

Translating into global success

Mai Jia is among Chinese writers who have cracked the international market with overseas publishing deals

By **BEN YUE** in Beijing
For *China Daily Asia Weekly*

Spy novelist Mai Jia is one of the few Chinese contemporary writers so far to have achieved stellar commercial success in both the domestic and overseas market.

First published in China in 2002, Mai Jia's *Decoded* has, since 2014, been published in 26 languages and sold more than 30 copyrights.

Marketing campaigns in the United Kingdom called him China's answer to John le Carre, the acclaimed British author who penned *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*.

In the United States, *Decoded* ranks among Amazon's best-selling international novels. And in Brazil, its publisher ran a bus advertisement, saying: "Who is Mai Jia? The Chinese writer you have to know."

How his debut novel was ultimately picked up abroad is a story in itself. In the years beforehand, Mai Jia (the pen name of Jiang Benhu) was already a well-established novelist in China.

In 2008, he was awarded one of China's highest literary honors, the Mao Dun Literature Prize. The following year, his novel *The Message* was successfully adapted for the big screen as an espionage thriller, and bagged 225 million yuan (\$34.6 million) at the box office.

However, although the novelist's agent was attending the London Book Fair each year to sell overseas publishing rights to his books, those attempts came to nothing.

In 2010, Olivia Milburn, a British Sinologist who teaches Chinese language and literature at South Korea's Seoul National University, bought a copy of *Decoded* while waiting at a Shanghai airport for a delayed flight.

The book is about a genius Chinese mathematician who worked as a cryptographer during World War II. Milburn's grandfather was also a WWII cryptographer, so she was immediately drawn to the character and plot.

Upon arrival in Britain, she decided to translate a few chapters to show her grandfather. She then mentioned the book to a doctoral classmate, Julia Lovell. Lovell is a Sinologist who works closely with the UK publishing industry and has translated works by Chinese writers including the late literary master Lu Xun.

From there it all went very smoothly. Lovell introduced *Decoded* to Penguin Books and, with a \$50,000 advance fee, it became the first contemporary Chinese fiction ever published under the Penguin Classics imprint.

Mai Jia was the fourth Chinese



Mai Jia (far right) discussing his books with overseas publishers at a forum ahead of last month's Beijing International Book Fair. The spy novelist's book, *Decoded*, has been published in more than 30 languages and sold more than 30 copyrights around the world. BEN YUE / FOR CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY

writer to be included in the series — after Cao Xueqin, Lu Xun and Eileen Chang — but among them he is the only one living.

A few months later, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, owned by Macmillan, republished the book in the United States. In 2014, 26 copyrights of *Decoded* were sold at the London Book Fair.

"Translators are like writers' foster parents," Mai Jia said at a Beijing International Book Fair panel discussion last month. "I don't think I'm particularly good, but I'm particularly lucky. All of this began with the delayed plane: How many books (would owe their success to) such a coincidence?"

In China, more than 7,000 writers have registered with the China Writers Association, creating more than 3,000 novels each year. But only some 200-plus writers have been introduced overseas, according to the Chinese Culture Communication and Translation Center.

"Many foreign readers struggle to understand Chinese literature themes," said Nick Tapper, commissioning editor at Giramondo Publishing.

The Australian publishing house, which specializes in translation literature, has introduced cutting-edge Chinese writings. These include works by A Lai, Yu Jie, Sheng Keyi and Zhang Zao — names that even

Chinese readers may be only a little familiar with.

"Translation literature is a small pie in an already small market," said Tapper. "Mo Yan, Yan Lianke, Gao Xingjian, Liao Yiwu have all been published in Australia, but it is rare for their work to gain much prominence."

According to Tapper, 7,000 represents a good sales figure in Australia, while a best-seller will achieve about 30,000 or 40,000 sales.

"Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* sold 7,500 copies. That was a real success," he said. "Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* sold 3,000 copies. But most Chinese titles are under 1,000 copies."

Soul Mountain's translator Mabel Lee is from Sydney, and the translation was first published in a literature magazine by Giramondo.

Tapper noted the many Chinese living in Australia, about 1 million people of Chinese ancestry in the country, and the 100,000 Chinese students at Australian universities. "It may have bigger impact in the future," he said.

Howard Goldblatt, the translator who helped Mo Yan gain the Nobel Prize in Literature 2012, and arguably the world's most famous translator of Chinese literature, once said that the problem of many Chinese novels not appealing to Western readers is that the writers focus on philosophical discussion, forgetting that novels should first be intriguing.

Also, Sinologist Lovell said that translated Chinese titles are largely for academic purposes rather than commercial, which is often why they stay out of the sight of ordinary readers.

Simon Lorsch, editor at Germany's Suhrkamp Verlag, a leading European fine literature publisher, has suggested that the best way for Chinese writers to go commercial is via the genre novel.

Lorsch generalized that there are three types of readers in Germany. The first category he called "serious readers" — mainly professionals who read relevant and useful books, in most cases nonfiction. The second category, "emotional readers," is the biggest group — people who like to read romance or thrillers. And the third category is "cool readers" — those willing to read experimental and innovative writings.

Lorsch said Chinese titles obviously do not belong to the first category and they also find it hard to fit into the third category because of the language barrier. Therefore, the only choice is to grab the attention of readers from the second category, which requires the books to carry great stories and intense emotion.

Suhrkamp recently published Chinese writer Xiao Bai's *French Concession*, a political conspiracy novel focusing on assassinations and adventures in old Shanghai.

When it comes to foreign writers, readers tend to buy international best-sellers so that they have no need to assess the writer's previous works, said Lea Penn, editor and publisher from Penn Publishing, Mai Jia's Hebrew publisher in Israel.

Although small, the Israeli market closely follows international trends. The market for translations is dominated by those of English novels, with a 66 percent market share, followed by French (6 percent), German (5 percent) and Spanish (4 percent). Other languages, including Chinese, hold a combined 19 percent market share.

"We bought Mai Jia's novel because Israel has a lot of code crackers," Penn said. "Also, the main character's teacher is Jewish."

Identifying that link, Penn promoted the book to several military organizations. Mai Jia, who served in the Chinese army for more than 10 years, was invited to Israel and gave a speech to local fans.

"It took me 11 years to write my first novel, and it took another 12 years for this novel to go abroad," Mai Jia recalled at the Beijing book fair session. "So I guess publishing overseas is even harder than writing the novel itself."

"There are many writers in Chinese who are better than me. I just wish there will be a systematized way for them to be known by the world," he said.