

ARTICLES

CHINESE PUBLISHING IN DILEMMA, 1980-1985\*

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Five years ago, I wrote an article entitled "Chinese Publishing in Transition, 1972-1979". At that time I observed that the word "transition" was appropriate to describe the period covering the later years of Mao Ze-dong and the Gang of Four and the first few years after the fall of the Gang. Now, looking back to the period from 1980 to 1985, it seems that "dilemma" is an appropriate word to describe the situation.

If we agree that publications are cultural products which reflect the political, social and economic development of the time, China has enjoyed a high degree of political stability under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. Social and economic reforms during this period have enabled people to have more freedom than at any other time in the history of the People's Republic of China. More important still is the gradual abolition of the old economic system to ensure material incentives and thus encourage people to lift their living standard.

Under these circumstances, people are happier, richer and, moreover, have the desire to enrich their knowledge to cope with the new situation. Publishing has therefore been flourishing to meet people's demands. In 1980, about 21,000 titles of books were published. Five years later, the figures had doubled which was equivalent to the years 1958 and 1959, the golden era of Chinese publishing. However, the climate was entirely different. In 1958-59, although that was the period of "Hundred Schools Contend", it was limited to ideological interpretation of socialism and socialist culture under the banners of Marxism, Leninism and Chairman Mao's thoughts. In the last few years, under the slogan of "Four Modernizations", China has abandoned her hostile attitude towards capitalism and the Western world. Therefore, the scope of publishing has widened to include translations of books on any subject from practically any country regardless of ideological differences from the socialist point of view. Some even went further and queried the validity of Marxism and the economic theory as it appeared in Das Kapital.

During this period, there was an episode which was directly caused by publishing. It became a political storm but finally turned into a "storm in a tea-cup". The episode was called "spiritual pollution" which will be discussed in some detail later.

In order to depict these six years of Chinese publishing dilemma, it would be clearer if all the views are present. First of all, it is the official view which directly affects the trend of the publishing.

China regards the entire period of "Cultural Revolution" as "ten years of disasters" which should never be repeated. The Chinese leaders believed that "Four Modernizations" (Industry, Agriculture, Science and Technology, and National Defence) were perhaps the best prescription to cure China of its backwardness. Before they could pursue this aim, the intellectuals had to be mobilized. However, during the "ten years of disasters" intellectuals suffered most, especially the political opponents of Mao and the Gang. After all the disgraced political figures were reinstated, the government believed that unless the intellectuals were rewarded accordingly, there was no way to pursue the "Four Modernizations" without their support.

The intellectuals' requirements were very simple: better working and living conditions and freedom of expression.

After all academic and intellectual workers were given status equivalent in ranking to the West and substantial wage rises were granted, they were encouraged to do research and publish the results. Publishing is motivated by two goals: (i) the desire to seek promotion, and (ii) the desire for extra money from authors' remuneration so that their income would not fall behind that of the workers and peasants.

Chinese intellectuals, however, had been moulded into the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist frame since 1949 and had no experience in knowing the limits. Once the freedom was "official", they were so relaxed they began to write in all directions. This was mainly reflected in the political and literary writings. Among those authors and translators, some genuinely believed in what they wrote or translated, but some wrote only for the sake of money. However, no one could publish without the backing of the publishers. In line with the Government policy, the number of publishing houses increased rapidly. In 1979, there were only 117 publishers throughout the nation of which 59 were under Central Government control. In 1983, the number increased to 292 of which 132 belonged to the Central Government. Two main factors contributed to this big jump. One was that under the new policy, all publishers were responsible for their gains and losses, and publishing became a very profitable enterprise. Most professional organizations, research institutions and universities set up their own publishing houses to finance their activities. Another reason was that many authors could not find a publisher and the easiest way was to urge their organizations to publish.

Although most well-established publishers had a fine tradition of publishing good books, the aim of some new publishers was nothing except profit. Because of the close link between authors and publishers, many strange phenomena appeared which had not occurred since the founding of the People's Republic.

The first was the excessive income of some popular literary writers. It was not uncommon that a piece of work would appear in different magazines or books up to ten times within two years, first in one magazine or newspaper, and then re-published by other similar types of magazines in various provinces. Under the Chinese rule, each has to pay the authors' remuneration accordingly. Thus, some popular writer can easily obtain "Ten thousand dollar family" status by writing some articles or novels. Publishers too, could easily get handsome profits by publishing some best-sellers. The People's Literature Publishing house, for example, recorded more than five million yen profit in a year.

The authors were, however, not without frustration. For those renowned ones, the publishers had to pay exceedingly high fees to solicit an article, a short novel or a book due to high competition among publishing houses. The little-known ones, however, could not find a place to publish. Thus, some back-door arrangements involved corruption and malpractice. While kick-backs and bribery to the editors and publishers were not new, some even had to put the name of the editor as joint author or translator so that the editor or his designate could illegitimately share the remuneration, some up to 60%. There were also reported incidents exemplifying further malpractice: one high school teacher of mathematics in Ho-fei translated and edited three books on mathematics and obtained altogether over 5,000

yen in remuneration. Perhaps due to the jealousy of his colleagues, the case was reported to the local education authority. The author was first charged with violating economic laws and the return of 3,000 RMB to the authority was demanded. After that, the case was referred to the Department of Taxation which charged him with an "illegal business operation" and levied 1,673 RMB tax with a further penalty of 836 RMB. When all the taxes and fines were added together, the translator's income turned into a deficit. The incident was published by a staff member in the Taxation Department who believed that injustice was done to this poor high school teacher.

Some institutions also charged their staff members who published. Professor Fei Xiao-tong, a Deputy Chairman of the People's Consultative Committee, mentioned that after being charged by all the authorities, an author could only get about 200 RMB from a fee of several thousand RMB. One university even instructed all the staff members that from all the remuneration an author received, 40% was to go to the author's own department and 60% to the university.

Author's remuneration and royalties have long been regarded as the legitimate income of Chinese intellectuals; the heavy levies imposed in recent years would either stop people from publishing or encourage them to publish more to generate regular income. It would affect the quality of the publications.

Publishers had another type of dilemma. In the new economic system, most publishers were required to be responsible for balancing their budgets. Thus, apart from some publishing houses directly under central government control, some could get grants for publishing non-profitable titles, others were either to balance their profitable and non-profitable titles or even publish only popular titles. Thus, even a reputable literary guild had to publish cheap sexy stories in order to support a serious monthly literary magazine which suffered financial loss. Some smaller regional publishers were even commercialised to the extent that only profit-making books would be published.

As a result of this tendency, Chinese publishing turned into unprecedented chaos. Some good, conscientious authors condemned the ill-wind, but others were taking advantage of the situation to make more money. Some government-owned publishers ignored the money-making philosophy, but many of their businesses were being lost to regional publishers who could pay more to the authors. As the situation turned more serious, government intervention became inevitable. In January 1983, the Publication Bureau of the Ministry of Propaganda held a Publishers' Conference. In June of the same year, the State Department organized a conference of a similar nature. During these conferences, the government re-stressed the role of publishing in the era of "Four Modernizations". The tendency of "looking for money" was condemned and publishing was urged to focus on spiritual purity to attain the goal of socialist civilization. The conferences further emphasized that, despite all the political, social and economic reforms, the government's policy to carry out a correct Marxist-Leninist-Maoist line had not changed.

Subsequently, the Ministry of Propaganda again organized another conference for publishers and distributors with the aim of rectifying the situation. Although resolutions were passed and government and party policy was made clear to the publishers and distributors, after the debate on "spiritual pollution" in mid-1984, there was little improvement evidenced in the later

publications.

In fact, as long as the government adopted an "open door" policy and publishing was treated as a commercial operation, the quality of publications was bound to be affected. Thus, book lovers wrote to the local and central government authorities, to newspapers and magazines to complain that they could not buy what they wanted and bookshops were full of Kungfu stories, pseudo science fiction, ghost stories and cheap comics. Readers tended to blame bookshops for not delivering the better quality publications to customers. They were, however, not aware of the dilemma faced by the booksellers.

Chinese publishing houses belong to different central and regional authorities but the distribution of books is handled by the New China Bookshop (Xinhua Shudian) which is controlled by the Ministry of Culture. Newspapers and magazines are available normally through subscriptions handled by the Post Office. Xinhua Shudian is a huge organization which covers the country with a network running over 6,000 bookshops and stalls. When a book is typeset and is ready for printing, the publisher sends out advance notice to the headquarters of Xinhua Shudian which then distributes it to all its outlets. Each title is accompanied by a description of up to 200 words to aid selection. When all outlets have decided how many copies they want according to their local selling experience, headquarters then places a block order and the publisher instructs the printer to make copies according to the actual orders. Neither publisher nor Xinhua Shudian would be expected to carry any extra stock. After the goods have been delivered, Xinhua Shudian immediately pays the full amount and goods sold by the publisher are not returnable.

Thus, the manager of each Xinhua Shudian is very careful at the ordering stage so as to avoid the piling up of stock which in turn is a financial loss. More difficult still is the space problem in keeping extra stock. Let us use the biggest Xinhua Shudian in Beijing as an example. It has 3,600 square metres of floor space to cater for over 60,000 customers each day. However, it has a warehouse of only 200 square metres and therefore it only orders the number of books which it believes can be sold within three months. It is also doubtful whether staff really have the experience in book selection. According to a survey, of all 80,000 employees, only 2% have received university education and 70% are below junior high school standard.

Because of the inadequacy of bibliographical description by the publishers, booksellers are easily trapped too. For example, a book on pure mathematics, described by the publisher as most suitable for high school students, attracted a total order of 1.7 million copies. After the books were received and paid for, it was found that they could not be understood even by the teachers. Thus, the only types of publications which they have confidence in ordering more copies of are popular fiction, translated detective stories, Kungfu novels, and revision books for examinations.

The ordering pattern by Xinhua Shudian also affects publishing trends. Some big publishers could afford to publish high quality books even at a loss but sometimes they found it impossible to contract a printer to print them. All state-owned printers are also under the control of the Ministry of Culture but there is no clear-cut line of management control. The printer charges the publisher for type-setting and printing per page. Thus, the printer can get a handsome profit for printing a popular book of over a

million copies but is very reluctant to print a scientific publication full of graphs, figures and strange symbols in a small print-run of 2,000 or less copies, as there is no profit for the printer; he may suffer a loss because of the difficulty and time-consuming process of type-setting.

The number of printers and their equipment is also a contributing factor to the slowness of printing. At least two-thirds of the machines are 20-60 years old and there is no re-investment from the printing profit into updating equipment. According to one source, the demand for printing is approximately 6.8 billion Chinese characters per year but the total capacity is only 5.8 billion. Thus, the waiting time for an ordinary book is about a year, but according to Scientific Publishing House (Kexue Chubanshe) the time-span for printing a scientific book is between 417-1530 days. Bearing in mind that there is an urgency in scientific publications, there is no doubt that much information contained in those books is outdated by the time they are published.

In order to reduce the publishing, distributing and printing problems, there have been new developments in recent years. Many books of scholarly value addressed to universal readership have been published in many languages in cooperation with overseas publishers either as a joint venture or by selling the copyright. Some books requiring urgency, precision and quality are printed in Hong Kong. To tackle the problem of distribution, many publishers accept mail orders or set up a showroom for retailing. The Shanghai Publication Distribution Company established 58 outlets in over 20 provinces to promote Shanghai publications. More recently, over one hundred publishers invested in setting up a distributing company in Guangzhou selling not only their publications but also cassettes, records and stationery. This was an attempt to break the monopoly long enjoyed by Xinhua Shudian.

However, librarians are less fortunate. They have long been complaining that Xinhua Shudian cannot supply the titles and number of copies of books they order, resulting in complaints from library users. Last year, the staff from the public library system throughout the country met and decided to set up their own system to acquire directly from publishers at discount prices. At an earlier stage, most publishers responded enthusiastically. However, after Xinhua Shudian knew about it, they gave the publishers pressure to boycott their publications. Later in the year, many publishers withdrew from the scheme. Although both the public library system and Xinhua Shudian belong to the Ministry of Culture, the deadlock has apparently not yet been resolved.

Perhaps this paper has covered enough of the pessimistic side of Chinese publishing in recent years. However, most of the problems were not generated during this period and well publicized criticism such as that which has appeared in the newspapers and magazines just indicates that Chinese intellectuals are now enjoying a degree of freedom of expression which they have not experienced in the past. Those criticisms will, no doubt, be a force for improvement. In recent years, ambitious publishing projects are being undertaken. A multi-volume collection of representative literary works from 1919-82 is in the process of publication; a collection of Chinese painting throughout the centuries in 60 volumes is also being published; the Chinese Tripitika in 200 volumes will be completed in a few years' time, and the Encyclopaedia of China is well underway.

The most ambitious project is the microfilming of all Chinese rare books and

backsets of important newspapers and periodicals. An organization called the China National Microfilming Centre for Library Resources has been founded and the project is going well. Last year alone, some 20 million RMB was invested in the Centre. It is a non-profit making concern with the aim of preserving cultural treasures.

As China is entering a new era, it will take some time to settle down. Publishing reflects part of the total situation in the process of the "Four Modernizations". When government, authors, publishers, printers and booksellers gain more experience, they will no doubt find a clearer direction to enable readers to have more and better publications.

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The Australian National University Library

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