

## FEATURE

# Books in China's Bookstores

Books in bookstores tell something about the country

By T. K. Chu

**B**ooks in China's bookstores tell something about the country. I first visited a bookstore in China in 1975. Many shelves in that drab Beijing store were lined with works of communist luminaries of the day. Patrons were few and inattentive attendants were many. The theme of the Cultural Revolution then was to criticize two dead people, Lin Biao and Confucius. The people, their will diminished by poverty and their energy sapped by hateful conflicts with designated socio-political others, felt no excitement about the allegorical campaign against Premier Zhou Enlai or those books.

As a Chinese American who attended schools in both (the pre-1949) China and America, I have maintained an interest in my evolving native land. In my periodic return visits I found the displays in bookstores different from visit to visit, changing profoundly in the last several years. The Shanghai Book City that I visited this summer reveals more about contemporary China than does the Shanghai Museum or the Shanghai Grand Theater. It is also an antidote to the internet bars with their video games. A mid-level manager told me that the store, on seven floors, has 100,000 square feet of display space for its 400,000 titles.

Not surprisingly the fields of business and finance offer many titles. But other categories, less expected, also indicate the cultural undercurrents.

Confucius is back, and history is in. Editions of the Confucian *Four Books* abound. One interpretive volume of *The Analects* is said to have sold more than three million copies, beating Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, also a Chinese best seller. There are at least three abridged editions of *Records of the Grand*

*Historian* (a complete annotated *Records* runs more than 3000 pages). Two titles devoted to the history of the Tang and Ming dynasties (one is translated from Japanese) are popular enough to be found in airport bookshops. According to one scholar, the work of the late American historian Ray Huang, author of *1587, A Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline* and other books, has influenced the academia in historiography.

The number of law books on sale is large and growing. The law books are grouped into several categories: exam preparation, textbooks, code, civil law, commercial law, criminal law, legal dictionaries, theory and history of Chinese law, and law and the legal history of major European countries, the U.S. and Japan, the last group including a massive edition of the code of Justinian. There are nine titles analyzing the Property Law enacted on March 16, 2007 (the sixty-page text sells for 65 cents at the conversion rate of 7.65 Yuan per dollar in early June), ranging from 344 pages (\$3.27) to 715 pages (\$5.88). They explain, interpret, annotate, recast it in question-and-answer form, and describe its background, its perspective and its links to other laws. The same manager said that law books offer small profit margin per book and carry large sales volume. Western books are prominent in the bookstore's inventory. In addition to popular titles like *Harry Potter*, *An Inconvenient Truth* (but no *The Assault on Reason* yet) are books from the classical and pre-modern period of Western intellectual history. A nearby bookstore devotes an island counter to titles that would please any American professor teaching post-Renaissance humanities: books by Bacon, Descartes, Flaubert, Freud, Goethe, Kant, Luther, Milton, Nietzsche, Rousseau, Schopenhauer,

Adam Smith and others. One title summarizes the fifty books that “have the most influence in history,” with Plato’s *Republic* heading the list. A 2496-page *Oxford English-Chinese Dictionary*, which takes entries from the 1998 edition (2152 pages) and the 2003 edition of the parent dictionary, has just become available (\$52).

On a billboard on the Chengdu-Leshan Expressway in Sichuan province, the Mianyang city government tells passers-by that Mianyang has bilingual school(s). The city is known for being the most ‘civil and progressive,’ and for its stellar reputation of having the highest percentage of high school graduates passing the college entrance exams. Perhaps Confucius, who has always (well, almost always) been venerated as the First Teacher and known for his teaching that happiness is learning and practicing what one learns, is indeed back.

On a weekday morning in June about a hundred mostly young people were waiting in a drizzling rain outside the Book City fifteen minutes before its opening. After the opening several people in the crowd quickly occupied the few reading chairs inside. The rest read sitting on the ledge at the base of the waist-high glass partition between the display area and the escalator, read standing up or, mostly children, read sitting on the floor. The uniformed attendants came out



Shanghai Book City is located in the middle section of Fuzhou Road, known as a Cultural Street. The grand and elegant building smacks of academic flavor. Built on a land of 3,713 square meters, the building boasts a total floor space of about 40,000 square meters. The book city has 27 stories, six of which opened in December 1998 for book retails. As the first bookstore hypermarket in town, the facility sells more than 120,000 titles of books, audio-video and electronic publications on living, literature, social science, education, children’s readings, science and technology and art.

of the work elevator, unloaded crates of books from a dolly and stacked them on shelves, on the floor (now and then with a bang) or in the ‘New Arrival’ area. They also helped readers locate a title. Patrons queued at the floor cashier to pay. Two checkers at the door courteously verified all purchases.

In my retirement I have had the enriching luxury of auditing undergraduate courses in the ‘Great Books’ and in the classical foundations of Western history, philosophy, and literature, and in classical Eastern thought. My visit to Book City suggests that the new generation in my native land is doing something similar. The Chinese, long concentrating on *zhongguo*—meaning, roughly, geographical China—are rediscovering with excitement another notion from the classical culture: *tianxia*. Its capacious meaning is “that which is below the sky”—the whole world and its mental and material wonders. This world is above all the province of books.

Would a Confucian humanist, after having reclaimed this world, engage in searching dialogues with a Socratic rationalist on the subject that started their teachers’ inquiry into morality, a question which the world, East and West alike, has long neglected: the nature of human happiness? Perhaps in doing so they would also diminish the notion of Otherness in the label East and West, a notion mankind has inherited since the ancient Greek and Hebrew days.

A photo tour of the Shanghai Book City can be taken at <http://www.forestlife.info/slide/s124.htm>

###

*T. K. Chu, a retired research physicist at the Plasma Physics Laboratory, Princeton University, translated Qian Ning’s Chinese Students Encounter America.*