A Window on China

Veteran publisher celebrates 70 years of telling China's story
By Yuan Yuan & Ji Jing

When Paul White first came to Beijing, his plan was to stay for a year. That was in 1984. In 2019, “I’m still here,” the 76-year-old said with a smile.

He arrived from Yorkshire, the UK, to work as a copyeditor for Xinhua News Agency, getting the job partly due to having studied Chinese as his major at the University of London.

After his stint at Xinhua, White moved to the Foreign Languages Press (FLP), a publishing house affiliated with the China International Publishing Group (CIPG). Sharing Chinese thoughts with the outside world through translation since has been his lifelong pursuit. His most recent work is a more modern translation of The Analects of Confucius, selected sayings of the Chinese philosopher thought to have been compiled by his followers. The book came out with an audio.

White’s plan is to improve his Chinese and translate more. “I probably do it forever and improve, I hope, every day. There’s only one way to learn Chinese characters. That’s to see them every day.”

The CIPG, a Beijing-based publishing conglomerate interested in international readers, was founded on the same day as the People’s Republic of China on October 1, 1949. Despite changes in the international landscape as well as in the media over the past seven decades, White and his Chinese colleagues at the CIPG have remained true to the group’s founding mission to share China’s story.

Making China heard

President Xi Jinping sent a letter congratulating the CIPG on its 70th anniversary, recognizing the group’s role in making China’s voice heard and promoting exchanges with foreign countries.

Xi said since China is increasingly connected to the outside world, the CIPG should carry forward its fine traditions, improve and develop into a world-class, comprehensive international communication institution.

The CIPG was established as the international news division of the Central Government’s national press administration. Qiao Guanhua, who later became minister of foreign affairs, headed the division. A group of Chinese professionals including foreign language experts, as well as foreign editors, were pooled together to create a channel for international readers to know more about China.

Many Chinese classics were translated into foreign languages at the CIPG. Prominent translator Yang Xianyi worked at the CIPG for decades with his British wife Gladys. They translated many masterpieces, including the 18th-century novel A Dream of Red Mansions, into English.

To present a real-time image of China to the world, the CIPG started publishing a series of periodicals in different languages. They included China Pictorial, a multilingual monthly magazine launched in 1950, using English, French and Spanish, as well as in Chinese. Beijing Review was founded in 1958 as China’s first national newsweekly in English.

“I have witnessed the CIPG’s development,” former CIPG Vice President Huang Youyu said at a symposium in Beijing on September 4 to celebrate the 70th anniversary, recalling his work experience since 1975. “Today international communication is facing many challenges and we must work harder to deliver the real picture of China to the world.”

Huang is one of the experts that finalized the English version of Xi Jinping: The Governance of China, a compilation of Xi’s speeches, interviews, letters and other works published by the FLP in two volumes. The first volume was launched at the CIPG pavilion at the Beijing International Book Fair on August 21.

Keeping pace

“We are ready to contribute more to introducing China to the world.” CIPG President Du Zhanyuan said at the symposium. “To do so, we will continue developing talent, strengthening research and promoting integrated development.”

In seven decades, the CIPG has produced about 80,000 kinds of books and magazines. It now publishes 34 magazines in 13 languages and produces over 4,000 book titles in more than 40 languages every year.

In 2000, China Pictorial launched an online platform called China’s stories and we are integrating more advanced technologies,” Huang said. “Yet professional translators who know the cultures of both China and other countries are still crucial to improving our work.”

White echoed Huang’s view, saying good translation is essential to transmit Chinese culture abroad.

There is a large receptive audience for Chinese culture outside China, according to White. “Abroad, there are more people interested in ancient Chinese than you think, especially in the U.S.,” he said.

Currently, the CIPG has 26 overseas branches in 14 countries and regions. “We will enhance cultural exchanges and make friends with people from all over the world with our events and publications,” Du said.

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