

The Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Labels: A Case Study of Librairie Avant-Garde

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Abstract: From the standpoint of label deconstruction and reconstruction, this research seeks to discover how the independent bookshop Librairie Avant-Garde not only survives but also thrives in this era, whilst other shops are dying slowly. It adopts interview, observation, and comparison to figure out its operation strategies and tactics. The deconstruction of old bookstore labels comprises book selection, respect for individuality, and the development of its branch culture, whereas the construction of new labels includes book classification, self-positioning, and the coordination of cultural activities. Librairie Avant-Garde can adapt to changes in this fast-paced world by employing these methods. Other bookshops can learn from them and gradually develop the best approach to thrive on their own.

Keywords: independent bookstore, Librairie Avant-Garde, deconstruction of label, reconstruction of label

1. Introduction

As the representatives of a city, independent bookstores attract increasingly less attention in an age of transformation and fragmentation [1]. Each bookstore has created its own way to survive, and Librairie Avant-Garde is clearly one of the best. The first bookstore in Nanjing is opened in 1996 with barely 17 square meters of space [2]. With other branch bookstores opening outside Jiangsu Province in Yunnan Province, Fujian Province, Anhui Province, and Zhejiang Province, the main store in Nanjing successfully expanded to 3,680 square meters, converting from an underground parking garage and bomb shelter [2,3]. It was named one of the ten most beautiful bookshops in the world by BBC in March 2014 for its fascinating appearance [4]. Additionally, Librairie Avant-Garde has developed into a popular cultural destination, making it chosen by National Geographic as one of the top ten bookstores in the world in 2015 [5].

The majority of studies on independent bookstores in China focus on their survival and development, operational strategy, transformation, and use of space [6]. Based on contemporary literature on these elements of Librairie Avant-Garde, this paper aims to explain why it not only exists but also thrives in this era. Along with the increasing pursuit of universality, the term “label” is exceedingly contentious, but it provides a new perspective to understand how independent bookstores struggle between old-fashioned physical bookstores and online stores. In the case of Librairie Avant-Garde, this paper focuses on two aspects, namely label deconstruction and reconstruction. Label deconstruction reveals the spirit of this independent bookshop whereas label reconstruction depicts

its full control over its identity. Furthermore, the author conducted interviews with five college students who frequented the bookstore and two owners of other bookshops in Nanjing about their perspectives on Librairie Avant-Garde's operation strategies.

2. The Deconstruction of Old Labels

The deconstruction of labels relates to the essence of Librairie Avant-Garde, namely its independent character.

2.1. Selection of Books

Librairie Avant-Garde's main competitive advantage as an independent bookstore is its book selection. This distinguishes it from ordinary public-owned bookstores where book selection is dull and repetitious [2]. Its independent identity is correspondingly formed. When Qian Xiaohua founded Librairie Avant-Garde in 1996, he set a high standard for book selection. He would fly alone to Yunnan, Guilin, and Shanghai solely to buy old edition books [2]. Instead of simply acquiring best-sellers, he has dedicated his life to supplying people with high-quality books. Until today Librairie Avant-Garde's faith remains vivid and alive. While it sets a high quality for book selection, it also covers various book categories, including in humanities, social sciences, and arts [2]. It employs professional book pickers. New books chosen by them are published on the WeChat platform each month, along with their recommendations [7]. It is clear that it has upheld its standards and provided the most delight to true book lovers.

2.2. Respect for Individuality

In terms of in-store sales, Librairie Avant-Garde has assisted consumers in selecting books and even providing tailored services since its establishment [2]. In the early days of the bookstore, Qian Xiaohua's reading expertise also significantly helped draw many dedicated customers [2]. However, as book-by-book recommendations become impractical with the expansion of the consumer base, Librairie Avant-Garde launched a book selection service for specific customer groups. It organized the "Pioneer 173 Reading Alliance" collection activity via its WeChat public account. Participants paid a total of 600 yuan as an entrance fee for the five sessions of the activity and obtained customized book list services from experienced book selectors [8]. The individualized book list is a silent protest against the tendency of universality in this era. Individuality must be respected, just as independent bookstores appreciate independent thoughts and personalities.

Moreover, the official account of Librairie Avant-Garde occasionally publishes random survey reports, conducts question-and-answer exchanges on books and literature for the readers who visit the store, and shares their passion and love for literature with individual voices. In terms of clerks, Librairie Avant-Garde has released daily caricatures of them which are not only entertaining but also accurately depict the real working environment in the bookshop [9].

2.3. Branch Culture

Librairie Avant-Garde has multiple special branch bookshops in addition to its flagship store in Wutaishan. Each branch has a different cultural backdrop that has been carefully selected to complement its surroundings [10]. The book selection is also distinctive, reflecting the branch's individuality and its diversity of values. It seeks to provide a warm and soulful environment that can foster community [10].

The urban boutiques of Librairie Avant-Gardes in Nanjing are generally in attractive neighborhoods and cater to visitors. On November 6, 2013, for example, the Nanjing Museum

welcomed the New Life bookshop in the style of the Republic of China, as a blend of Republican-era architecture, history, and humanistic aspects. The bookshop's overall layout includes paper-based thematic books and creative cultural products, demonstrating the publication and distribution of books during the Republican period [2].

If independent bookshops are the personification of urban spiritual culture, then creating bookstores in rural areas is a method to bring knowledge to the farthest reaches of the earth [11]. Librairie Avant-Garde has opened rural branches in Anhui Province, Zhejiang Province, and other regions over the last year [3]. These stores infuse vitality into the rural culture, create unique rural landscapes based on local conditions, and promote industrial integration to fuel the development of surrounding economies and realize the extension of space. According to Qian Xiaohua, creating a bookstore in rural areas is to enlighten people's knowledge and mind [2]. He describes the Chen Jiapu Civilian shop as "blending into the environment" in lyrical language: "It (the bookstore) is like the back of a book, the mountain is like the pages of two books, and the pages are full of starry words. Chen Jiapu, despite its poverty, is a country of milk and honey and a sea of riches" [12].

3. The Reconstruction of Labels

The deconstruction of labels satisfies people's expectations of an independent bookstore, while the construction of new labels helps Librairie Avant-Garde strengthen its identity, as its name indicates.

3.1. Classification

The tags of books can motivate people both stand in a given place and walk around the bookstore. They assist them in swiftly finding their interests on the shelf and push them to concentrate on one area. For instance, photography-related books are named "image catcher," which not only delivers enough information but also shows great originality.

However, this can also be problematic. The book *The Garden of Forking Paths*, for example, may be described as both Argentina literature and a mystery [13]. Therefore, there is a screen at the bookstore that helps to alleviate the problem caused by the varying recognition of tags on books. Consumers can enter tags such as author, publishing company, and keywords from the book's title, then the exact location of the book will be displayed.

3.2. Self-positioning

As the Librairie Avant-Garde has become a spiritual and cultural monument in Nanjing, its brand image has become firmly ingrained in people's hearts, inviting waves of readers to come on pilgrimage [14]. Its efforts in developing brand image were critical in obtaining this achievement.

Trakl's poems *Strangers on Earth* is the motto of Librairie Avant-Garde. According to Heidegger, when a foreigner searches, he unwittingly treads the path to his own home [15]. Similarly, for book lovers, the bookstore is their eternal spiritual home. According to Qian Xiaohua, the bookstore is a spiritual refuge for those who are in a "foreign" land [2]. This expresses Librairie Avant-Garde's unique nostalgia and humanistic concern.

Physical symbols, in addition to spiritual symbols, are commonly used. The Wutaishan main store, for example, which has been refurbished above the parking lot, has a distinctive entrance painted with a red mailbox, a giant black cross, a sculpture of the meditative man, and a ramp and double yellow lines that are unique to the parking lot. The basic and modern architectural design sets it apart from other bookstores, producing a one-of-a-kind landmark exclusive to Librairie Avant-Garde.

At the same time, the Librairie Avant-Garde is a symbol of Nanjing's urban spiritual culture. Nanjing was proclaimed the World Capital of Literature on October 31, 2019 [16]. Librairie Avant-Garde, as a cultural monument of the city, complements the powerful cultural environment of Nanjing,

the ancient capital of the Six Dynasties. It creates a cultural trend, shapes people's spirits, and reinforces its status as a city representative.

3.3. Cultural Activities

Along with the interaction between individuals and books, encounter between people happens all the time at bookstores. Librairie Avant-Garde provides a natural platform for human contact through a number of cultural activities, including new bookmark sales, writers' sharing sessions, cinema salons, and art salons [2]. As a cultural arena, bookstores can promote traffic through celebrity effects, cultural salons, and media influence, and it can further drive book sales in the signing process.

Labels are used by Librairie Avant-Garde to enhance the worth of cultural activities, regardless of their form. Tagging authors with their names can attract readers who are admirers of specific authors while harnessing the writers' influence can drive the magnitude of the event and the development of the bookstore. Using the event's theme as a label can assist readers in deciding which area of interest to investigate further. It is obvious that the use of labels is critical in the promotion of activities and the placement of participants.

Some customers, however, may be attracted by well-known names but find it unpleasant. Here is a story told by a college student during an interview with the author. She took part in a poetry-sharing workshop held by Librairie Avant-Garde last year. Several visitors conversed on stage, detailing specific intimate interactions and keeping the subject of the conversation very secret. It evolved into an elite party with a threshold. When there was not enough time following the sharing, a dramatic situation occurred. One staff indicated that the Q&A section should be skipped and the workshop should move to the signing and selling part. However, an old man suddenly responded, "You have betrayed poetry; you have kept poetry away from the masses!" When he was finally allowed to propose some questions, he asked, "Did Librairie Avant-Garde bring the people closer to literature or alienate it from it? Was the event held solely for commercial objectives, rather than to provide readers with enough opportunity to engage with the author?" This case demonstrates the negative aspect of the combination of cultural activities and commercial activities.

4. Conclusion

Through the deconstruction of labels including the selection of books, the respect for individuality, and the diversity of branch culture, Librairie Avant-Garde's pursuit of independence can be observed and it is the spirit of independent bookstores. In terms of label reconstruction, Librairie Avant-Garde demonstrates its ability to build identity through label classification, self-positioning, and cultural activities. As some consumers are aware of the downsides of these techniques, there is still space for improvement.

This research provides an original perspective through a case study by merging the core of independent bookshops with the use of labels. Through adjustments, the methods used by Librairie Avant-Garde to survive can be applied to other bookstores. Future studies can look into other independent bookstores and do comparison studies to fully reveal the survival strategies of independent bookshops, especially in different regions.

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