

Strategies to Improve the Overseas Dissemination of Original Chinese Children's Books in the Post-epidemic Era

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Abstract:

With the advent of the post-epidemic era, the increasing demand for reading provides a favorable situation for the cross-cultural spread of Chinese original children's books. Practitioners of children's books should analyze the bottlenecks restricting the dissemination of Chinese original children's books from the audience groups and attach importance to non-leader audiences. With deeply understanding and developing Chinese elements from the perspective of target diversified audiences, they should create export-oriented works with child-based thinking. In response to the advantages of digital reading during the epidemic, the children's book publishing industry should further improve the level of digital communication to maximize potential audiences; on the other hand, it should use the Chinese international education and communication system to target the huge available audience groups and improve the overseas promotion of Chinese children's books

Keywords: *Post-epidemic, China, Children's books, Audience, Overseas promotion.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The global spread of COVID-19 has had a huge impact on the global economy. At present, China has resumed work, production and school routine, and the economy has begun to recover after a series of fights against the epidemic. China has entered the post-epidemic era, which is both a challenge and an opportunity for all walks of life. Meanwhile, the surge in reading demand brought about by the fight against the epidemic at home has provided a favorable situation for original children's books to go global.

II. THE IMPACT OF THE EPIDEMIC ON THE SPREAD OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Due to measures such as school closures and working at home during the epidemic, children's home education and reading needs have soared. Children's books have become a dark horse during the epidemic. The volume has shown an increasing trend, and the structure and dissemination of children's books have also undergone structural changes.

2.1 Significant Increase of Total Sales

Anti-epidemic measures at home have led to a sharp increase in students' reading time, and the huge market demand in China has attracted the attention of international publishers. At the China Shanghai International Children's Book Fair in December 2020 attracted more than 350 children's book publishing organizations and children-related cultural companies from 21 countries and regions, including Russia, Italy, Germany, the United States, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, Belgium, and Australia.

As COVID-19 spreads to the world, the international children's book sales market is also on the rise. Take the United States as an example, according to the US Publishing Weekly, the first half of 2020 witnessed print sales totaled 322.1 million copies and a year-on-year increase of 2.8%. Specifically, children's non-fiction books rose the most, up 25.5 % year-on-year, and children's literature books rose 7.1 %. By August 2020, the total book sales have increased by 24.8 %, among which children's non-literary books have increased by 28.0%, and children's literature has increased by 8.5%[1].

2.2 Changes in Book Structure

After the outbreak of the epidemic, the publishing industry organized large-scale anti-epidemic publishing activities to help prevent and control the epidemic. Anti-epidemic-related books emerged accordingly, which is the most eye-catching and has played a positive role in understanding children and controlling the epidemic. As of early June 2020, 13 professional children's publishing presses have planned to release 23 types of anti-epidemic children's books (a total of 30 books); 8 science and technology/science publishing presses relying on a strong science/medical team have launched 10 anti-epidemic books. 22 other publishing presses of different categories have published 28 kinds (a total of 34) anti-epidemic children's books[2].

Since the outbreak of the epidemic, domestic universities, middle schools and primary schools have adopted measures to delay the start of school. 90 % of students around the world

have implemented home learning. The time and place of study have changed, and the role of parents has also changed accordingly. They have also assumed the responsibility of education and supervision. Home learning has increased the demand for books for family education. Jingdong (a Chinese online website) sales data on November 11th, 2020 (which is an online shopping feast in China) shows that pre-sales of books related to family reading have seen rapid growth, and the pre-sales of family education books have increased by 45 times compared with last year. The situation is similar in the United States. *"My First Learn to Write Workbook"*, with a single sale of 379,101 copies, ranks second in the top ten best-selling books for children in 2020.

2.3 Significant Digital Trend

During the epidemic, digital network reading was unprecedentedly active. Amazon China's "2020 National Reading Report" shows that 46% of readers chose to read both paper books and e-books in the past year, while 29% of readers use e-books as their main reading medium, an increase of 6% compared with 2019. At the same time, e-books also play a positive role in readers' reading behavior. More than 70% of readers believe that digital reading has helped them increase their total reading volume, and 40% of readers' feedback has increased significantly. On average, American children had an average of 3 hours of electronic screen time per day before the epidemic, and nearly 6 hours after the outbreak[3]. In order to reduce personnel contact and gathering, the epidemic has played a boosting role in digital publishing. During the epidemic, the contents of the 570 Chinese books related to the epidemic were basically published by integrated media, which overcomes the difficulties in dissemination[4]. The "Kai Shu Story" app in China featuring audio stories has been downloaded more than 100 million times in the mobile app market. During the epidemic period, major online platforms open teaching and reading resources for free. The convenience and speed of digital reading and teaching, huge amount of information, and powerful functions have greatly alleviated children's fear and anxiety about the epidemic.

III. BOTTLENECKS OF THE OVERSEAS DISSEMINATION OF CHINESE ORIGINAL CHILDREN'S BOOKS

The saying of "there is no national border for children's books" is popular and widely accepted, as children's books focus on commonality of children and comparatively less influenced by ideology. In recent years, Chinese original children's books have good achievement in the global market. For example, *"A New Year's Reunion"* was selected as the Best Illustrated Children's Books of 2011 by *The New York Times* at the end of 2011, and was also selected as a list of 100 children's books recommended by the New York Public Library in

2011. In April 2016, Chinese children's writer Cao Wenxuan won the International Andersen Award. This is the first time for Chinese writers to win this award, which has strengthened the confidence of Chinese children's literature to go global.

Although China's original children's books have achieved rapid development, it is difficult for overseas dissemination to break through the bottlenecks, which include the adult-oriented thinking and superficial understanding of Chinese characteristics, coupled with the restrictions of the way of dissemination,

3.1 Adult-oriented Thinking

In ancient Chinese culture, Chinese books aimed at children in traditional way, such as "*Di Zi Gui(Standard for Students)*", "*San Zi Jing(Three Character Classic)*" and other Chinese classics, "mostly preached doctrines, contained feudal consciousness, and gradually abandoned them for future generations." [5] Although these books uphold the excellent Chinese virtues, they are all from the perspective of adults and treat children as objects of education and persuasion. This adult-oriented thinking is still reflected in the creation, publication and promotion of modern children's books. It is the parents who have the right to choose and buy books. In parent-child reading, it is also the parents who read and interpret children's books. Due to the silent status of children in purchasing, choosing, and reading children's books, and creators, publishers, translators, and promoters of children's books have intentionally or unintentionally catered to the psychology of parents, and adult-oriented thinking is always permeated in. For example, the themes of many picture books for children are love, death, sex, etc. which children cannot understand. Publishers will use words such as "master", "classic" and "awarded" to attract parents to buy, and translators will also use "review and communication" for these children [6].

In addition to ignoring the independent existence of children, another characteristic of adult-oriented thinking is its obvious educational function. For example, in the Chinese famous children's magazine "*Children's Pictorial*", the role "red kangaroo" is always the incarnation of justice and wisdom, the image of a small adult to help the role of "leapfrog" and other little animals to solve problems or give warnings when they make mistakes.

3.2 Superficial National Characteristics

In the increasingly internationalized cultural production, Chinese elements are no longer the patents of Chinese authors and Chinese works. This also puts realistic pressure on Chinese original children's books to go global faster. "If we don't do it, others will do it, and develop

Chinese elements first." [7] Under such reality pressure, the publishing industry has shown some eagerness for quick success and instant benefits. The understanding of national characteristics is superficial, and traditional Chinese stories are briefly summarized, translated, and then promoted to the international market without considering its difference and acceptance. This kind of children's books not only fails to attract international audiences, but also strengthens cultural barriers and even brings a negative impact on the international spread of Chinese culture. For example, "*The Story of the White Snake*" published by Wuzhou Communication Publishing House received the negative feedbacks from readers on Amazon.com, such as "failure to withstand scrutiny", "simplified content", and "failure to deliver accurate information to foreigners".

However, the enthusiasm for Chinese culture in the international market is increasing. According to related overseas surveys, 98.3 % of respondents expressed interest in reading Chinese-themed books, but they couldn't get suitable books [8].

"I have been trying to find good books that show a genuine aspect of Chinese people/life for my daughter. Many fail because they are over-Americanized or they are poorly written/illustrated."

From reader: Ahhling, on Amazon website.

Since Chinese original children's books cannot meet the needs of the international market in terms of quantity and quality, it is not surprising that writers and publishers from other countries develop Chinese elements. Take Amazon as an example. Among the top 10 children's book sales in Asia, 4 of them are Chinese related. "*Mulan's Secret Plan*" is a peripheral reading material for Disney's animated film "Mulan". "*Where The Mountain Meets the Moon*" was created by Chinese American writer Grace Lin and won the Newbury Award. The origin of the story of "*Tikki Tikki Tembo*" is based on Chinese folk customs. "*The Empty Pot*" tells a story about the traditional Chinese virtues of honesty. These bestsellers with Chinese elements are not created by Chinese people, but they have been well received and sought after in the international market. How to develop Chinese elements and break cultural barriers should cause children's book publishing practitioners' attention.

3.3 Low Digital Level

With the coming of reading pictures era, the advantages of digital reading have gradually become prominent. Especially during the epidemic, online reading has become the mainstream reading style. Compared with the static paper-based reading method, digital reading, which is

based on images and audio, quickly occupied big shares in the children's reading market, and penetrated into the field of reading for young children. Through research, it is found that digital reading has played a positive role in promoting the reading ability of young children. Therefore, its high acceptance is international. A Canadian comparative study of reading e-books and printed books among 17- to 26-month-old children found that children learned more new words when reading digital books, and showed more participation and willingness to socialize. In another experiment, the researchers compared Dutch children aged 3 to 4 with e-books and printed books. The e-books scored higher in vocabulary acceptance when children were reading[9].

Thanks to the vigorous promotion of public libraries and major publishing houses, the digital reading system of children's books in developed countries has become more mature and popular. For example, the 12 German public libraries that have won the "World's Best Public Library Award", have built a relatively mature and efficient digital promotion system from building parent-child reading spaces to developing virtual reading terminals for children[10]. In addition, libraries in many countries are gradually declining their collections of paper books due to space constraints and funding compression. Relying on traditional paper books for overseas dissemination has been more difficult. Improving the level of digital dissemination of children's reading is an inevitable choice to increase overseas market share and promote Chinese culture to go global. However, China's original children's books are mainly targeted at the paper-based media market. Children's digital reading is still at the preliminary stage of exploration. Due to content homogeneity, poor interaction, copyright protection and other reasons, the acceptance and dissemination level are not high.

3.4 Defective Hierarchical Reading System for Chinese Books

Dissemination of children's books does not necessarily depend on translation and dissemination. With the continuous enhancement of China's economic strength and the promotion of Confucius Institutes around the world, foreigner's enthusiasm for learning Chinese continues to rise. According to Chinese national statistics, the number of people studying Chinese in the world has exceeded 100 million, and 70 countries around the world have included Chinese in their national education systems. With the continuous heating up of Chinese international education, the market demand for Chinese reading materials has surged. Ironically, the NO.1 original Chinese book on Amazon.com is the "Little Bear" series by Yoko Sasaki, Japan.

“These are the best, simplified children's Chinese storybooks I've seen available on Amazon so far, especially to help motivate a non-native Chinese speaking baby to learn

Chinese, I am definitely considering in buying these again to help my baby nephew be motivated to learn Chinese!”

Feedback from Reader: PeiPei0708, on Amazon website

A systematic and scientific graded reading system has not been established resulted in the difficulty of Chinese original children's books becoming the standard reading materials. Graded reading is the world-wide scientific reading paradigm, and children's reading grade is an important direction for the scientific development of children's reading. For example, in the United States, the Lexile Assessment System is the most widely used, and many books have a corresponding Lexile index to guide students in graded reading. The American Library Association and Amazon website both marked the Lexile Index of children's books. For example, the Lexile Index of the popular picture book *"The Very Hungry Caterpillar"* is AD460L, and AD means Adult Directed. The Lexile assessment index ranges from 0L to 2000L, the higher the score, the higher the reading level. The Lexile evaluation index for *"The Hungry Caterpillar"* is 460L, and the corresponding student is in the third grade of elementary school. AD460L has already given standardized suggestions for reading objects and reading styles, that is, students in the third grade of elementary school read under the guidance of their parents. The establishment and use of the standard graded reading system provides a scientific reference basis for readers' reading and learning.

As early as 2011, the *"China Children's Development Program (2011-2020)"* promulgated by the Chinese State Council clearly stated for the first time "to promote a child-oriented book classification system, provide children of different ages with books suitable for their age characteristics, and provide children's parents with suggestions and guidance." In the 2016 *"National Reading Development Plan for the 13th Five-Year Plan"*, it was specifically pointed out that "to strengthen the study and application of the laws of children's reading, learn from scientific methods such as foreign reading ability tests and graded reading, explore the establishment of a stepped reading system for Chinese children, and accelerate the improvement of the overall reading level of Chinese children." The systematic and scientific reading system can recommend suitable reading materials according to different ages and different reading levels, and provide students with effective graded reading plans and programs. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a scientific hierarchical reading system to promote Chinese children's books

IV. STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE THE OVERSEAS DISSEMINATION OF CHINESE ORIGINAL CHILDREN'S BOOKS IN THE POST-EPIDEMIC ERA

With the spread of the epidemic, more than 130 countries around the world have adopted control methods that limit the scope of residents' activities, and home isolation has become the most effective anti-epidemic measure. A global atmosphere of reading has gradually formed. COVID 19 has stagnated the world economy, but it has brought unexpected opportunities to the publishing industry. Kristen McLean, chief book industry analyst at NPD Books in the United States, said: "During the entire COVID-19 pandemic, book sales have performed better than expected." In the context of increasing international demand, Chinese original children's books should face up to their shortcomings. To fill up the gaps in creative thinking, forms of expression, and communication methods, multiple measures should be taken to promote the quality and speed of overseas communication.

To help Chinese original children's books go to the world, the importance of the audience should be highly valued in the process of dissemination. International communication audiences generally refer to readers, listeners, audiences, users and netizens outside the national boundaries of their country, including groups from different countries or regions, different languages and different cultures[11]. Only under the premise of fully understanding the audience and understanding the audience's needs, interests and expectations can we design works in a targeted manner.

4.1 To Attach Importance to the Standard of Children as the Non-opinion Leader Audience

As early as 1923, Zhou Zuoren, a Chinese famous writer, repeatedly emphasized that true children's literature should be "child-oriented", based on reality and transcending reality to show "childhood" aesthetic art creation."[12] However, due to various reasons of reality and history, Chinese original children's books lack the child-oriented nature.

The "two-level communication theory" that emerged in the 1940s believes that the transmission of information is carried out in accordance with the two-level communication model of "media-opinion leader-audience"[13]. In real life, due to the particularity of children's books with dual audience, the choice of children's books rests with the parents who are the opinion leader audience. As the non-opinion leader audience, children have been in a silent and neglected position for a long time. Practitioners in creation, publishing, sales and other links have taken parents' preferences as a reference standard. But too much emphasis is placed on the opinion leader audience. Newcomb's symmetry model emphasizes that the sender of information uses the interpersonal attraction of "similarity" as an intermediary, through communication, to identify with the recipient and achieve the purpose of coordination. Communication is an interactive process that maintains interpersonal relationships. The recipient has identity and interacts with the sender [14]. The creators and practitioners of

children's books are too biased towards the choice of opinion leader audiences. Parents and children are reading together with their children to help children interpret the works. The interaction between parents and children is bound to happen. According to the author's survey on children's bookstore operators, it is clear that the actual choice of children's books lies with parents, and only 17.33% of them recommend children's books, but 72% of parents should also consider their children's acceptance when choosing children's books.

The children's book industry in western countries has developed maturely and emphasizes the acceptance of non-opinion leader audience. The child-based narrative feature makes it highly respected by parents and children. For example, *"The Very Hungry Caterpillar"* tells the story of a caterpillar breaking out of its cocoon and becoming a butterfly, but its narrative focuses on the caterpillar constantly eating, what it ate on the first day, and more on the second day, on the third day.... The appeal of food to children is unparalleled. The design of the product is also very creative, with a hole in the middle of each food, so that children can intuitively understand how caterpillars eat. This book is sold in dozens of bookstores on Dangdang.com in China, one of which has a sales record of 33,175 copies. Similarly, during the epidemic, this book ranked 5th in the 2020 best-selling list of children's books in the United States with a single volume sale of 278,937. "There is no national border of childlike innocence", so it is necessary to attach importance to children's psychological needs and child-based narrative features that conform to children's psychological characteristics is the best way to overcome cultural barriers.

4.2 To Cultivate Export-oriented Books with the Analysis of the Target Audiences

Export-oriented book products are those designed and produced based on the cultural background, reading psychology, and aesthetic characteristics of overseas target audiences that are guided by the international market. In the communication process, the audience can be segmented into potential audiences, available audiences, actual audiences and target audiences according to the dimension of "coverage and contact"[11]. To support Chinese children's books going global, the creators must analyze the characteristics of overseas target audiences. The target audience of children's books is children, whose age range is between 0-14 years old. Take the United States as an example, according to statistics released by the National Bureau of Statistics, the proportion of children aged 0-14 in the United States is 18.71%. The large number of target audiences provides favorable conditions for the dissemination of Chinese original children's books. The United States is a country of immigrants, and diversity is its most significant cultural feature. The readers' feedback on Amazon and other websites reflects the diverse background of the target audience of Chinese children's books: Chinese immigrants and their descendants, families adopting children from China, foreign families who want their

children to be exposed to multiculturalism, and Chinese children's books.

The large number of target audiences is the innate advantage of Chinese children's books going global. The number of target audiences can be maximized only by diversifying the creation and publishing of export-oriented book products. The theme selection of export-oriented book products should start with universal themes such as children's talent, science popularization, and family so as to break cultural barriers. According to the relevant survey, the three categories that overseas readers are most interested in Chinese children's books are: Chinese traditional cultural stories (38%), Chinese history (27%), and stories about Chinese children described by contemporary Chinese writers (20%)[8]. The creators of children's books should make creative ideas from these three categories.

For example, the original Chinese picture book "A New Year Reunion" by Yu Liqiang and Zhu Chengliang, which was recognized and promoted by Western mainstream media for the first time, tells the story of a "dad" who went to work in the city to return home and his family during the Spring Festival for a short time. The theme of the story is family reunion. Adaptability and universality break cultural barriers and allow readers of different cultural backgrounds to be moved by this sincere emotion.

"Celebrations and traditions might differ, but the story of missing distant family is universal." —School Library Journal

"It combines Chinese culture with the global concepts of family and work."

Reader: Hannah, on Amazon website.

Professional book reviewers and target audiences under different cultural backgrounds have the same understanding of the story, reflecting that the theme of export-oriented books should be universal in order to overcome cultural barriers and achieve effective cross-cultural communication. Regarding how to develop Chinese elements, Yu Liqiang, the author of "A New Year Reunion", objected to overemphasize the superficial characteristics of culture. She said, "The author should return to his /her spiritual core and emotional power. This is the really attractive part. Many audiences like the book. I think they like the life of being together and parting with relatives more than just dancing dragon lanterns and eating glutinous rice balls."

While paying attention to the universality of subject matter, export-oriented books should also pay attention to how to reflect cultural differences and the concealment of cultural communication. The international market's demand for Chinese original children's books

comes from the high concern for Chinese culture of overseas readers. In embodying cultural differences and realizing cultural dissemination, the illustrator of "A New Year Reunion" is indispensable.

"Two things make this Chinese New Year story remarkable—Zhu's meticulously observed gouaches and the family's poignant backstory."

——Book Review of *The New York Times*

The background of the whole story is during the Spring Festival, which is very Chinese. The painter Zhu Chengliang interprets the story as a water town in the south of the Yangtze River, painting with gouache, using large color blocks to compose the picture, full of traditional Chinese elements. In this way, the whole work reaches the heart with sincere emotions, and at the same time, it supplements and conveys a large amount of Chinese cultural information with pictures, presents different cultures of different countries, meets the needs of the target audience to experience the diversity and difference of world culture, and also represents Chinese culture.

4.3 To Expand the Scope of Potential Audiences with the Way of Enhancing Digital Communication

Digital reading based on new media technology brings three-dimensional, interactive, and interesting reading experience to children. It has a positive promotion to improve the richness, diversity and effectiveness of children's reading effect. People in the publishing industry predict that in the post-epidemic era, digital publishing will dominate the publishing industry.

Digital communication is an inevitable trend to meet the needs of audiences and expand the scope of potential audiences. Audiences in the information coverage area are called potential audiences. The outbreak of the global epidemic has caused 90% of the world's students to learn online, and the exposure time of electronic screens has doubled, and the number of potential audiences for digital communication has increased sharply. The American Pediatric Association has changed its previous practice of restricting children's screen time and recommends that the screen time rules be re-established in the event of an epidemic. In the post-epidemic era, improving the level of digital dissemination is an effective means of accelerating the overseas dissemination of Chinese original children's books. In view of the low level of digitization of Chinese children's books, it is difficult to build its own e-reading platform and cultivate target audiences in a short period of time. Therefore, it is necessary to increase international exchanges and cooperation with foreign publishing houses and e-reading

platforms in terms of copyright export and electronic publishing. For example, the electronic copyright of children's books can be transferred with or without compensation to open up the electronic reading market.

In order to make China's anti-epidemic children's books better "soothe the hearts of children from all over the world", the Chinese publishing industry donated the international copyright of anti-epidemic children's books for free through the "Global Anti-epidemic Children's Books Mutual Translation and Reading" project, and convened translators to translate the anti-epidemic free of charge. Children's books are free for children around the world to read. At present, 11 Chinese children's books on anti-epidemic have been translated into more than ten languages and are online on the Life Tree Children's Book[2]. The effective export of anti-epidemic children's books is only an emergency measure in response to the surge in international demand under the epidemic. The launch of China's anti-epidemic children's books has been well received by readers from all over the world, opening up a new situation for Chinese children's books to go global. The children's book publishing industry should take this opportunity to explore the digital model of children's book publishing, translation, and dissemination.

4.4 To Attract Available Audience with the Graded Chinese Reading System

Chinese culture has always emphasized the output of translation and introduction, but it has neglected the huge available audience market. In the process of dissemination, those who have the condition to receive information are the available audiences. More than 100 million Chinese enthusiasts and learners around the world are lovers of Chinese culture and belong to the available audience. At the same time, the framework of Chinese international education has created unique conditions for children's books to go global. Children's books are an excellent resource for Chinese international education due to their language and interesting topics. Children's book publishing should aim at the available audience market of more than 100 million, and find an important breakthrough in the international dissemination of children's books.

At present, there is a "*Chinese Graded Reading Guide for Foreign Students*" designed for foreign students in China, which recommends extracurricular Chinese reading books for foreign students in China. But its drawback is that it is only for international students in China, and the main purpose is to pass the HSK test. This graded reading system has no reference value for many groups, such as Chinese enthusiasts from other countries, second-generation Chinese immigrants, families adopting Chinese children, etc., but this market demand still exists.

“We have two children adopted from China. We buy them books that will give them knowledge about their country.”

Reader: William M Tracy on Amazon website

Therefore, it is urgent to establish Chinese graded reading standards and develop corresponding graded Chinese reading materials. In 2019, at the main venue of the 6th Beijing International Children's Reading Conference, the first domestic academic standard for Chinese graded reading was officially released. This is also the study of the "Graded Reading and Children's Literature Education Research" project undertaken by the Ministry of Education Planning Fund of Capital Normal University. The scientific graded reading standards have a high social universality, which can guide the publishing industry to conduct reasonable research and serve the real needs of society. The children's book publishing industry should standardize publications according to the academic standards of graded reading, which can not only meet the needs of domestic children, but also promote children's books to open up the international market.

V. SUMMARY

There have been many excellent works of Chinese original children's books, which have also gained certain international recognition, but there are deficiencies in creative thinking, narrative methods, and communication methods, which restrict the pace of cross-cultural communication of children's books. The spread of the global epidemic has brought a sharp increase in reading demand, creating a favorable opportunity for Chinese original children's books to go global, and audience analysis is required to improve the level of cross-cultural communication. The creators of children's books should pay attention to the interaction between opinion leader audiences and non-opinion leader audiences, return to children's standards, and increase the interest of the works; at the same time, they must pay attention to the diversified characteristics of the target audience and deepen the development of Chinese elements to enhance the connotation and international acceptance of the works. The children's book publishing industry should improve the level of digital communication to maximize potential audiences, standardize publications, target the huge market of available audiences, and build a diversified platform for children's books.

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