Publication Trends in the People's Republic of China

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This paper was presented at a panel meeting entitled, "Libraries and Publishing in the People's Republic of China," on the program of the 31st Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, held in Los Angeles, March 30 - April 1, 1979.

In this paper I would like to share the results of my experiences in scanning the last two years of Kuang ming jih pao, the catalogs of the Guozi Shudian of Peking, the catalogs of San lien, Universal, Chiao Liu, and other book dealers in Hong Kong, the Chung kung nien pao of Taiwan, and the Chugoku nenkan of Japan; some of my observations are also based on a trip I took to China in January, 1977, and on conversations I had with book dealers while in China. From these sources, I have concluded that after the campaign to smash the "Gang of Four" in 1976, a great flourishing of publishing activity began in China. However, it is difficult to document just how flourishing this activity has been, even with a reference tool like the Ch'uan kuo hsin shu mu. Particularly difficult to analyze is the impact of the publishing activity on America.

To illustrate the difficulty in obtaining complete and accurate information on publishing in China, I cite the following examples. First, when I visited Peking in 1977, I found a provincial map of Kuangtung at the Hsin-hua Bookstore. I purchased it and asked the clerk at the desk if any more provincial maps had been published. The answer was that many such maps had indeed been published, but that they were all out of print. When I returned from China, I checked every bibliographic source available to me in the United States and from Hong Kong, but was unable to find citations of the Kuangtung map I had purchased. The second example refers to the experience of a friend who visited Wuhan University, where a professor showed him a Chinese book on chemistry. The professor had only one copy and suggested to my friend that if he wanted a copy he should go to the Hsin-hua Bookstore to acquire one. But upon inquiring at two Hsin-hua Bookstore branches, he found that no one at either branch was aware that such a book had been published. It was not until several months later that a copy of the book was sent to my friend by the author, but even then we were not able to find it listed in any bibliography or catalog. In still another instance, a traveller to China this last September saw five volumes of a historical atlas entitled Chung-kuo li shih ti t'u chi, which impressed him tremendously. Upon his return he gave me the exact citation. I checked with various libraries in the United States, but none
reported having any knowledge of this publication. I sent an order for it to Hong Kong, and the book dealer promptly replied that he had heard about this publication, but that neither he himself nor anyone he knew had ever actually seen a copy. We then wrote to a library in China requesting it on exchange; several months have passed, but we have not as yet received a response. We also wrote to Guozi Shudian in Peking to ask if we could purchase this atlas; we received a courteous reply informing us that the work had not yet been published.

From these examples it is evident that there are no comprehensive, dependable, bibliographic sources providing information about what is currently being published in China, or what publications are available to the American reader. Titles listed in the Ch'üan kuo hsüeh hsüeh pao, the catalog of the Guozi Shudian, and Hong Kong book dealers' catalogs. I have compared journal titles listed in four sources: the Kuang ming jih pao, the Guozi Shudian catalogs, and the catalogs of two Hong Kong dealers. My findings from this comparison were rather disturbing, because they indicated a lack of comprehensive coverage in any of these sources. For example, the Li hsüeh hsüeh pao (力学学报) listed in the Guozi catalog was not listed in any of the other three sources; the high energy physics journal, Kao teng wu li (高能物理) listed in the Kuang ming jih pao was not listed in any of the other three; the applied mathematics journal, Ying yung shu hsüeh hsüeh pao (应用数学学报), advertised in Dealer B's catalog, was not found in the other three; and the Chung hua chung lou tz'u chih (中华肿瘤杂志), advertised in Dealer A's catalog, was not listed in the other three. The lack of adequate data makes an accurate description of publishing trends in China all but impossible. Disturbed by the lack of reliable information on the subject, I wrote to a library in China, asking for help in locating information on the subject for the purpose of preparing an accurate report to my scholarly colleagues in America. I received a polite reply saying that nothing on the subject had been published, and that because of limited experience of their library staff, they are not knowledgeable enough to help me with this topic.

After my repeated failures to collect adequate data, I turned to the 1978 catalog of the San lien Bookstore in Hong Kong, which listed 3,777 titles of Chinese imprints, but also some Hong Kong reprints. Although the catalog's coverage was certainly not comprehensive, I hoped that it would serve as a representative sample. Among the titles it listed were 96 on Marxism and Leninism, and 81 on Mao Tse-tung's writings, which together constituted less than 5% of the total, this small percentage representing a drastic reduction compared to earlier years. Another interesting statistic is that, contrary to the common belief that China is putting more emphasis on science and technology, this San lien catalog listed only 1,210 titles, or 32%, in science, technology, and medicine. On the other hand, there were 693 titles in literature, 650 titles in the arts, 300 titles in history and archeology, the social sciences and humanities accounting for 63% of the titles listed, in addition to the ideology listings comprising 5%. The large proportion of publications in the social sciences and humanities probably represent manuscripts prepared during the long years of the cultural revolution, when people were still doing research in these fields under unfavorable circumstances. On the other hand, because natural sciences, technology, and medicine require major laboratory facilities and equipment
which were lacking during the destructive period of the Gang of Four, little scientific research was carried out, and only a relatively few manuscripts were ready for publication at this time.

Based on a selection of some 991 titles from the San lien catalog made at the University of Washington, it would appear that a large number of the Chinese monographic titles, perhaps as many as 70%, are aimed at the elementary levels of reading. On the other hand, the new journals that are becoming known to people outside of China represent some very specialized topics, including soil studies, archeology, heredity, biophysiology, radiology, pediatrics, high-energy physics, psychiatry, computers, high-polymers, and tumors.

Chinese publishing is centrally managed by Kuo chia ch'u pan shih yeh kuan li chü (国家出版事业管理局), which assigns responsibility for different subjects to specialized publishers, such as the K'o chi ch'u pan she (科学出版社) for science and technology, Ku chih ch'u pan she (古籍出版社) for rare books or newly discovered old texts, and Chiao yü ch'u pan she (教育出版社) for school text books. In addition to this subject specialization among different publishers, some traditional publishers, such as Shangwu and Chunghua, also assume specialized responsibilities. Shangwu, for instance, now specializes mostly in science and technology, while Chunghua concentrates on works in the humanities and social sciences.

After a book is published, distribution inside China is mainly by the Hsin Hua Bookstore, or by outlets from the other chains, such as the Wai Wen (海外) and the K'o Chi (科学), or by the Post offices. The major center for distribution to foreign countries is the Guozi in Peking and its associates in foreign countries. In Hong Kong and Macao distribution is managed by the Chung-kuo t'u shu fa hsing kung ssu (中国图书发行公司).

Books are published in China usually at about 15,000 copies per title. These limited quantities have created an acute shortage; with the result that there are often long lines of people at book outlets waiting to purchase new publications. Another factor limiting the availability of books is the way they are classified by categories of distribution to their prospective audiences. For example, publications are classified into categories for "national distribution" (国内发行), "overseas distribution" (海外发行), or "internal use only" (内部发行); there is even a category, "non-distributed" (不发行)! North American readers may gain access to those publications that are classified for "overseas distribution" (海外发行). In the autumn of 1978 the People's Daily carried an article by Po Sheng entitled, "Why are these books for internal use only?" (这样的书为什么要内部发行.). In essence this article challenged the internal distribution category, and asked why many of these books could not be distributed more widely. The article mentioned that even the Marxist classic, Cheng chih ching chi hsüeh p' i p'an ta kang ts' ao kao (政治经济学批判大纲), had not as yet been openly published. The famous Chinese translation of Joseph Needham's Science and Civilization in China, Chung-kuo k'o hsueh chi shu shih* (中国科学技术史), had been publicized in newspapers, and yet it had not been openly published. Still another work, She hui chu i ching chi wen t'i chiang tso (社会主主义经济问题辞座)
had been announced over the radio, but had not been openly published. And at that
time some of the major reference tools, like Hsien tai hanyu tz'u tien (現代漢語詞典),
had also not been published. It is to be hoped that publishers in China will make an
adequate response to this challenge to make more books available to their public, as well
as to scholars in North America.

Books in China sometimes are published under the category of "trial edition" (試用本). Such
books are difficult to obtain. One example is the trial edition of Tzu hai (辭海); another
was an elementary school mathematics textbook I saw in China which had been a "trial
edition" since 1970. The latter book had been reprinted in 1975, and was still in use in
1977 under the category of "trial edition." I understand that the Chinese large library
classification scheme devised about 1976 has also been issued in this category.

Profit has never been a major concern of Chinese publishers. Compared with the list
price of books in other countries, the cost per item of books in China is probably lower
than almost anywhere else in the world. However, because of the now intensified publishing
activity, especially in the areas of archaeology, the arts, science, and technology, all
of these books will require a lot of illustrations, some of them colored, which will un-
doubtedly boost the publication price tremendously. For example, the Chia ku wen ho chi
(甲骨文合集), a 15-volume publication on oracle bone inscriptions which is scheduled
to start publication this year, has a list price of RMB$8500 and is being offered by an
American dealer for US$5,400. Publishing is on the upswing, and so is the cost of
publications. In the early stages of the cultural revolution, when publishing in China
came virtually to a halt, the University of Washington Libraries could have purchased a
copy of every book coming out of China with an expenditure of only a few hundred dollars.
In the last few years, the Library's acquisitions budget has been gradually increased to
several thousand dollars. It is expected that in the near future its annual budget will have
to be increased up to $25,000 per year for new Chinese publications, including journals.
Larger libraries, such as the Library of Congress, whose collection policies are broader
in scope, will probably spend many more thousands of dollars in the acquisition of new
publications from China.

Because of the relatively low list price of Chinese publications and the small number of
copies per title printed, a very acute shortage is often created soon after each book is
published, a situation which gives rise to active reprinting, particularly in Hong Kong.
One dealer in Hong Kong reported that some of these Hong Kong reprints are returned
to China to meet the demand there. The status of copyright has never been very clearly
defined with regard to Chinese books and there is no copyright statement to be found
in any of the books published in China. While all the reprinting has been done openly,
even blatantly, in Hong Kong, and occasionally in Taiwan as well one word of protest
from the Chinese government has yet to be reported.

If the limitations on the number of copies of books printed in China continues, and if
the restriction on overseas distribution is not relaxed, it is predictable that the
reprinting business in Hong Kong will continue to flourish. This reprinting will be done
not only by unauthorized profit-making businesses, but also by certain government-
sanctioned outlets, such as the San lien Bookstore in Hong Kong.

In view of these trends and present circumstances in the world of Chinese publishing, I propose the following as possible steps for us in the United States to take:

1. Negotiate a formal arrangement with the Chinese government, so that restrictions on the distribution of books to America may be relaxed, and bibliographic and publishing information from China may reach America effectively.

2. Send a representative of American scholarly and library interests to China to go through bookstores, and even to stand in line to compete with the local buyers for limited supplies of books.

3. Expand American reprinting capabilities, including those excellent facilities and services of the Center for Chinese Research Materials of the Association of Research Libraries.

Perhaps the best approach would be to combine these three steps into a single program that would function in the place of the NPAC program, which has been conducted so successfully by the Library of Congress in Japan and in other countries, but which, for various reasons, has never been set up for Chinese publications.

While we may think that publishing is at best a technical problem, the availability of Chinese publications to the United States, and vice versa, is an issue essential to the cause of good China-U.S. relations. The paramount issue in improving relations between these two countries is communication, and publications are the most crucial component in the communication process. We should see it as a matter of national importance that both China and the U.S. move to promote a better flow of publications between each other. The door between the U.S. and China is now open. That the door is open will have little meaning unless there is traffic going through it. At this time, and in the foreseeable future, publications should be an important communication vehicle that goes through this open door.

Notes

*Being published in Hong Kong