

Dynamics of book publishing : the Malaysian perspective

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The Dynamics of Book Publishing: The Malaysian Perspective

A book may be defined as "a written work of substantial proportions, printed and bound in a unit of one volume or more volumes". It is a portable printed work filling a number of sheets fastened together in a cover. According to UNESCO, a book, to be qualified as one, must have a minimum of 49 pages, it should have a cover be published and made available to the public. The book has been the primary dispenser of human knowledge.

What is book publishing? It is having a book printed and announcing that it is for sale. It consists in issuing copies of a book for sale to the public. Who is a publisher? A publisher is a person whose business is the publishing of books. He is one who produces copies of a book and distributes them to booksellers or to the public. According to UNESCO, a publisher is one who brings out at least four titles a year.

A publisher's job in society is communication and his tool for it is the book. Though a book is produced in the author's head, the publisher provides the means of conveyance to other minds. However, a book is not the only way of communication which can be done also by radio or television, but it is "portable, easily multiplied, convenient for reference and more or less durable".

Publishing may be said to be primarily "the source of preparing the work of an author in the most suitable form and presenting it in the most efficient manner to the widest possible audience".

Book publishing is an entrepreneurial venture. The publisher starts with nothing but his brains, energy and a modest capital. The risks and possible profits of that enterprise are his. When a manuscript comes to him, "it is a sheaf of handwritten or typed sheets or even nowadays in diskette which are to be transformed into a certain number of printed books ready to be sold to the public".

He takes a calculated risk in which a certain amount of his money will be tied up for an unknown period of time. Before he does so, in his role of entrepreneur he asks himself: How many copies can I expect to sell and over what period? What will be the selling price? How many pages will the book contain? What size should it be? Does it require illustrations? Will the book be hard bound or paper bound? Does it contribute to a balanced list of publications?

It is true that four basic elements to make a book industry - the publisher who takes the business risk, the

author who writes the manuscript, the printer who produces an edition of books and the bookseller who sells the books. But it is the publisher who sets the whole publishing process in motion.

Though the publisher occupies a pivotal position in book publishing, his role is least understood by people outside the field of books. It is the publisher, who secures the manuscript from an author and raises capital from his own or other sources. It is he who engages the services of artists and other editorial specialists, and commissions and supervises the work of printers. It is again the publishers, who has the books thus produced, distributed to potential markets.

The author is no doubt, the first owner of the right to publish the work he has created. But usually he makes a contract with a publisher, permitting him to have copies of the book printed and to sell to them, with specified payment to himself, offered on the basis of the number of copies sold. The printer then receives the manuscript from the publisher. He composes, prints and binds an edition. The manufactured books are then sent back to the publisher. The printer's payment is a matter of firm agreement with the publisher. Lastly, the bookseller buys the books from the publisher at a discount and sells them at the list price to buyers in his bookshop.

Book publishing is both a business and an art. The art of book publishing has been developed on systematic lines. Making and selling of books involves many specialised skills - editing, designing, printing and selling. There are three main jobs for the publisher to perform: editorial operation - securing and developing manuscripts and preparing manuscript for printing; production - designing the book and the arranging of manufacture by a printer, and sales - selling the books and making people want to buy the book and long-range promotion (reading development and co-operation among publishers). These form the three main divisions of a publishing house.

The publisher's functions involve an ability to draft agreements and some knowledge of the law of copyright and the law of libel.

He should also have a good grounding in accounts procedures and financial bearings - a knowledge which would enable him to choose the relatively economical process of reproduction, to stand up in a highly competitive buyer's market so as to earn a reasonable profit and guard against losses. He should also be a management man - a job concerned with planning, organising, directing, co-ordinating and controlling men, money, machines and

materials, (4M). All what I have discussed above is the dynamics of book publishing.

Indeed, as Datus C. Smith observes in his A Guide to Book Publishing, "the publisher's central position gives him, a breadth of view not easily available to the other partners, and an accordingly greater responsibility for vision, imagination, long-term planning, and a spirit of experimentation. If a country lacks a corps of publishers with that spirit, it will continue quietly along in the old grooves of high costs, low sales, inefficient coverage of the market and unimaginative development of editorial projects. With such a corps of publishers, however, and with an increasing literacy and an almost universal desire for more and better education, there is virtually no limit to the possible development of book publishing in almost any country".

Book publishing in Malaysia, which has come a long way since her Independence on 31 August 1957, is pulsating with new life and accelerating towards professionalism and has developed a progressive character. In fact, the emergence of books in Bahasa Melayu has started way back in the nineteenth century, when large number of local literates read and write in Jawi Script. Most books in Malay language during that time were translations of works from Arabic. Mostly on Islamic religion and Arabic/Persian literatures.

Only when Pejabat Karang Mengarang Melayu (Department of Malay Authorship), at Sultan Idris Teacher's Training College that was set up in 1924; an organised and planned work in the publishing of book was started.

However, much of the work at this department was books for Malay primary schools, both as textbooks as well as reference materials, mostly translated works for library series. While a large number of books were still in English especially for schools and general market and they were imported from Britain. Although there was already a government printer, the East India Company Press, which also acted as a publisher, it concentrated more on publishing of newspaper and at the same time publish government documents and reports.

The Publishing scene in Malaysia today has been greatly influenced by the National Language Policy and the National Education Policy. Both policies which were formulated and implemented after Independence, created tremendous opportunities for the growth of indigenous writing and publishing in the national language (bahasa Melayu). After Independence, Pejabat Karang-Mengarang of SITC was taken over by the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), a government organization set up in 1956 to develop and enrich the national language to promote literary development and to publish books in the national language. As a government

publisher and DBP being directly under the Minister of Education was entrusted to publish textbooks, teachers' guides, syllabus, etc. for the national primary schools or KBSR (New Curriculum for Primary Schools) and some selected subjects for the national secondary schools or KBSM (Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools).

The mainstay of publishing in this country for the past 30 years or so has been and still is the school book market. Recently in the local newspaper, it was reported by The Text Book Division of the Ministry of Education, that for this year school session of 1992/93, 102 publishers including DBP were selected to supply textbooks to schools costing the government \$38.9 million ringgit.

Most publishers appear only when there is a change of new curriculum or examinations where new textbooks are required. Beside textbooks, all kind of supplementary reading materials for students, mostly examination-biased, that tend to encourage parrot-learning and memorization reading such as 'revision courses', question-and-answer model books, workbooks, and so on. Of the average yearly production of books in this country is about 3,000 titles, more than 60% are school books; about 25% - 30% are general books (which include literary and creative works, general knowledge books story books for children and religious books) and about 10% or less are what might be called

'higher learning books" which include university textbooks and some scholarly and academic works. (See Table I).

The situation has caused some concern among book development people, librarians, educators and even political leaders. A reading society cannot be evolved through textbooks alone. It is the love of reading either for pleasure or for one's personal intellectual and mental enrichment that defines reading habit and reading consciousness.

In the 1960's and 1970's, publishing for the general public, for the out-of-school population, in Bahasa Melayu, was largely confined to the production of Malay literary-creative works, such as novels, anthologies of short-stories, and poetry. but the trends somehow slowed down and new publishers began to turn to other areas of publishing. In 1975, for example, the DBP established a General Publishing Division to concentrate on the publishing of non-textbooks for the growing number of young Malaysians educated entirely in the national language. This probably set a trend in the general publishing scene in the country. New and more enterprising private publishers emerged to produce general books in new areas, such as current affairs, politics, literature, management, philosophy, and religion and a variety of other books of general interests. If anyone had been to the recent Malaysian Book Fair, the 12th

he would have noticed an impressive display of general titles in Bahasa Melayu. Although the titles are still not very wide-ranging, I think the number available so far is good enough for those who care to read in the subject areas covered by the books.

The growth of children's books has been traditionally related to developments in the country's educational programmes. Since around 1980, when the Education Ministry tried to encourage them to read more general books, there has been significant growth in the production of non-textbook publications for children. The government's emphasis on the 3R's education led to a rush among publishers to produce a lot of story books for children, the contents and themes of which were based on the general guidelines formulated by the Education Ministry.

Without doubt, there is also a hiccup in the publishing industry in this country. The problem is, can the publishing industry in this country meet these total book needs of the nation? In a developing country like Malaysia, where the environment is not often conducive to proper book development and growth of good and strong publishing, it is difficult to expect the publishers to do more than they can possibly do under the circumstances to meet the 'social book needs' of the nation. Like it or not, publishers publish in order to make money. It is rare, indeed, for a publisher to

plan to publish a book which he knows is going to lose a great amount of money, for the sake of the nation, although admittedly there are a number of publishers in the country who care very much for the broader social book needs of the nation beyond the economically viable school textbooks.

Publishers usually give two main reasons why they do not go into general publishing and especially into the publishing of 'higher knowledge' books, both for the general readers as well as for the scholarly and the academic community on a large scale. First, they consider that the economics of publishing books in these areas are not viable. They say that market for such books is terribly limited. Secondly, the reading public is not big enough to support general publishing on a large scale.

The Publication Programmes of the DBP - let me now, briefly touch on the publishing programmes of the DBP. The DBP has a slight advantage over the other publishers in this country is that its publishing operating costs, which include salaries, are government costs. But this government grant is decreasing every year. This year, for example, the grant is only 20% of the total budget; so the DBP has to work harder to get the other 80%, entirely from its publishing income, to develop the language, to promote literature, and

to continue to publish books, about 40% of which are not economically profitable.

With these constraints, and under the difficult conditions in which the publishing trade and profession have to operate all these years, the DBP has arranged to publish in the next five years more than 1,000 university textbooks and academic works, and about 3,000 titles of language books, literary-creative works, and general books in areas such as culture, management, Islamic studies, politics, and basic knowledge books, encyclopedias for general readers as well as for university students as general reference materials. School textbooks, especially the Loan Scheme Books (KBSR, KBSM and others), which are published in several million copies a year, are the DBP's main source of income is used to support the publishing of the non-profit making books. (See Table II).

It is important to note here that a lot of what I call book development programmes have to be promoted by the DBP in order to encourage local writers and translators to write and translate books in the language. Even as early as 1958, the DBP had started to organize writing competitions to develop creative writing talents. To encourage more writers and translators of books in the 'higher knowledge' DBP gives higher royalties and incentives. The DBP has also started a special project called NADI where private publishers are

financed by the DBP to undertake translation works of university books. The DBP also work in hand with the universities presses so as not to compete with each other. To increase more books in Malay language especially in the higher education, DBP undertake joint-publishing programmes with the local universities.

For example, last week a memorandum of understanding to publish 100 academic books of higher learning based on teaching modules and reference material was signed between the DBP and University of Science, Malaysia (USM).

Book development in Bahasa Melayu has to be regarded as a social programme, and not merely as a trade to be left entirely to the private capacity of the book trade people. This is because book publishing and book distribution are dependent on certain social, economic, and physical factors or environment which the book trade people are not capable of solving entirely on their own. Poor readership among the population, low purchasing power of the book buyers, the high costs of producing certain books, the lack of professional training facilities and incentives given to the book trade and to writers, translators and editors, a limited public library network to support the book market and book distribution; are some of the factors or conditions which tend to prevent the book world from reaching as many people as possible. Many books in Bahasa Melayu cannot be

published because of these conditions and not because there is a lack of commitment or vision on the part of the serious people in the book trade to meet the challenge. Many of the books already published do not reach the people because of these conditions and not because people in the book business have not tried enough to sell their products. The publishing of more books in Bahasa Melayu to meet the social objectives and the total book needs of the nation must have the support, directly or indirectly, of the national economy.

In response to the above situation, in 1984, the government appointed a task force known as The National Book Development Council (NBDC) and recently changed as the Malaysian Book Council (MBC) submitted a detailed proposal on National Book Policy, which analyses the main social and national problems facing the book world and recommends solutions and steps which the government and the professional book associations should take to remedy the problems and to create better conditions for book development and publishing. In principle the government has accepted the proposals and I was informed that the Malaysian Book Council under the chairmanship of the Director General of Education is now studying through the proposals to see how they can be implemented, either immediately or in the long-term.

If we want more Malaysians to buy and to read more locally-published books we have to do something serious about the following problems:

1. to produce more good books for all at cheaper prices.
2. to improve the distribution systems, in order to ensure that books can reach as many Malaysians as possible;
3. to seriously promote the reading habits of Malaysians;
4. to provide professional and technical training facilities to the book trade people, to writers, translators, editors and book designers.

As a parting note, I am happy to say that the infrastructure for book publishing industry in this country to continue to flourish is bright. We have a strong and established Association of Writers (GAPENA), Translators Association of Malaysia (PPM), Malaysian Book Publishers Associations with members about 200 publishers, Scholarly Books Publishers Association (PEPET), Malay Publishers Associations (IKATAN), Book Sellers Association, and

recently there was a move amongst the professionals in the book industry such as book editors, book designers/artists, indexer and etc. to form their own professional associations in pursuit of standardisation and quality in their work and products.

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Appendix : I

Books & periodical published in Malaysia : 1985-1990

Subject	Year					
	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990
1. General	57	68	45	37	94	108
2. Philosophy & Psychology	11	17	8	14	16	31
3. Religion	187	394	259	279	304	417
4. Social & Science	696	809	556	616	734	1,018
5. Philology, Language & Linguistics	418	563	593	496	585	793
6. Pure Sciences	266	369	339	378	454	589
7. Applied Sciences	341	423	345	290	316	437
8. Arts	77	131	44	60	116	94
9. Literature	349	445	636	646	560	854
10. Geography, History & Biographics	152	178	163	188	169	237
Total	2,554	3,397	2,988	3,004	3,348	4,578

Source : National Library of Malaysia

Appendix: II

Number of Publications received by the National Library
of Malaysia during the period 1976-1986

Year	B.M.	English	Chinese	Tamil	Total
1976	691	474	31	11	1302
1977	643	547	24	30	1341
1978	624	467	49	51	1328
1979	991	792	98	44	2037
1980	1118	550	177	8	1948
1981	1654	548	85	12	2356
1982	1699	919	96	23	2801
1983	1997	1067	282	17	3534
1984	2582	1072	147	9	3975
1985	1458	876	129	30	2554
1986	1943	966	163	14	3397
1987	1931	788	75	27	2988
1988	1985	861	4	3	3004
1989	1908	893	341	4	3348
1990	2498	1074	734	18	4578
1991	2249	1015	321	4	3748
Total	25971	12909	2756	305	44239

Source : National Library of Malaysia

Appendix: III

Books Published By The Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka In 1989 - 1991

Subjects	1989	1990	1991
General	-	4	4
Language	28	39	31
Religion	16	29	23
Philosophy	5	4	7
Fine Arts	10	3	11
Literature	92	84	266
Applied Sciences	51	61	62
Pure Sciences	52	48	38
Social Sciences	49	97	59
Geography & History	9	13	16
Others	-	63	
Total	312	445	517

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5. National Book Policy (National Book Council, Malaysia), Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 1992.
6. Berita Harian, 9 October 1992.
7. The Star, 10 October 1992.

Appendix: IV

Book Published By The Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka
Until October 1992

	Year	Titles
1957 to	1989	3,500
	1990	445
	1991	517
	1992	600
TOTAL		5,062