

BUYING BOOKS IN BEIJING

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Early May in Beijing was warm and cloudless. The drought that had affected much of north China still held its grip, and the air was often hazy with fine dust drifting in from the dry countryside. From a visitor's point of view though the weather could not have been better.

I had gone to Beijing primarily to attend the annual meeting of the Pacific Rim Digital Library Alliance, but I also took the opportunity to visit some of the city's bookshops and make contact with our Library's established suppliers as well as talk with prospective new suppliers. All these visits had to be fitted into two and a half days. My ambitious plan to visit at least two organisations each day was quickly dashed, not only because of the size of the city and the congested traffic along its 12-lane trunk roads, but also because of the unshakeable business (or social) ethic of treating visitors to elaborate lunches. In all, I managed to visit the offices of China International Book Trading Corporation and China National Knowledge Infrastructure, as well as eight bookshops. I also visited the National Library of China with whom our Library has had a long exchange relationship.

In this short piece I will restrict myself to impressions and statistics gathered from my visit to bookshops and my experiment with on-site acquisition. "Experiment" is too grandiose a term for the small test I carried out. I had left Canberra with a small shopping list of required books that I hoped to purchase direct from local bookshops rather than through the services of our usual vendors. The shopping list of monographs was compiled hastily and contained modestly-priced single-volume titles.

As it happened, the many lunches and discussions with vendors and National Library of China staff, took up more time than anticipated which meant that my book-buying expeditions had to be squeezed into the late afternoon and early evening hours when traffic was at its peak. Of the eight bookshops visited, I made purchases at four of them:

- Wangfujing Bookshop (purchased 9 volumes)
- Beijing Tushu Daxia (13 volumes)
- Beijing Guolinfeng Bookshop (18 volumes)
- Peking University Press Bookshop (2 volumes)

The first two bookshops are large, multi-storeyed, commercial enterprises situated in the fashionable shopping districts of town, and with a book-stock catering to the general population. The latter pair are relatively smaller establishments, favoured by students and academics, and situated on a street devoted exclusively to selling books, journals and, increasingly, electronic formats. This "book district", located on the same side of the city as three of

Beijing's most prestigious universities, was recommended to me by a former ANU post-graduate who now works in Beijing.

I was able to find only 19 of the 52 titles on my shopping list - a 37% success rate - which surprised me. Locating specific books was difficult in all bookshops, but more so in the smaller ones where books were shelved two deep and piled high on heavily laden shelves. The aisles between the shelves were not only narrow but were crowded with prospective buyers, standing, sitting or reclining, singly or in groups, who seemed to all intents and purposes to have settled down for the day. Although the books were sorted into blocks by subject there was not the handy "alphabetic, by author" shelf-arrangement common with European-language books. Ultimately, I depended on the shop assistants' amazing knowledge of "local geography" to pull out the required volumes from some dark recess of the room.

However, what was lacking in shelf-order was compensated for in good client service and new technology. There were computerised catalogues in three of the four bookshops staffed by assistants whose job was to check the availability of titles for customers. The hapless young assistant I approached looked aghast at my list of 59 titles - "what, all of them!?" - but she quickly regained her composure and "service ethos" and proceeded with the task. I am not sure that the queue forming behind me shared her patience.

As expected, in terms of book prices only, there were substantial savings to be made from buying on-site. Books purchased from China have an "export" (chukou) price and a "local" (guonei) price. The "export" price is often over twice the "local" price. The cost difference between the "export" price and the "local" price for the 19 books purchased from my list was Renminbi 486.23. That is to say, I paid RMB 376 on-site for books that would have cost RMB 862 had they been purchased from Australia (or, 44% of the cost of vendor-supplied books).

It is worth adding that although the "dual pricing" policy still exists in China, there is growing competition between book-sellers. Gone are the days of a virtual monopoly on book exports by large state-sponsored book-sellers. Opportunity is surfacing for some negotiations on a fairer price. In this context, I wonder if WTO membership will impact further on China's dual pricing policy. Whatever the answer to this, the value of face-to-face discussions with book-sellers to obtain a better pricing structure is undeniable.

Of course, the time involved in on-site purchasing has to be considered. It took me approximately seven hours to make the 44 purchases and post them off. However, travel time need not be excessive depending on your location, and cheap taxi fares are a real bonus.

The 59 titles on my list were taken from eight vendor catalogues, four PRC vendors and four Hong Kong vendors. Three of the PRC vendors quoted in Renminbi while one quoted in US dollars. All Hong Kong vendors quoted in HK dollars. On the whole, the US\$ quotations represented a slightly higher "price hike" than Renminbi quotations, that is, US\$ quotations were 2.6 times the local purchase price as against 2.1 for Renminbi quotations. The

difference between US\$ quotes and Renminbi quotes would seem to be a reflection of uncertain exchange rates. However, this percentage difference can be significant if purchasing in high enough numbers. The table following shows these statistics more succinctly.

Price Differences for Books Purchased On-site

VENDOR CATALOGUES	No. or volumes	CATALOGUE PRICE			PURCHASE PRICE RMB
		RMB	US\$	HK\$	
PRC Vendor 1 (RMB quotes)	8	264.00			112.00
PRC Vendor 2	2	72.00			38.00
PRC Vendor 3	2	91.00			45.50
Sub-Total (RMB quotes)		427.00			195.50
PRC Vendor 4 (US\$ quotes)	3		30.60 (RMB253.28)		94.00
HK Vendor 1 (HK\$ quotes)	1			29.00	18.00
HK Vendor 2 (HK\$ quotes)	1			90.00	36.00
HK Vendor 3 (HK\$ quotes)	1			31.00	19.00
HK Vendor 4 (HK\$ quotes)	1			21.00	13.00
Sub-Total (HK\$ quotes)				171.00 (RMB181.45)	86.00
TOTALS (IN RENMINBI)		861.73			375.50

Besides the 19 pre-selected items I also purchased 25 other titles (including two VCD discs from a Wangfujing store specialising in audio/visual equipment and materials). Many of the 25 books were reference works that I was sure were not already held at the Library. There were other interesting titles that could have been purchased but the uncertainty of picking up duplicates, especially with the amount of unacknowledged reprinting that is taking place in China, made choosing a frustrating task. From past experience we found duplication to be problem when entrusting ANU scholars located in Beijing to make book purchases on the Library's behalf. A mini-catalogue of the Library's Chinese holdings downloaded onto a laptop or some other portable device would have been such a useful tool!

Keeping track of expenditure was not a problem. Authenticated receipts or "fapiao" (dockets are not deemed sufficient as proof of purchase in China) were readily available everywhere and the larger bookshops had sophisticated computer systems which were able to give detailed itemised receipts containing book titles, number of volumes and prices. Similarly, it was easy to keep a record of postage costs through the same system of authenticated receipts. In two of the four bookshops there were post offices either within or near the building, and one of the small bookshops handled its own posting. Where there were no postal facilities it was simple enough to use the postal services at the hotels.

In summary, my principal impressions gained from this "experiment" with on-site acquisitions are:

- that it is more difficult than expected to shop for known items
- that success in finding known items depends very much on being familiar with individual bookshops and the idiosyncrasies of their stock
- that the same familiarity will reduce the time needed to make purchases of selected titles
- that the serendipity of finding worthwhile material through browsing the shelves is a valuable aspect of on-site purchasing
- that the lack of access to the home library's catalogue is an obstacle to making decisions on what to purchase
- that a certain quantity or dollar-value of books needs to be purchased in order to gain the most of the hugely lower "local" prices

While these observations may not be new to anyone familiar with Chinese library acquisitions, it is nonetheless satisfying to be able to gather first hand experience of it and substantiate it with some statistics, albeit gathered from a very small, unvaried, sample base and executed in limited time. There is indeed scope for more work to be done on exploring the many issues of on-site purchasing of library materials from China and assessing it as a method of acquisition.