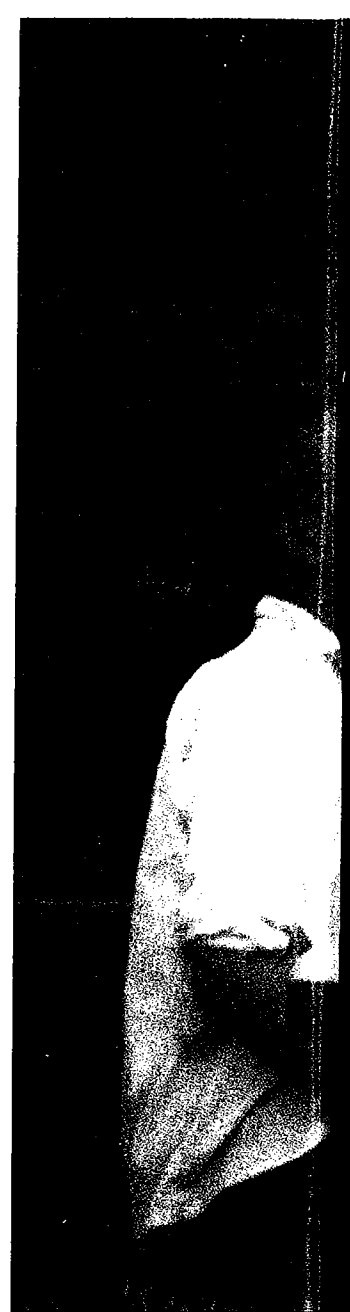


AN AMERICAN BOOKMAN IN BEIJING

A New Chapter In a Chinese
Bookmarket Challenged by
Political Changes



MY FIRST ENCOUNTER with a book in China was with the one that was wedged under my refrigerator. The book was a bent and dusty copy of *The Beijing Turmoil: The Real Truth About the Counter Revolutionary Rebellion*. Published in a magazine format by the People's Liberation Army Press, it presented the government version of the 1989 suppression of the democracy movement. It was full of bloody photos whose captions attempted to twist the meaning of the events that were so clearly portrayed. Invested with stabilizing properties by its creators, the book required the vision of my

predecessor to find its rightful place. Clumsy as a propaganda, *The Beijing Turmoil* brought steadiness and grace to my groaning and shaky refrigerator.

The apartment was in Beijing, on the dry, sprawling campus of a small technical university where I had come to teach oral English. The job paid ¥600 a month (about \$150 U.S.) and included the apartment, a Flying Pigeon bicycle, and a 40-pound Flying Fish typewriter. I had moved to Beijing as part of a sabbatical, a self-administered antidote to six years in sales manage-

ment at Simon & Schuster in New York City. I traded in a 70-hour work week, a corner office over Central Park, a jarring daily commute down the West Side Highway, and a life consumed with forecasts and budgets. In return, I received a two-room cold water flat, 11 hours of assigned classes a week, and—best of all—time. Through this gift of time, I was able to renew my relationship with the subject of a personal passion and the basis for my professional life—the book.

Books have been central to my life since the days when an aunt who was an editor at Lippincott brought her juvie samples on visits to our suburban home. Since then, as a reader, bookseller, publisher's rep, and sales director, I've seen books from many vantage points. By August of 1990, when I left New York for China, I found myself

written and
photographed
by Tom Hallock



In Turpan, Xinjing Province, Muslim booksellers spread their holy books on tables next to the produce offered by nearby merchants.

viewing them almost exclusively in commercial terms. I talked about "product," "packaging," and "the market." I would find myself ranting around the office at seven o'clock in the evening, confronting colleagues with the pointed question: "Are you making your numbers this month?" By this, I meant to inquire whether certain literary properties had been discussed with booksellers and a plan made for their timely introduction to the reading public.

I became preoccupied with in-house politics, defending myself against outraged publishers who felt "with only thirty-five thousand out there the book will get lost." In China, all this was to fall away, and I was to become reacquainted with the essential book, the one my aunt first introduced me to—an object of wonder and value, possessed of great power.

The first lesson I was to learn about the book in China was taught by the one under my refrigerator. The book, like all else in China, is entwined with the political. The blatant persecution of writers in the anti-rightist campaign of the late '50s and the cultural revolution of the '60s and '70s had given way to a thaw in the '80s. The vocabulary of artistic expression had changed, so that it was no longer necessary to justify a book's publication with its "service to socialism." Books that were merely entertaining, and not "ideologically harmful," could be published. In the aftermath of Tiananmen Square, however, a chill breeze blew through Beijing and the poet who had been minister of culture was among the first to be sacked. Such changes had a strong effect in a country where the majority of bookstores, pub-

lishing houses, printers, and the media are state owned. To be a bookseller in China is, therefore, to be engaged in a political act.

Estimates vary on the number of bookstores in China, but, by 1988, there were probably about 26,000. The number had almost doubled in 10 years. In a nation of 1.1 billion people, this constitutes a bookstore density of 1:42,000 people, as compared to about 1:20,000 in the U.S.

There are about 125,000 booksellers in China, most of them working in government-owned stores. As recently as 1983, there were only 200 private bookstores in China. Although the number is undoubtedly much higher today, the second lesson about independent bookselling in China remains clear: It is a visible, potentially dangerous occupation. To protect those engaged in

this visible and political activity, I will change some details as I describe a "typical" rural and urban bookstore.

The bookstore in Sichuan was unlike any other I'd seen in China. No dusty, ill-kempt state store with bored clerks, it had the look of a fine independent, reminding me of A Clean Well-Lighted Place for Books. Here was a store that placed both book and reader in an honored position. The store was small but spacious, with deep reddish-brown bookshelves overflowing with stock, and massive tables in the center of the floor. The tables were not used for display of bestsellers or remainders, but to provide space for readers who are the store's acknowledged reason for being. There was classical music, calligraphy, and a backroom stuffed with overstock. The manager and I were delighted when we were able to cross language boundaries to identify a new shipment of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The store had the ambience of a Paperback Booksmith in the '60s and I had to wait for a bookseller to finish his Tai Chi before I could pay for my books. I fell in love with the store immediately. The owner of the store was in his fifties, and had operated the store for seven or eight years. It was his life's passion and the embodiment of his hope for China. He had been branded a rightist during the Cultural Revolution and was sent to prison. Disgraced, separated from family and friends, he watched as his country descended into *luan* (chaos), a word that carries great dread in a country where social disorder has often presaged widespread famine and death. He saw the universities closed and intellectuals hounded into suicide, madness, and lives of despair. He saw the hopes of a generation dashed.

As an act of patriotism and an expression of his hope for his country, he opened a bookstore when he was finally released from prison. The store's mission was to help revitalize China's culture, to provide the Chinese with the intellectual and spiritual resources to counter future mass political campaigns. He wanted to be sure that such a thing would never again occur in his country. Imagine making a bookstore the repository for such a dream, believing that books have the power to protect a society against its tyrants.

In such a store, even routine activities could have a political dimension in the aftermath of Tiananmen Square. The selection of stock, for example, involved certain risks: A preponderance of foreign authors, or the wrong Chinese ones could attract the attention of the ubiquitous Public Security. Scheduling author appearances or other store events—risky to hold under any circumstances—required awareness of politically sensitive dates when demonstrations had occurred in the past. Booksellers marketed for survival here, and the best strategy inverted the equation we use in the West: The best marketing was that which drew the least attention. Advertising, maintaining a customer list, and event marketing

were all activities that could jeopardize a store and its customers. One's ability to survive as a bookseller—and a person—in China rode on this ability to calculate risk. In such an environment, political correctness takes on a distinctly ominous ring.

I became intoxicated with the store and its mission. I was filled with grandiose impulses to "help." Clearly my purpose in coming to China was being revealed to me: I was to meet such people, to help expand their stores and open new ones, to share my experience, knowledge, and contacts. I would bring them inventory control, teach them about dollar per square foot, faceouts, and front-of-store merchandising. I would link them with wholesalers, bringing them the literature of the West, develop a mail-order



TOEFL and GRE announcements in Beijing

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business, and reach into the foreign community for customers.

They were delighted with my American optimism and enthusiasm. Many meetings were held over *mala doufu* (spicy tofu) and *jiaozi* (steamed dumplings) while we discussed our plans. When even store book-marks were felt to be too risky, however, I began to realize how little I really understood and how little help I really had to offer. I was left with an uncomfortable awareness of my own missionary impulse, a piece of cultural baggage Americans seem to bring to most enterprises in China. No longer the great Western benefactor, I felt China grateful for my friend's courageous reminder of the importance of our shared profession.

The politics of bookselling in the countryside, where over 70 percent of China's population lives, can be a little different. In the southwest of China, in the village of Menghan near the border with Myanmar, I found a wonderful bookstore.

To get there, I took a ferry down the Mekong River from Jinghong and walked up the hill past the Buddhist temple to the center of town. I paused at the Elephant Pool

Restaurant for a beer and snack of fried moss. I watched the pigs snuffling and snorting at the feet of the young yellow-robed monks smoking cigarettes and shooting pool at the dusty roadside tables. The store itself was a little further on and had once been the only permanent building in town.

From the outside, the store appeared blocky and unremarkable. Inside, I discovered that it carried books in three languages: Chinese, English, and Dai, a local dialect. The store's 12 bookcases were full of dictionaries, children's books, novels from Hong Kong and Taiwan, classic Chinese literature, English lesson books, and calendars. The bookseller had read, he said, almost all of them. He had been sent here 30 years ago from the provincial capital in Kunming by the local communist party, which felt the town needed a bookstore. The 200-mile journey he took was not great by Western standards, but even today it is a two-and-a-half-day bus ride—a world and a dialect away from his home.

The man was proud. He had done his duty as a communist and had brought this bookstore and all the learning it represented to this small town on the Mekong. He understood book-selling as a legitimate concern of the party and, above all, as a service to the community.

A pervasive feature of Chinese life, revealed in these bookseller portraits, was the politicization of routine activities. Another feature, evident on every street corner and in every open market in the fall of 1990, was the free-wheeling (if not free market) economy. Books were sold in myriad ways.

In Xining and Turpan in Western China, Muslim booksellers spread their holy books on tables next to the grapes and breads offered by their neighboring merchants. In tourist areas, such as Guilin, stores sprouted up with names like Napoleon's Bar and Grill and The Hard Rock Cafe, where a tourist could rent bikes and buy Baedeker's. Beijing *ge ti hu* (individual entrepreneurs) had a brisk seasonal business in calendars and cards for Christmas and the New Year's celebrations of two different cultures.

Many of these vendors operated at the economic and political edge—tolerated one moment, subject to a political campaign the next. The anti-pornography campaign was in full swing during this period, and it was often the *ge ti hu* who would be the first to have their calendars and magazines confiscated.

In the hall of mirrors that is Chinese politics, an apparently repressive campaign was rumored to be the work of reformers who wanted to deflect official scrutiny from Tiananmen Square dissidents. Like American magazine distributors in the '60s, these economic pioneers are often on the front line of free expression issues. And like the American chains in the '70s, this segment of the bookselling community may play an important role in increasing the availability of the book.

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Beijingers in New York. Written by a Chinese man who lived in America, the book is a sensational account of a Beijinger who came to New York to pursue the American dream. The man did, in fact, become the wealthy owner of a garment factory, but along the way he abandoned his wife, lost his daughter to drugs, stood by helplessly as she was murdered by her dealer-boyfriend, and lost his savings gambling. The author claimed he wanted Chinese to have a more realistic picture of life in the United States. The Chinese Communist Party was naturally delighted with this propaganda windfall and exploited it with a blitz that would have made any big house marketing department proud. It was quickly serialized in the largest circulation daily newspaper, broadcast on the radio, reviewed everywhere, and promptly sold out.

The book was perfect fodder for the campaign against America's bourgeois values. It supported the government's contention that while it was possible to make a few bucks in the West, the "spiritual pollution" would, in the end, destroy you. Dulled by having had this "real truth" pounded into them through decades of government propaganda, the Chinese were stunned by the lurid details of life in America provided by an apparently authentic successful Chinese American. They bought the book in droves, and a bestseller was made.

Backlist bestsellers had a different dynamic—and often a different language. If you followed the crowds, you would usually wind up in the English-language section, standing among the Penguin Classics, Oxford Chinese-English dictionaries, the pirated books of all publishers, and what is likely China's all time backlist bestseller—the TOEFL book. The TOEFL books, humble spined-out denizens of our reference sections, in China merit table space. Pirated Arco and Cliffs books stand in proud stacks next to dated books from Hong Kong, each retailing for about a dollar.

Coming to America is the deepest dream of many young Chinese and taking the TOEFL is a major rite of passage in the process. The process requires energy and skill: obtaining registration fees, gaining the permission of one's leader and work unit, enrolling in a test prep course, and months of "feeding the ducks," an intensive style of cramming that recalls the way in which Beijing ducks are fattened for market.

It is humbling to realize that it is your country that has inspired these labors. It is humbling to realize that your country has been given a name that embodies these hopes: *Meiguo*, Beautiful Country. So these dull, bulky test prep books, formerly a routine item on a forecast at Simon and Schuster, warranting only a one-minute sales conference presentation, now take on a new vitality. I am in awe of their ability to transform a life and transport a person to a new land, a beautiful land, and perhaps a beautiful life. *Meiguo. Mei shu*: beautiful books.

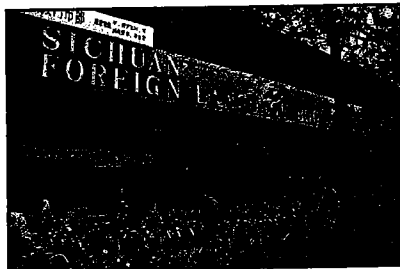
Nowhere was the power of books more evident to me than in my role as a teacher.

To be an American and a teacher in China
American Bookseller

is to become a revered member of the community. The effect is intensified if one is also in midlife, as I was, and might presumably be doing other things. It was assumed that one acted out of high moral purpose and was possessed of great virtue. Invitations, gifts (such as my beloved fighting crickets paperweight), and compliments came in an unceasing and embarrassing flow.

If all this were accepted at face value, it could become quite heady—and misleading. Beneath the traditional politeness and deference to strangers, however, there lies a deeper and truer yearning for contact with the "outside" and for conversation with one who could be trusted.

The fabric of trust between Chinese remains badly frayed. The traditional reserve



Foreign language bookstore on Chendu, Sichuan Province

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about revealing the personal has been sadly reinforced by the betrayals so characteristic of the Cultural Revolution. The sorrows, anger, and despair of this national trauma only intensified the psychological dynamics between individuals and families. In a land where people grew up fearful that even their journals could betray them, a foreign teacher is a natural and long-sought confidant. So it was that Xiao Zhang came to speak to me about her marriage proposal.

By western standards, Xiao Zhang was an accomplished scientist and athlete who showed admirable independence in accepting an offer to enter a Ph.D. program at an American university. To her family and friends, however, there was cause for concern: Already 29, she had no husband. Reeling from their pressure and confused by their warnings that childbirth after 30 would be dangerous, she sought my advice.

Feeling uniquely unqualified (I'm 42 and single) I first waffled, then told her she should choose her own way. To back up my contention that she had more childbearing options, I also loaned her a copy of *Our Bodies Ourselves*. I wanted her to learn the truth about her own body and its childbearing capabilities. She hadn't loved the man and, in the end, found the courage to stay

single and proceed with her plans. Imagine the power of the right book, presented at the right time: something that can cross boundaries of language and culture to shatter an old myth, enabling a young woman to live as she chooses.

I had the privilege to be the bearer of such books to my Chinese friends and students. My own personal library was almost always on loan, making it especially rewarding to own. In addition to my Arco test prep shelf, books on psychology and Chinese history were especially popular. Since an open examination of the historical record was still not possible in China, students often learned of their own country's history through a reading of authors like Spence or Fairbanks. They were astonished to read, for example, that 20 million of their countrymen and women were estimated to have died in the Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s and early 1960s, an event that had happened in their lifetimes. They told me, "We only knew that times were difficult. We were told that the party had saved us." In class, we read excerpts from *The Joy Luck Club*, *Everything I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, and *Bradshaw: On the Family*. Imagine being the bearer of books that introduce people to the history of their own country, to the literature of their compatriots in a foreign land, and a discipline that is almost unknown in their country.

After I had been in Beijing for a year or so, word spread that the American English teacher had been a businessman and had worked for a publishing company. It was assumed that he might also be wealthy and, perhaps, a philanthropist. Opportunities to underwrite a variety of book-related enterprises soon began to appear with regularity.

Chinese are rarely engaged in work they've chosen and true interests may lie elsewhere. The projects, therefore, often arose from unexpected sources. The AV staff person at the university, for example, was really a painter and his office really a studio. He wanted me to fund the first printing of his book on drawing horses the Chinese way. A young aeronautical engineer had started a poetry magazine and needed support for the first printing of 500 copies. Petroleum geologists produced their poems, hydrogeologists their film books, an economist his philosophical musings. Though I was not the philanthropist they hoped for, still I could share their enthusiasm and respect for the power of the written word.

Ten thousand miles from the corner office where I had worked into the night to get my numbers, I encountered the book I had almost forgotten: The book that embodies our experience and our hopes. This book has the capacity to empower individuals to transform their lives and their societies.

One mid-list title can change a life. And a spine-out can alter the course of history. □

Tom Hallock is a former bookseller, rep, and sales director. He is currently living in New York, working for Aperture and writing about his China experiences.