U.S. ACQUISITION OF CHINESE-LANGUAGE MATERIALS*

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ABSTRACT

The author scouted out the distribution of Chinese-language materials in the United States, with the purpose of marketing the books of the publisher she represents. One big help was the Chinese Yellow Pages business directory in every large such community. Chinese Chambers of Commerce furthered her telephone contacts nationally in the bookstores and video stores. The author urges greater attention to marketing: cataloguing, display, and salesmanship. She also urges the distribution of more books in English by Chinese-Americans, apropos of maintaining heritage in second-generation children.


**U.S. representative, Chin Show Cultural Enterprise
Over the past several weeks, I have been investigating the status of Chinese-language materials distribution in the United States. I am happy to be able to provide you with the results of my search, which reveals a market scattered like a plate of loose sand, one might almost say, but served by a surprisingly large number of ambitious small businesses.

First of all, I should let you know why I did this research. I am the U.S. representative for Chin Show Cultural Enterprise, a Taipei publisher of geographic/scenic, art ("coffee table"), children's, and reference books. Briefly, we have two parts to our business. The first is the licensed translation and production of Chinese editions of foreign books. We have cooperated with such publishers as the National Geographic Society, Rizzoli in Italy, and Larousse in France. The second is the production of our own high-quality, rather upscale books and magazines. Chin Show has been considering establishing a book-distribution business in the United States, and I wanted to investigate the existing system thoroughly to see how we might fit in. We intend to start by marketing our own products. When Amy Seetoo, President, Chinese American Librarians Association, suggested I share my results with the CALA membership, I was delighted to accept the invitation.

I think I combined a "Western" and "Chinese" way of doing this search. I was overwhelmed by the idea of tracing Chinese bookstores and video stores in the US which is not an easy task. Indeed, in most of the standard indexes to the book trade, you will not find Chinese bookstores and distributors. One reason is that so few sources attempt to serve more than their local communities, and those that do seem to rely on word of mouth rather than on advertising. My first breakthrough was to learn that almost every area with a large Chinese population had a Chinese Yellow Pages business directory. Through the good auspices of the regional offices of the Coordination Council for North American Affairs and by telephoning systematically the Chinese Chambers of Commerce in cities with large Chinese populations, I obtained directory listings all over the country. Then I got on the telephone and made contacts, and this led to a richer vein of results. I called the bookstores and video stores themselves, and I called
librarians around the country. In particular, I would like to thank Suzanne Lo and the CALA chapter of California, as well as Elizabeth Hsu, who kindly shared their own lists with me. I also asked many librarians about bookstores and video stores in their areas, in order to determine which stores were larger, longer established, or more diverse in their offerings. The list I have compiled is recent. I have called every source listed on it except those for which there were no phone numbers. The list is divided somewhat impressionistically into nationwide and local sources by the intent of the business. I will appreciate any additions any of you may have to this list and hope that we can keep it current.

There are about fifteen nationwide sources for Chinese books and magazines. Some of these sources offer the sale of videocassettes. These range from full-scale bookstores to publishing houses to mail-order businesses which don't even offer a telephone number. Through these sources, provided that you know what you want, you can obtain all sorts of materials, from the most abstruse scholarly journal from the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.) to popular novels from Singapore. A few distributors offer cataloguing, an essential service to many librarians.

Also, there are sixty or seventy local Chinese bookstores and an inestimable number of local video stores. Video stores especially seem to sprout up like mushrooms after spring rain, and they fold just as quickly. I used the 1990 editions of the Chinese Yellow Pages and called almost each store in each city; I found when I did that, on average, fifty percent of the stores listed had closed down.

Bookstores are more stable, but they tend to be very small, limited in their offerings, and not geared to marketing, neither in terms of the store displays nor of advertising. Some bookstores, especially some which specialize in P.R.C. and Hong Kong books, are not even listed in the Chinese Yellow Pages. The lack of attention to marketing extends to the interiors of the stores. Personally, I do not find it especially enjoyable to browse in most U.S. Chinese bookstores. The displays are generally poor, so it can be hard to find what you want; often, even the lighting is poor. And almost every
store I have been in could have used a dusting. This contrasts markedly with some other foreign-language bookstores, such as French bookstores in New York and Washington and, especially, the Kinokuniya Japanese-language bookstores. At the same time, most Chinese-bookstore proprietors are helpful and express a willingness to special order any books their clients desire.

Few librarians could help me assess local bookstores, because few libraries order from stores and distributors in the U.S. (Also, some librarians told me that, rather than buy books personally, they tend to read the books which come into their own libraries.) Almost none of the major university East Asian libraries order locally. They cited lower cost and library-quality binding as major concerns which their direct suppliers in the Far East were able to address. However, public libraries seem to use these sources more, both for standing orders and for using their yearly budgets. Several distributors offer selection services for public libraries.

One problem cited by librarians with using local sources was the quality of catalogues offered. Many local sources are willing to ship out of state but have no catalogue. Among the nationwide sources, only a couple offer fully-annotated catalogues. Some of the largest suppliers offer catalogues with hundreds of titles, but fail to give the most basic information about the books, such as author, publisher, and publication year. Librarians expressed a desire to see more descriptive catalogues. To really sell their products, U.S. sources of Chinese books should be attempting to let their markets know about new and special items.

I was also surprised that there are very few stores which have made a systematic attempt to sell Asian-American history books and literature; I mean books in English by Chinese-Americans and/or other Asian-Americans. The only one that comes to mind is Eastwind Books in San Francisco. Surely second-generation Chinese-Americans could benefit from increased access to these books, to understand their heritage and find common ground with others. It would be a way as well that first-generation parents and their second-generation children could share a trip to the
bookstore. One store in Cupertino, CA, Apple Tree Bookhouse, now stocks English and Chinese children's books, and I think this could be extended to young-adult and adult books.

In sum, Chinese-language sources in the U.S. will serve you if you know what you want and if you find and go to them. I believe that, with a few exceptions, the distributors need better catalogues and the bookstores need better displays. Better marketing and more tailoring of services to the specific needs of libraries and individuals are aspects which I feel could increase the business of sources of Chinese-language materials in the United States and benefit the Chinese-speaking community.