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The Will to Serve: Chinese Booksellers in Hong Kong

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As an Asian Studies librarian engaged in the acquisition of both Chinese and Japanese publications, I have often been intrigued by the marked contrast between them. Apart from their obvious difference in price and production quality (paper, printing, binding, etc.), they also have different ways of reaching us. Nearly all Japanese books come to us directly from Tokyo where most of them are published. Books from China, on the other hand, often take an indirect route and reach us via Hong Kong. This is because of a lack of mail order service by Chinese book publishers and booksellers from 1949 to the late 1970s, and the not quite satisfactory vending service offered by them since the 1980s. Hence, to a certain extent, overseas libraries may still have to rely on Hong Kong booksellers for the supply of Chinese publications.

From the librarian’s point of view, Chinese booksellers in Hong Kong can be classified into four groups according to the nature and style of their business operation. First, there are four big bookstores that are also publishers and distributors. Next, there are a number of smaller bookstores which also specialize in mail order service. The third group consists of book vendors that deal exclusively in mail order trade. Lastly, there is a mail order antiquarian bookseller who is also expert in supplying current publications that are relatively rare. Apart from selling original editions, some booksellers in the last three groups also offer photocopies of books and journals for sale.

The "big four" in the first group are Joint Publishing (Sanlian), Commercial Press (Shangwu), Chung Hwa (Zhonghua), and Cosmos Books (Tiandi). Besides publishing many worthwhile titles themselves, all four companies conduct their business in a huge bookstore at a good location near a subway station. They are either situated on Hong Kong island (Joint in Central, Commercial in Causeway Bay, Cosmos in Wanchai) or on Kowloon peninsula (Chung Hwa in Yau Ma Tei). Joint, Commercial, and Chung Hwa all have one or more branch stores in other districts of the British colony.

Joint is the major distributor of publications from China. Apart from distributing and selling numerous monograph titles, it runs a book club whose members are granted 10 percent discounts. To become a member, one can either pay an annual fee of US$7.00 or deposit and spend US$40.00 per annum. Joint is also the chief subscription agent for Chinese newspapers and periodicals. In 1995 it offers to supply more than 4,400 serial titles published in China, as listed in its 1995 Subscription Guide to Chinese Periodicals. This compares favorably well with the China International Book Trading Corporation’s (CIBTC in Beijing) shorter list of 1,838 titles in its 1995 Newspapers and Magazines of China catalog. Based on a small sampling of price comparison, and not taking into account the 5 percent discount granted to libraries, the sea mail subscription rates charged by Joint are on average about 26 percent (it varies dramatically from 15 to 65 percent for individual titles) more expensive than that of CIBTC. However, in some surprising cases, Joint's rates can actually
be cheaper than CIBTC's. For example, a random check on the first ten titles listed under "Economics" on page 11 of CIBTC's catalog shows that for both Jingji kexue and Jingji luntan, CIBTC's rates are at least 35 percent dearer than Joint's. As to service, issues sent by Joint are seldom missing because Hong Kong's postal service is very reliable. This is not the case with CIBTC in China. Since 1994 Joint has further improved the speed of their delivery by airfreighting all Beijing and Shanghai journals to Hong Kong for processing.

Commercial Press, founded in Shanghai in 1897, is the oldest publishing house in modern China. It has published many dictionaries which have been used by millions of Chinese. Its Hong Kong branch was established in 1914 and, for three generations, it is the most well-known publisher and bookseller in Hong Kong. More than two million volumes of books are currently stored in its warehouse. In recent years, it has become the distributor for more than fifty Chinese publishers, including Wenwu, Beijing guji, and Shumu wenxian in Beijing, Shanghai guji and Shanghai zhishi in Shanghai, and all major publishers in Shandong province and Tianjin city.

Books published in Jiangsu province are distributed in Hong Kong by Chung Hwa, the third big bookseller in this group. Like Joint and Commercial, Chung Hwa has its origin in prewar China and is now independent from its parent company in mainland China. Similar to them again, it maintains a multistorey bookshop in Hong Kong. Chung Hwa, which was founded in 1912 in Shanghai, has long been a publishing rival of Commercial in China, and is justly famous for its many modern editions of Chinese classical works, particularly in literature, history, and philosophy. In Hong Kong, however, Chung Hwa, Commercial, and Joint all belong to the Sino United Publishing (Holdings), Incorporated.

Cosmos Books, founded in Hong Kong, is the youngest publisher among the "big four". It publishes a large number of titles by contemporary writers in the fields of the social sciences and the humanities. Their book covers are often more colorful and attractive than those produced by Joint, Commercial, or Chung Hwa. As a publisher, its original titles on current affairs and cultural studies and its reprints of controversial contemporary Chinese fiction are most welcomed by educators, professional writers, and college students. Cosmos operates a huge bookstore with an impressive display of Hong Kong and Taiwan publications. Its current stock of books from China is also rich in variety.

Booksellers in the second group are chiefly located upstairs in residential buildings in the crowded streets of Mongkok, Kowloon. They are often within short distance from one another. One can thus visit Man's (Wenxing), Sapience Cultural Enterprise Company (Xuefeng), Converging (Huichuan), Greenfield (Tianyuan), and a few other shops within a couple of hours. Man's and Sapience are very competitive, often offering 30 percent to 40 percent discounts off their marked price on books published in China to personal shoppers. Like most other shops, they obtain their books directly from China, bypassing the distribution network of Joint, Commercial, or Chung Hwa. For overseas mail orders, Sapience dispatches all book parcels from Guangzhou, although orders must be sent to Hong Kong. Sapience also sells photocopies of journal articles, which it regularly compiles without revealing their sources, for researchers to select and order. It regards all overseas clients as "members", and offers them a number of choices to pay their accounts. It also
offers them a 20 percent discount on books published in China and charges only 25 percent of the book cost for postage.

Converging acts as an agent for several Chinese publishers and institutions, including Beijing's People's University of China Clipping Service (Zhongguo renmin daxue shubao ziliao zhongxin) and the Number One Historical Archives (Zhongguo diyi lishi danganguan). It is accepting orders for the former's Fuyin baokan ziliao annual bound volumes and the latter's microfilm collection of important documents. Converging can also supply back files of more than 1,250 Chinese serials published in this century, although its prices for prewar journals are often quite expensive.

There are fewer such bookstores on Hong Kong island. Two well-known ones are Sun Chau (Shenzhou) in Central and Youth Literary (Qingwen) in Wanchai. Sun Chau concentrates on selling secondhand books and out of print items. Youth Literary sells current publications published in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. It offers 20 percent discounts to personal shoppers on all titles. Another bookseller that may be classified in this group is Tai Yip (Daye), a specialty bookshop of Chinese art that is also a publisher and distributor as well as an art gallery. Tai Yip has one shop in Central and another store at the Hong Kong Museum of Art in Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon. Like Joint and a few other bookstores, Tai Yip accepts all major credit cards for mail order payment.

While only some vendors in the second group issue a book list to attract orders, all booksellers in the third group rely on such catalogs for their business. These include Universal (Wanyou), Chiao Liu (Jiaoliu), Far East (Yuandong), Sunshine (Guangming), Hsing Kuang (Xingguang), Knowledge (Zhishi), and several others. Most of them are prepared to give a 10 to 20 percent discount to their regular clients. Their business is supported by East Asian libraries and scholars around the world, and many Chinese collections in America, Europe, and Australia have been built up through their services. To cut down on overhead, most vendors have no separate warehouse apart from their office in a residential flat. Some have no full-time staff other than a helpful family member or a casual assistant. The majority of them travel regularly to China to collect and replenish their stock. All are trying hard to survive, or prosper, in this competitive business with a low to reasonable profit margin.

Because the Classic Novel Association (Guyi xiaoshuohui) conducts its business in a distinctive style, it merits being classified separately. Classic Novel is a mail order vendor specializing in Ming and Qing editions, periodical back files, out of print titles, and contemporary Chinese publications restricted to "internal circulation" (neibu faxing). It publishes a bimonthly catalog which is annotated and illustrated. As many titles in this catalog are rare, unique, hard to find, or essential for research, they are certainly worth acquiring despite their apparently high price. Classic Novel can also supply new ordinary publications at the market price to its regular clients. It has been in business since 1981 and was known as Wei Man Kok (Huiwenge) prior to 1980.

For current Chinese publications, Hong Kong booksellers generally convert the Renminbi-(RMB) marked price to the Hong Kong dollar selling price by multiplying it three to five
times (the official exchange rate is around RMB Y1=HK$0.92). The pricing principle is thus: the higher the original price, the lower the price-increase multiple. Books over RMB Y50 would cost about three times more, while those under RMB Y15 would cost at least four times more. Annuals, local gazetteers, limited editions, and books for "internal circulation" may cost considerably more. This price increase is acceptable because Hong Kong vendors have to pay a high price for owning or renting their stores, offices, or warehouses. Transporting books from China, storing them in Hong Kong, processing foreign orders, and packing and sending parcels overseas by mail all involve time, space, and labor. Moreover, they often have to wait for four to six months before they can receive any payment. Sometimes, longer delays in payment occur and unpaid invoices do exist. All booksellers have to build up a sizable amount of stock to attract business, but their unsold volumes will all turn into worthless paper.

In the past fifty years, both China and Hong Kong have undergone enormous changes and, in July 1997, Hong Kong will be returned to China. Let us hope that the majority of Hong Kong booksellers, including those who may earn more income if they close down their business and let out their stores or offices but choose not to do so, will continue to provide an excellent mail order service to overseas clients, not just for another two or three years, but well up to and beyond the next century.

APPENDIX

List of Hong Kong Booksellers Mentioned in This Article

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Bookseller</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Telephone</th>
<th>Fax</th>
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<tr>
<td>Chiao Liu Publication Trading Co. Ltd</td>
<td>P.O. Box 50324 Sai Ying Pun Post Office</td>
<td>852-2858-0645</td>
<td>852-2858-6379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chung Hwa Book Co. (HK) Ltd.</td>
<td>450 Nathan Road Yau Ma Tei</td>
<td>852-2385-1811</td>
<td>852-2782-3525</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classic Novel Association</td>
<td>P.O. Box 33309 Sheung Wan Post Office</td>
<td></td>
<td>852-2838-5816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial Press (HK) Ltd.</td>
<td>9 Yee Wo Street Causeway Bay</td>
<td>852-2890-8028</td>
<td>852-2895-1027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Converging Book Collection</td>
<td>1/F, Block C Lee Man Building</td>
<td>852-2391-6236</td>
<td>852-2393-2972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>110 Tung Choi Street Mongkok, Kowloon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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Cosmos Books Ltd.  
30 Johnston Road  
Wanchai  
Hong Kong  
Tel. 852-2865-0708  
Fax 852-2861-1541

Far East Book Co.  
G.P.O. Box 4892  
Hong Kong  
Tel. 852-2577-6594  
Fax 852-2577-4854

Greenfield Book Store  
1/F, 56 Sai Yeung Choi St.  
Mongkok, Kowloon  
Hong Kong  
Tel. 852-2385-8031  
Fax 852-2770-2484

Hsing Kuang Book Co.  
P.O. Box 30560  
Causeway Bay Post Office  
Hong Kong  
Tel. 852-2874-1922  
Fax 852-2874-2045

Joint Publishing (HK) Co. Ltd.  
9 Queen Victoria Street  
Central  
Hong Kong  
Tel. 852-2523-0105  
Fax 852-2521-7040  
Email jpchk@HK-SUPER.NET

Knowledge Book Co.  
P.O. Box 79033  
Mongkok Post Office  
Kowloon  
Hong Kong  
Tel. 852-2789-1029  
Fax 852-2397-8121

Man’s Book Co.  
2/F, 32 Argyle Street  
Mongkok, Kowloon  
Hong Kong  
Tel. 852-2789-1736  
Fax 852-2391-7719

Sapience Cultural Enterprise Company  
1/F, 83 Tung Choi Street  
Mongkok, Kowloon  
Hong Kong  
Tel. 852-2391-3329  
Fax 852-2391-3325

Sun Chau Book Co. Ltd.  
32 Stanley Street  
Central  
Hong Kong  
Tel. 852-2522-8268  
Fax 852-2522-0423

Sunshine Book Co.  
P.O. Box 47219  
Morrison Hill Post Office  
Hong Kong  
Tel. 852-2575-3710  
Fax 852-2591-6232

Tai Yip Co.  
6/F, Li Yuen Street West  
Central  
Hong Kong  
Tel. 852-2523-6483  
Fax 852-2845-3296
Universal Book Trading Co.  
G.P.O. Box 2641  
Hong Kong  
Tel. 852-2851-6041  
Fax 852-2850-5516

Youth Literary Book Store  
2/F, Flat B  
214-216 Johnston Road  
Wanchai  
Hong Kong  
Tel. 852-2891-6932  
Fax 852-2572-1652