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A SHORT NOTE ON CURRENT CHINESE ONLINE BOOK DEALERS

Thomas H. Hahn

University of Heidelberg

1. Introduction

In Taoist reckoning it is said that nine steps lead to the Tao. Ordering and receiving a book from China may, then, be more complicated than reaching the Tao, for many more than nine steps are necessary to obtain a particular item.

Heretofore the business of ordering a book in Chinese from China, Hong Kong or Taiwan has relied heavily on printed catalogs from the respective bookdealers, which may or may not cover whatever was published within their “domain” of business. Scholars and librarians or scholar/librarians then make their choices of what should be ordered, thus initiating a rather lengthy and sometimes even tedious ordering process that usually results in shipping order slips or “wishlists” to the originator of said catalogs.

Given the situation of the (anarchic and flourishing) publishing industry especially of mainland China, coupled with the absence of a centralised book distribution system A that is able to procure titles from point B and redirect it to institution C (which may reside in a foreign country), the picture that emerges can only be a rather sketchy one: a “hit rate” of 60 to 70 titles out of 100 ordered can be regarded as a fair average of the trade. The rest of the wishlist may or may not arrive sometime, from somewhere; numerous “corpses” of entry level acquisition records float around in each and every library’s order files. What is needed to reform this process is a higher degree of transparency, a greater degree of interaction between bookdealer and librarian. To put it bluntly: we need better service.

Not that there aren’t excellent examples of people going out of their way to supply items not readily available. There are real heroes in this trade. Expenses to procure titles sometimes by far exceed their fiscal value. Postage rates are getting exorbitant these days, and this applies to sending books as well as to sending out two thousand catalogs or newsletters each month.

Redundancy of books offered in ten different catalogs is another hindrance. For congshu 經書 in many cases we lack detailed analytical data, and large volume sets come without abstracts. Thus the decision making process regarding the building of a comprehensive, well defined collection is a tough one: developing a bibliographical “nose” like that of a good hunting dog for a worthy prey requires not only years of experience and scholarly expertise, but also the kind of perseverance and far-sightedness that is constantly and explicitly highlighted in the Yijing 易經, the Book of Changes.

And indeed the world changes faster and faster. In a networked world many values and routines are subjected to doubt and revision. Scholarly concepts, ways of asking questions and producing results will radically change. The old ways of transmitting or pre-processing
information as found in libraries over the last centuries are under discussion, threatened by the new, digital media, most notably fulltext databases and online bibliographies. Dictionaries that can be activated with the push of a button and which reside somewhere on the other side of the globe indicate the aptness of the First Lady’s slogan of the global village.

But to the matter at hand: seizing the Internet as an opportunity for conducting business, some bookdealers dealing in Chinese and/or Sinological literature have ventured to show an online presence. Employing HTML as their web language, a number of the sites discussed below are serious contenders to those “orthodox” dealers that continue to send out publication (or pre-publication) book lists. The following two categories of dealers are not under discussion here:

1) those that almost exclusively publicize and distribute *western* language titles relevant to the scholar or student of Sinology, like Asian Rare Books (New York), HanshanTang (Great Britain) etc.;

2) Chinese dealers which have merely started to send out electronic catalogs using e-mail (like the Zhongguo Shudian in Beijing for example)

Rather, I have tried to do a survey of those Chinese dealers which occupy a “virtual space” on the web, a space that librarians for example can enter, search for titles (or compare prizes!) and activate an online ordering process, either by plain e-mail, using a cut-and-paste method, for example, or—better still—by using some kind of interactive feature of the website itself. This is a near-complete survey,¹ so it can be counted as a rather representative indication of current tendencies of the trade,² which in my opinion shows a greater willingness to make use of the new media, thus providing a higher degree of transparency and timeliness than was hitherto possible through printed media, such as ordinary catalogs and newsletters.

2. A table-formatted overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hong-xue tang</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>GB</td>
<td>Big-5</td>
<td>Big-5</td>
<td>Big-5</td>
<td>GB</td>
<td>Big-5</td>
<td>Big-5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Although I extensively searched the site of this distributor I was not able recover a physical address; putting in “Hong Kong” here may thus be viewed with caution; this could also well be some Chinatown type bookstore somewhere in the southern reaches of Namibia. A *traceroute* command should solve the riddle, however.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3. b) help with coding?</th>
<th>yes</th>
<th>no</th>
<th>yes</th>
<th>yes</th>
<th>yes</th>
<th>??</th>
<th>yes</th>
<th>no</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. a) type of material</td>
<td>M and var. 2</td>
<td>M, S, V, CD, MF</td>
<td>limited M, S, CD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M, S;</td>
<td>M; S ??</td>
<td>M, S;</td>
<td>M (mostly western)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. b) going back to</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>not specified</td>
<td>not specified</td>
<td>not specified</td>
<td>not specified</td>
<td>not specified</td>
<td>not specified</td>
<td>not specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Retrieval</td>
<td>selective (classified sections)</td>
<td>some modes de-activated</td>
<td>no active search function</td>
<td>no active search function</td>
<td>selective (classified sections)</td>
<td>selective (classified sections)</td>
<td>no active search function</td>
<td>selective (classified sections)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. a) proprietary search engine</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. b) advanced searching 3</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. c) simple searching</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. d) retrieval speed</td>
<td>fair</td>
<td>XX 4</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>fair</td>
<td>??</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>XX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Password required</td>
<td>yes (when entering site)</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes (before placing orders)</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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2 HongXueTang cooperates closely with China's third-largest book distributor, the China Educational Books Import & Export Co. and the Beijing University Library, one of the main projects of HXT is the distribution of grey material from Hong Kong government agencies.

3 I use the terms "advanced searching" and "simple searching" in the context of how many search fields (like ISBN, author, title, keyword etc.) are part of the formula to search for an item. "Advanced" stands for more than five such qualifiers.

4 "XX" means simply that no underlying search engine is incorporated, so when searching items the "find" option of whatever browser used coupled to the parameters of the connectivity employed set the retrieval speed;
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>8. a) order process</th>
<th>interactive</th>
<th>non-interactive (^5)</th>
<th>interactive</th>
<th>interactive</th>
<th>interactive</th>
<th>non-interactive</th>
<th>non-interactive</th>
<th>non-interactive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8. b) order confirma-\ion{\textstyle\text{t}ion}</td>
<td>by e-mail and before leaving site</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>??</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.c) retrieval within specific portions (^6)</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. overall access speed</td>
<td>fair to low</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>fair</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>??</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. embedded e-mail to admin</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. in stock catalog</td>
<td>not specified</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>not specified</td>
<td>yes (as old stock option) (^7)</td>
<td>not specified</td>
<td>??</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>not specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Other services or features</td>
<td>Monthly newsletter of Chinese Publications</td>
<td>book news and copyright notices</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>classical poetry sub-site</td>
<td>monthly online newsletter</td>
<td>??</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>links to and catalogs of related dealers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Remarks</td>
<td>technically speaking ranking top; extensive site by one of the major Chinese dealers</td>
<td>very limited offer (&lt;100 titles)</td>
<td>some internal URLs produced error messages</td>
<td>very limited scope, but all titles in digital format!!</td>
<td>more science oriented, western type materials</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) CIBTC used to have (in 1996 for a period of several months, if I recall correctly) a model setup for retrieval and searching functions, employing elaborate forms and tables which were clickable and very userfriendly. They may have lost their technician to a nearby computer company - whatever the reasons, titles now are merely presented in list form.

\(^6\) "Specific portions" can be specific months of publications (ideally one arrives at this month's publications first) or certain types of publications like newspapers, journals, yearbooks etc. in the category of periodicals; sometimes a classification scheme (like that of the Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing) is employed, which conveniently breaks down the number items one has to survey. Corresponds to item 6).

\(^7\) Dates of publication within the in-stock part is intelligible; page numbers and dates are corrupt.
3. Miscellaneous observations and some preliminary conclusions

I am not going into the pros and cons of online catalogs and online orders here. It is my understanding that the advantages (like timely ads of new titles, confirmation of books ordered, ready e-mail connection to the company in question etc.) already at this early stage of the development outweigh the disadvantages (“browning” due to slow connectivity; still limited scope of items offered; crude—or overburdened—navigational setup etc.). Rather, I will pick out a few select points that aroused my interest while doing online research for this survey.

What becomes very evident when studying the table above is the rather diverse picture that emerges: we have sites that merely sport lists of titles (in one case in fact only the likes of Fengshen yanyi 封神演義 and the Hong lou meng 红楼梦), and others (like Sanmin Shuju 三民書局 and HXT) which offer a full-fledged program plus a variety of online side services.

Coding and help with coding is taken seriously, which means that in many cases help (sometimes very extensive help, as in the case of Fangsheng) is provided, overcoming the obstacles that PC or MAC users had to struggle hard with only a couple of years ago. Still, delving into some of these sites means (at times at least, as in the case of CIBTC and DongQuan) subjecting yourself to irritating surprises: internal URLs don’t connect and produce error messages, search options or portions of material don’t come up; sometimes a roundabout way in the end does lead the user to the sub-page in question, but all in all the navigational structures of a number of sites in my opinion still need improvement in terms of setup logic.

The time factor also may play a dual role in deciding which dealer to employ for future cooperation (that dealers which render this type of online service to the public present a challenge to the established book trading companies like Sanlian shudian or perhaps even CNPTIC which have not gone online yet goes without saying). On the one hand connection time may be either slow or expensive (or both!). Little is known about the technical setup or the technical staffing of such companies like HXT, which does entertain a model site but at times is just impossible (at least from Germany) to get access to. On the other hand, only a few sites were really up-to-date with what they had to offer. And only in one case (HXT) was information available on how far back a user could hope to retrieve publications.

In addition one should be cautioned against blindly accessing site A and expecting to be presented with a list of titles in Chinese language that have been released by Ningxia renmin chubanshe 宁夏人民出版社 the month before. Only a few companies are really up-to-date in terms of what was published by whatever publisher within the last, say, three months or so. It also has to be pointed out that the scope of publications covered by those online dealers analysed in the survey does in general not exceed that which is reflected in the printed catalogs; this is to say that specialised publishers, small academic presses or printing offices which may operate outside certain geographical or logistical perimeters are treated as they are
in most official printed book catalogs: for the most part they are simply neglected (they may start putting up their own pages one of these days, though).

The enterprising spirit of the managers and staff of Fangsheng Bookstore is very interesting. Already hinted at by the fact that they do not provide a physical address on their digital outlet to which one could address a snail mail item, they have decided to go “all the way”. Thus all titles “on display” (not many so far, most of them of the modern literature type) were keyed in character by character and are available for ftp down-load or via e-mail; titles like Bai lu yuan 白鹿原 thus exist in electronic form. Short portions or “appetizers” of online text can be found on the Fangsheng website, including the complete table of contents (TOCs) of selected items.

Every month Fangsheng intends to digitize 10 books (averaging about 180,000 Chinese characters each). Digital “copies” go for 2.99 USD; issues of periodicals (I only identified four different titles) sell for 0.99 USD. The possibly troublesome issue of copyright is not touched upon by FangSheng, which may reduce the willingness of institutions in the public service sector to buy (i.e. download) this type of material and make it available through their local network. For individual readers (or researchers) it may still be an interesting (and cheap) option for tackling material that was hitherto only available in printed form.

The future may see the founding of a conglomerate of online Hong Kong and mainland Chinese bookdealers. The advantage of such a conglomerate can be seen from the example of the Antiquarian booksellers which (since the end of 1996, I believe) manage a joint project allowing one search within a great number of linked online catalogs. The resulting set gives e-mail links and URLs of the dealer that holds the search item. To compare prices and availability it would be ideal if such a meta search engine existed, combining searches of titles printed by Fudan University Press with the year qualifier of “greater than 1995” in six or seven online catalogs (CNPTIC and CIBTC among them). Before this type of online searching capacity actually is implemented a great deal of water will flow down the Yangzi gorges.

But what we do see today in terms of transitional models of online services can without doubt be interpreted as a stepping stone for a more accurate, timely and user friendly interface between the book retailing and the information processing trade. A reform of the underlying infrastructure involving Chinese book distribution logistics and publisher-to-distributor relationship may in fact have a much greater impact on what we in the end get to put on our shelves than fancy web pages. On the other hand: online ordering from in-stock catalogs is the most convenient method I can imagine to supplement a library’s holdings. The time when both factors (old-fashioned distribution channels and the new technology that serves librarians and readers) will finally have claimed their respective territories in the present day drama of “information brokerage” doesn’t seem so far off.

Appendix 1: List of URLs of bookdealers treated above
Datong Bookshop http://tatong.allright.com.tw/
Dongquan Bookshop http://juliet.stfx.ca/~x94ycj/welcome.html
Chinese Books Cyberstore  http://www.chinesebooks.net/
CIBTC (Beijing)  http://www.cibtc.co.cn/
Sanmin Shuju  http://sanmin.com.tw/
Hongxue Tang  http://www.enmp.org.hk/innoos/
Fangsheng Bookstore  http://www.digiweb.com/hollydev/fangshen/welcome.html

Appendix 2: List of URLs that link to online bookdealers distributing Chinese materials and related links

Yilin Bookshop  http://www.yilin.com.f1.htm
China Books & Periodicals  http://www.chinabooks.com/
CEAL publishers homepage  http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~felsing/ceal/pubcats.html
Asian Rare Books  http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ccs/cuwil/clients/arb/

NOTES

1. To the best of my knowledge, that is. Chinese Books Cyberstore (also called Boxuetang), a password-protected site in Hong Kong, did not respond to my application for such a password, so the information supplied under this heading is taken from the announcements and respective ads on p. 106 of the 1997 AAS program and the flysheets that were distributed at the stand in the AAS exhibition area.

2. In this context I refer to the online publication of the table below which will be kept in the custody of Bob Felsing’s CEAL homepage project and can be readily accessed (and updated or altered) as the situation changes and more sites (or features) become available.

3. Fangsheng Bookshop’s server has responded rather erratically to online accesses over the last six weeks since this survey was undertaken. Most recently many error messages have been returned to the requester stating that the latter (whoever it may be) has no authorization to access the server.

4. Strange as it may sound, one of the most obvious advantages of the media (timeliness) in a number of cases is—in my eyes at least—rather lightly sacrificed. But possibly it was never the intention of the companies in question to operate on such a full scale.

5. Or perhaps by OCR; how the titles are in fact digitised is not specified.

6. None of the sites listed here (and only rarely printed catalogs, for that matter) quote the edition statement, indicating the number of copies printed.