

Challenges in China's Thriving Children's Book Market: A Comprehensive Analysis and Solutions

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Abstract. With the development of society and the improvement of material conditions for Chinese people's lives in the 21st century, parents are increasingly willing to invest more money in books to educate their children. Consequently, the children's book market in China is becoming more and more prosperous. As an essential component of China's publishing industry, the children's book publishing sector is very competitive. However, many problems have emerged behind the boom. This research aims to investigate various challenges amidst this growth by analyzing existing literature and comparing data. It is found that there are three significant problems, including the circulation of books that are not conducive to children's physical and mental development, publishers engaging in repetitive behaviors solely for profitability, and parents' excessive concern about education leading them to overly scrutinize seemingly innocuous books. This research also aims to offer targeted suggestions for addressing these problems.

Keywords: Children's book, publishing market, publishing status, education anxiety.

1. Introduction

According to data from the *2022 National Book Retail Market Report*, the children's book industry has developed rapidly in recent years [1]. It is anticipated that children's books will continue to be the mainstay of the national book retail market. They will constitute the largest segment in terms of the book type composition, with their share projected to further increase. Thanks to the stable economic development and improvement of material conditions, the education of children and teenagers has been more important, and parents and teachers want to select excellent children's works, fueling the prosperity of China's children's book market. However, this growth is accompanied by many problems. Existing literature has focused on the problems of inappropriate publishing content and duplication in China's children's book market, but few of them have recognized the impact of parents as an important player in the children's literature publishing market. Therefore, this thesis will not only analyze and summarize the first two concerns about the current state of the publishing industry but also cover the role of parents in this market. On 28 February 2023, China's National Bureau of Statistics reported that as of the end of 2022, the population aged 0 to 14 years old reached 239.08 million, which shows that China has a huge children's readership market [2]. Consequently, intense competition characterizes the children's book publishing industry. Given the size of the children's book market, creating a benign market environment for the future development of society is crucial. This paper delves into these issues and offers solutions. This paper is based on a substantial amount of materials, including official statistics, literature on children's books, the publishing industry, and Chinese parents' educational styles. It also traces the original text of the reported books and parents' views on these books.

According to existing literature, China's children's book publishing industry has become a sunrise industry, with great prospects for development, which has attracted countless publishers to share the benefits. Almost most publishers release children's books, but not all possess the necessary expertise and experience [3]. In the current children's book publishing industry, the problems of duplicate publishing and following trends for commercial gain are particularly serious. At the same time, certain books in the market are harmful to the physical and mental health of young readers and undermine the industry's growth. In addition to these objective problems, subjective judgments made by Chinese parents also affect the development of the industry. According to news reports in recent

years, it can be seen that many children's books have been taken off the shelves and asked to rectify their contents because they have been reported by parents. Why do parents think that these books will mislead their children? In connection with the psychological level, this is actually a reflection of parents' excessive anxiety about education. Stricter industry regulations and laws need to be involved to curtail the chaos within China's publishing landscape. Moreover, parents' anxiety needs to be gradually alleviated by schools and all parties in the society.

2. Three Notable Problems in China's Children's Book Market

The market for children's literature in China has continued to expand in recent years due to a number of factors, including parental involvement and increased publisher activity. With the improvement in living standards, parents pay more attention to the cultivation of their children's literacy, leading to increased book purchases. Simultaneously, publishers have also recognized the business opportunity and are producing a greater volume of children's literature than before. However, the increased competition in the market has also brought about several problems.

2.1. Inappropriate Content in Children's Books

Firstly, due to the relatively low threshold of the children's market, many publishers lack relevant professional knowledge. The absence of standardized criteria for "acceptable children's books" has led to instances where certain children's literature contains excessive violent and explicit content, rendering it unsuitable for school-age children. A few months ago, a controversy known as the "toxic textbook" incident sparked concern on Chinese social media. The incident revolved around a widely used primary school textbook that featured a number of illustrations with inappropriate content. For example, an illustration features a boy disrespectfully making a face with his tongue out and eyes rolled up while wearing a five-star red flag shirt and a red scarf symbolizing the Chinese Young Pioneers. In any country, the national flag is sacred and cannot be desecrated. The characters in this illustration obviously do not treat it seriously and solemnly. Additionally, the textbook features characters deliberately exposing private body parts, an inappropriate context for sex education.

2.2. Recurrence of Published Works

Numerous publishers strive to secure bestselling titles to ensure profitability, often signing famous authors as well as foreign children's books. However, the number of these authors and excellent foreign books is limited, and publishers cannot avoid vicious competition in the process of competing for resources. This can lead to multiple publishers licensing the same author, offering progressively higher royalties. To achieve a certain scale of publication and reduce cost, they intentionally or unintentionally oversaturate the market with identical books to monopolize the market and maximize profits [4, 5]. However, market demand does not always align with this strategy, as readers may not get too hung up on a particular publisher's books. This leads to a huge backlog of inventory and books that are not selling.

2.3. Education Anxiety among Chinese Parents

The third problem in the children's book market comes from parental concerns. In recent years, parents have increasingly called for the removal of children's books from shelves, including some classic children's books. It is undeniable that there are indeed many subpar and inappropriate books not suitable for children in the market, but it is worth considering whether all the reported children's books are really problematic or if parents are overly sensitive. For example, Shen Shixi's masterpiece *Wolf King Dream* has been a must-read for Chinese primary school students for years [6]. This animal-themed novel, tells a mother wolf chasing her dream to let her child become the king of wolves. It talks about animals mating and reproducing in full compliance with the laws of nature. However, some parents deemed the content as an "excessive promotion of eroticism" and "pornographic violence", so the book was removed from the shelves. This reaction may be influenced by the East

Asian cultural tradition of "self-restraint and reverence", which advocates restraining one's own nature and conforming to rules and regulations. To this day, Chinese parents still talk about sex in a negative way, refusing to teach their children about it. After the book was reported, a group of adults thought that the parents' reasoning was ridiculous because they themselves had read the animal novel as teenagers and were inspired by the protagonist's pursuit of his dreams and his indomitable spirit. The so-called "pornographic elements" neither caused them any harm nor led them to bad behavior.

Another very famous children's book author, Yang Hongying, experienced a similar backlash. Her bestseller *Mo's Mischief* faced accusations of "promoting suicide" [7]. The criticism was based on the main character Ma Xiaotiao's comment about not wanting to practice the piano and wanting to commit suicide due to his dislike. Many parents are alarmed when they see this statement, thinking that it will teach their children bad habits. However, is it too arbitrary to sentence a book to death just on the basis of one sentence? While this statement might be alarming on its own, evaluating it within the context of the entire book presents a more comprehensive and balanced perspective. In conclusion, the expansion of China's children's literature market has brought both positive and negative outcomes. While parents' concerns and publishers' competition drive some of these challenges, it is crucial to maintain a balanced viewpoint when evaluating the content's appropriateness for young readers.

3. Addressing Challenges in the Children's Book Market in China

3.1. Strengthening the Vetting Mechanism for Children's Books

The existence of chaotic phenomena within the children's book market demands the serious attention of all sectors of Chinese society. To mitigate these issues, certain measures can be implemented. First and foremost, safeguarding children from exposure to explicit content, including pornography and graphic violence, requires an effective reading classification system. While the "18 banned" classification has evolved into the more nuanced "12 banned," it remains crucial to gauge the psychological and cognitive suitability of children of different ages. This system should persist, with an enhanced focus on rigorous book vetting. Presently, numerous books blatantly breach the "12 banned" criteria, yet are erroneously categorized as fitting within the "18 banned" classification.

Another concern is the rampant recurrence of published works. In the context of introducing foreign literature, the Chinese children's book market should continue to embrace quality foreign books, albeit with a heightened emphasis on diversity and depth, rather than mere trend emulation. Rigorous market research prior to introductions can provide insights into genuine reader needs and preferences, ensuring alignment with market trends. Blindly following the popularity of certain book series can oversaturate the market, resulting in stagnation.

3.2. Audit of Publishers' Qualifications

Furthermore, the maturation and prosperity of the children's book market necessitate specialization in publishing. The emphasis should be on efficiency rather than striving solely for economies of scale. To achieve this, market access mechanisms should be refined, elevating the threshold for entry into the children's book market [8]. Astonishingly, out of China's 580 publishing houses, around 550 engage in children's literature [9]. Often, the vetting of children's books lacks the rigorous scrutiny applied to other genres, potentially due to underestimating the significance of children's literature in education. Encouraging originality while simultaneously importing quality works can bolster the long-term competitiveness of the domestic children's book market.

3.3. Alleviating Excessive Parental Anxiety

The third aspect involves parental engagement. Contemporary Chinese parents are increasingly concerned about education due to societal influences. However, this heightened focus has inadvertently given rise to "education anxiety" [10]. This anxiety manifests as overbearing control over children's extracurricular activities, particularly their choice of books. This fear-driven control

is a form of pathological anxiety. Parents grappling with intense educational anxiety may exhibit unfavorable behaviors, sidelining their children's interests and desires. Such parents tend to enforce an "expected" education model, subjecting even seemingly innocuous books to undue scrutiny. Consequently, they might report books they deem detrimental to their children's character development. To address this issue, parents need to introspect their educational motives. Schools and societal entities must create a balanced environment by including exceptional books as compulsory reading during mandatory education, fostering mutual trust between parents and institutions. While some parents may still dissent even regarding educational books recommended by the Ministry of Education, schools and organizations can bridge the gap by organizing informative lectures and advocating for children's exploration of personal interests, thus transcending conventional expectations. By nurturing a healthy children's book market and cultivating a positive, unrestrictive reading environment, China can contribute significantly to its young generation's development.

4. Summary

This paper focuses on the problems in China's children's book market today, analyzing them from three perspectives: inappropriate book content, publishers' vicious competition, and parents' excessive worries about education. Meanwhile, regarding the solutions to the problems, this paper mainly gives two suggestions, including strengthening the market censorship system and alleviating the anxiety of parents. However, it acknowledges shortcomings, particularly in evaluating whether a children's book is suitable or not, even when on the Ministry of Education's recommended reading list. Additionally, the paper recognizes the limitation of a small sample size in parent interviews. The hope is that this paper's insights contribute to addressing these challenges, fostering a healthier book market for Chinese children, and nurturing a more favorable competitive environment within the Chinese book publishing industry.

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