijing Reading Festival is an official nonprofit platform that promotes reading in the Chinese capital. Since it was inaugurated six years ago, the festival has held more than 20,000 events, attracting audiences of more than 10 million.

Last year, the festival cooperated with 300 publishing organizations to invite 300 writers, scholars and critics to meet readers in 1,000 reading spaces.

"Data from official and research institutions suggest the number of readers is rising and the average number of books being read every year has also increased," said Wang Yijun, director of public services at the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television.

"Many people have already

made reading a habit and a way of life," she said.

Wang said the Beijing festival serves as a platform where government support combines with publishers, bookstores and organizations that promote reading to offer integrated public services and the best resources.

"It wasn't easy to work with so many partners, but it was worth making the effort because I know how reading can light up people's lives and help build a strong country," Wang said.

The festival's management team is now actively seeking more partners and advocating reading unions among peer groups, such as school students and police officers.

Zhou Huilin, director of publishing management at the administration, said promotions will account for a large part of his work plan for next year, such as establishing a long-term mechanism to promote reading, which will include establishing a guiding committee and a system to assess the impact of the program.

On March 1, the Public Cultural Service Guarantee Law of the People's Republic of China was officially enacted, guaranteeing funding, infrastructure and facilities to promote reading.