

TRENDS IN MALAYSIAN BOOK PUBLISHING

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PUBLISHING INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENT

One of the latest developments in the Malaysian publishing industry is the current review of the National Book Policy. The Policy, adopted in 1985, proposes that the book industry should be recognised as an essential industry and, therefore, support must be given for its development. This review is aimed at making proposals for changes which can be implemented in order to support a more vibrant, integrated and commercially healthy publishing sector able to cope with changes and move toward knowledge-based economy. One of the proposals is the restructuring of the present National Book Council to give it more strength in overseeing the implementation of the policy and the existing book related laws.

As far as the industry is concerned, the government is supportive so much so that publishing, together with printing become a significant contributor to the country's economy being the top five largest industries in the manufacturing sector. Whilst the government policy towards the local printing and publishing industry is one of 'protection', nevertheless, the Government is encouraging foreign investors to establish their industry in Malaysia with full equity to take advantage of the viable local environment with the provision that the output is 100% export. The Government is also encouraging foreign participation in printing and publishing projects but limited to 30% foreign equity.

Publishing Statistics

The current value of publishing industry alone (excluding printing) is estimated at RM1.5 billion (USD405 million) in 2004, involving about 500 publishing companies, 351 of which are registered with the Textbook Section, Ministry of Education. While the bulk of the publication continues to be school-related

materials – textbooks, workbooks and reference books – the current encouraging seller in the country today is a trade book, the juvenile paperback. This genre, popular anywhere in the world, is soap on print, the same kind that appears on television primetime slots. Some local titles could reach up to 150,000 copies, which is unheard of several years back.

Among the 500 publishing companies operating in the country, only about one-third can be considered as very active. These consist of different categories of publishers in terms of ownership. A majority of them are privately owned, small-scale private companies with around one to 50 employees. The rest are full or semi-government institutions, which include university presses or publishing departments.

The trend in book production in Malaysia is shown in the table below. This figure is based from the National Library statistics on books received and registered under the Preservation Books Act and the Deposit of Library Material Act.

Malaysian Book Production

Year	Number of Titles	Increase (in %)
1994	4,050	9.60
1996	5,843	44.27
1998	5,816	-0.46
2000	5,341	-8.16
2002	7,040	31.81
2004 (est.)	8,550	21.44

Retail Outlets

An optimistic count of bookstores nationwide is 600 outlets of varying sizes for all of 23 million people, thus, about one bookstore for every 38,000 people. About 45% of these outlets are concentrated in the Klang Valley especially in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor area. About 20% are in the northern area especially Perak and Pulau Pinang. In Johor, about 60 book outlets (10%) are actively involved in book selling.

While the number of outlets is certainly encouraging, the quality of shops

is a different question. It is not surprising that some bookstores would not strictly be just bookstores. They would also carry many other products such as school and office supplies, art supplies, postcards, greeting cards, wrappers, audio-cassettes, souvenirs and even toys. This is typical of Asian bookstores, which present an uneven picture from a peddler sitting on the pavement to the luxurious air-conditioned showrooms in the shopping malls.

Children's Book

Publishing for children continues to be considered the safest and most reliable along with the market for educational publications. It is also observed that as much as 80% of MABOPA (Malaysian Book Publishers Association) members publish children/educational materials as one of the main activities; and more than 40% of the total Malaysian book titles in the 1990s were in the category of children's books. There are, however, new publishers who create their own niche and are capable of producing quality publication in their specialised areas such as illustration books, travel guidebooks and other trade book categories.

On the whole, interest among publishers in children's literature has increased significantly since the last decade. In 1980 for example, only 188 titles were published while in the 1990s, the annual output averaged at more than 2,000 titles. The present trend manages to provide sets of inexpensive publications each year to nearly all of the children's under the age of 12. Malaysian parents are becoming more education-conscious and are sending their children to kindergartens, thus creating a greater demand for pre-school literature. There has also been a move by the government to encourage pre-schoolers to attend formal kindergartens.

School Book Publishing

As mentioned, 371 publishers are currently registered with the Ministry of education. This comprises about 70% of the total number of publishers. Textbook and educational publishing is generally a lucrative business and private publishers are competing among themselves to secure government

contracts to provide books for a captive market in basic education in both public and private schools. There are now about three million children in primary schools and another two million in secondary schools. The pre-school population is also about two million students. Overall, the government spend about RM100 million (USD27 million) annually for school textbooks, which are given for free to most public and government-sponsored school children under the Textbook Loan Scheme. This amount does not include RM5 million (USD1.35 million) yearly allocation since the year 2000 to supply Additional Reading Books to selected rural school libraries. This also excludes pre-school books or reference and revision books that are highly in demand. In 1998, 22.5% of the total new titles published in Malaysia were school textbooks. In 1990 it was 30.8% and in 1999 it was 23 %. Currently it stands at about 20%. While the overall percentage decreases, the total number of titles as well as the volume continues to increase.

Academic Publishing and The University Presses

For the past four decades, the growth and demand for academic and scholarly books in Malaysia have increased dramatically. While the major suppliers of university books continue to be foreign publishers from the USA and the UK, the contribution of local university presses is increasingly important. As in many countries, university presses in Malaysia play their role in the production, promotion and dissemination of scholarly publications. The establishment of a university press encourages the scholarly publishing programmes and increases scholarly development and communication. The number of Malaysian universities involved in scholarly publishing has increased, as more local scholarly materials are needed.

The total output of scholarly books by the university presses (including DBP) in 1988 was 149 titles. Currently, the number is estimated at about 400 titles. The number of editors are also increased from 94 to 200. In the fifteen-year period, the number of books has increased by 168% and the productivity of each editor has also increased.

Trade Books

There are certainly more trade books coming out that more people can read and like to read due to the increasing awareness among the public. The range of locally published books is growing. Biographies and memoirs, cookbooks, dictionaries, travel books, inspirational and religious books, comic books, poetry and fiction are making ways not only into the shelves of local bookstores but also large international outlets. Many of them are competitively priced, attractively designed, and of high-quality productions. Even the coffee-table book range has expanded and is having its own following. Some of the titles can readily find their way into the international market especially the collections on Southeast Asia.

READING CAMPAIGN

The positive outlook in book production can be attributed partly to the relentless efforts by the government in education and in promoting the reading culture. Based on several studies, the literacy level among adult Malaysians has been rising steadily. Today, Malaysia's literacy level is above 90% and the actual practice of reading, although mostly for learning purposes, is 87%. Numerous reading campaigns have been conducted in Malaysia to inculcate reading habit among the people. A division for the promotion of reading has been established at the National Library in the early 1991. In 2003, this division was restructured into a section called Information Literacy Movement Division to incorporate new literacy skills in information and communication technology.

This Division continues to play an important role in executing and co-ordinating activities at the national level. The National Library has also been appointed the Secretariat for the national reading promotion committee, consisting of heads of several government and private bodies. The Ministry of Education, too, has given more emphasis on the importance of reading and, therefore, reading activities become part of the school curriculum. Since 1995, the month of August, and recently changed to July, has been adopted as the national "reading month" although reading promotion is conducted throughout the

year through the co-operation among the main players in the book industry, educational institutions, government departments and the public sectors.

Libraries continue to develop and currently there are about 400 public libraries including branch, regional, town, rural and mobile libraries run by the various public library corporations and local authorities. There are also more than 300 special libraries and about 8,000 resource centres in secondary and primary schools.

BOOK TRADE ORGANISATIONS

Another factor in the development of the book industry is the role played by several book organisations especially the National Book Council, the Book Industry Council, the Book Publishers Association and various other government and non-governmental organisations.

National Book Council of Malaysia

Established under the Ministry of Education in 1968, the council is a professional and advisory body in book development in Malaysia, which has the full support of the government and the private sectors that are involved in the development of the book for social and national interests. As a non-profit making body, its sources of income are mainly from occasional government grants and from private donation.

The council works on a voluntary basis. Its strength and support come from members, both the public as well as the private sector. But the administrative function is provided by a professional secretariat in the Ministry of Education. Among other things, the council's main objectives are to promote professionalism in the book industry, co-ordinate book development activities, encourage reading habits and facilitate negotiations among the parties that are involved in the production and consumption of books.

Malaysian Book Industry Council (MBIC)

Formerly known as Malaysian Book Trade Council, this is an informal non-profit organisation whose members are drawn from representatives of various book trade associations, namely MABOPA (Malaysian Book Publishers Association), MBA (Malaysian Booksellers Association) IKATAN (Malay Publishers Association), MBIA (Malaysian Book Importers Association) and MBCA (Malaysian Book Contractors Association).

In 1993, MBIC set up a company called Malaysian Book Promotion Sdn. Bhd. with a paid-up capital of RM60, 000, which was shared equally by the member associations, excluding MBCA. One of the main functions of MBIC is to help manage and organise the Kuala Lumpur International Book Fair. This year the Book Fair will be held from 26 April to 5 May at the usual venue, the Putra World Trade Centre.

Malaysian Book Publishers Association

MABOPA which is celebrating its 36th anniversary this year (2005) currently has 114 members. Most of them are actively involved in a wide range of publication including textbooks, revision course materials, workbooks, encyclopaedias, readers, magazines and multimedia products. This organisation has continuously addressed various issues including textbook publishing system, fair trade practices, copyright, pricing and discount structures. MABOPA has also played an important role as the bridge between the government and publishing companies in the private sector.

PUBLISHING OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES

Malaysia has some of the important ingredients of a successful publishing industry: considerably high level of literacy, strong government support for education, relatively modest technical resources that are required, commitment towards the development of information technology, and dedicated entrepreneurs willing to take risks in a difficult economic climate.

However, our book publishing sector is far from successful and there are several obstacles hampering the development of books in terms of their

availability, accessibility and affordability. For example, book publishing, like other cultural industries, is perceived as high risk and based on small profit margins. This, coupled with the difficulty in gauging a book's potential market success, makes it difficult for publishers to gain access to working capital through financial institutions. Without access to these resources, it is not easy for local entrepreneurs to benefit from potential gaps in the publishing market. Undercapitalisation and its effect on long-term health and stability of the industry are serious concerns for publishers. Many advanced countries, on the other hand, have developed loan or assistance programs for book publishers through joint efforts by the government and the commercial banks.

Other problems include the absence of a strong tradition of book authorship, readership and ownership. A limited buying market for published material is partly due to the absence of reading culture, limited disposable income and fragmented reading audience. Also, there is no significant global demand for our published books. Foreign publishers are highly competitive and they are impacting on local industry; for instance more than 60% of academic and university textbooks are currently imported.

These are some of the continuing problems and challenges that we encounter which, I think, are also faced by publishers in many developing countries.

Impact of New Media

Malaysia is strong in its intent to attain the highest level of communication technology. Its determination is reflected through the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) project that acts as an impetus for the new information and communication technologies. Various government-backed ventures such as the Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic System or MIMOS, the Multimedia Development Corporations, the Smart School Projects and the Virtual Library Projects are providing wide opportunities for the development of the electronic publishing.

Since 1995, more than 2,000 titles of multimedia publications have been

published and deposited at the National Library. A few academic publishers have published digital and online books while some academic journals have their digital versions. In the area of marketing, several online bookstores have been set up to promote and sell books over the Internet.

A good example of an electronic publishing initiative is by the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, a government-funded publisher. Its e-publishing portal called KaryaNet, launched in 2002 is an ambitious project to gather Malaysian writers in a virtual production house with the aim of producing and disseminating books in the Malay language in all fields. Currently, KaryaNet has more than a thousand digital titles in its list that can be accessed through the Internet.

COOPERATION AMONG ASEAN PUBLISHERS

The idea of establishing the ASEAN Publishers Forum is long overdue. The meetings will help us to know each other better, but above all to build the foundations for better cooperation. Some of us may still remember that there had been several futile attempts in the past to initiate co-operation, communication and networking among ASEAN publishers. Good suggestions and proposals were presented but there was no follow-up.

The key purpose of the Forum will certainly be to support the creation and development of a vibrant indigenous publishing industry in ASEAN by stimulating a dynamic partnership between publishers. This alliance is pertinent to fulfill our objective of bringing ASEAN closer to its citizens by improving access to ASEAN-related information.

The detailed objectives may include some of the followings:

1. To raise the profile of the publishing industry in all countries, and to increase public awareness and appreciation of the importance of a viable publishing industry to national and regional development.
2. To formulate and implement policy and strategy on the coordination and consolidation of training resources, curricula, infrastructure and funding for book publishing in the region.

3. To encourage excellence in writing, editing, design, production, marketing and distribution of published works in ASEAN.
4. To promote the exchange of knowledge between ASEAN countries and to promote intra-regional trade in books.
5. To protect and further the interests of copyright owners, agents and licencees.
6. To protect and promote freedom of expression.
7. To promote the creation of a ASEAN Book Fair and other book trade events which serve the interests of an indigenous publishing industry, and to encourage and facilitate rights trading between regional publishers
8. To initiate and develop policy studies on the expansion and economic development of the publishing industry in ASEAN and to formulate strategies which can be used by governments, donor agencies, and financial and lending institutions
9. To create an information gathering system on the developments in ASEAN publishing, and to provide a forum for the interchange of ideas on issues of interest to ASEAN publishers
10. To represent the interests of the publishing industry to governments and other organisations, and to support legislation which promotes the free flow of books across borders and ratifies international conventions in this area
11. To represent the interests of ASEAN publishers and publishing in international forum
12. To actively promote ASEAN publishers to international markets and to establish linkages with other organisations with similar interests

There are several main focus areas that we can cooperate: (i) training, (ii) marketing, (iii) capacity building, (iv) information and publications, (v) research and documentation, and (vi) networks and international relations. Some of the beneficial activities in these focus areas may include:

1. Development of regional training facilities and standards for regional book publishing
2. Development of a website as a resource for members and as a mail-order site for book sales
3. A survey of the constraints, resources and needs of the regional publishing industry
4. Development of an annual ASEAN Book Fair
5. Development of strategies for joint international marketing, raising public awareness of ASEAN publishing, making publishers' voices heard on copyright and freedom of expression issues, and encouraging government legislation and support
6. Compiling a register of regional publishing skills and resources
7. Developing intra-regional sales and rights trading.

CONCLUSION

With the new information and communication technology, the publishing industry are facing new challenges namely convergence, specialisation and globalisation. Publishers must respond to these challenges in order to seize the opportunities and to make the transition to the new economy. The demand for books, both printed and electronic, still looks promising ahead and this is a strong reason for our existence and success.

By linking regional publishers together, developing skills and resources, and forging contacts with international organisations, we will be able to build a vigorous publishing industry in our region. We must be proactive and sensitive to changes and need to find a new lease of life and play our role in building the society and in bringing our countries closer together.

Brief Biodata of

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Some other key positions held:

1. ***Council Member, National Book Development Council Malaysia (MBKM),***
2. ***Deputy Chairman, Malaysian Book Industry Council (MBIC),***
3. ***Council Member, The Outward Bound Trust of Malaysia.***
4. ***Council Member, Malaysian Institute of Management (MIM),***
5. ***Former Council Member, Malaysian Institute of Directors (MID).***
6. ***Founding Council Member, Jemaah Dato'-Dato' Negeri Perak.***

Awards

1. **In 1992, he was conferred the Ahli Mangku Negara (AMN) by His Majesty the King of Malaysia.**
2. **In 1999 he was conferred the Dato' Paduka Mahkota Perak (DPMP) by the Sultan of Perak.**
3. **In 2001 he was appointed a Justice of the Peace (JP) by the Sultan of Perak.**

Some Papers Presented:-

1. *Challenges In The Publishing Industry, @ Seminar on Libraries and the Publishing Industry in the Digital Era, 5th August 1999. Organised by National Library Malaysia.*
2. *Publishers' Perspective – Challenges In Electronic Publishing, @ Fuji Xerox Asia-Pacific Seminar, Publishing Beyond 2000, 24th August 1999, Petaling Jaya.*
3. *Publishing Challenges And Opportunities In Asia, @ The 9th International Forum On Publishing Studies. Organised by the Department of Media Studies, University of Malaya, Malaysian Book Development Council, The Japan Society of Publishing Studies, 2nd September 1999, University of Malaya.*
4. *Publishing Of General Books In Bahasa Melayu, @ Konvensyen Penerbitan Kebangsaan Ke-2. Organised by Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka, 8th September 1999, Legend Hotel, Kuala Lumpur.*
5. *Malaysian Book Publishing In The New Economy, @ Konvensyen Industri Perbukuan Negara. Organised by Majlis Penerbit Ilmiah Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 8th – 9th November 2000, Equatorial Hotel Bangi, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.*
6. *Electronic Publishing in Malaysia – Challenges and Prospects, Sehari Dengan Penerbit Ke-4, 25th July 2002, Organised by National Library Malaysia.*
7. *Taking Bahasa Melayu Books Global, Forum Penerbitan Dalam Bahasa Melayu, 13th March, 2003, Organised by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.*
8. *The Economic of Short-run Publishing, 19th October 2003, Organised by Jabatan Penerbitan dan Teknologi Media, Universiti Utara Malaysia and MAPIM.*
9. *Reinventing the Malaysian Book Industry, 14th March 2005, Bengkel Penerbitan Elektronik Kebangsaan. Organised by Kolej Universiti Teknikal Kebangsaan Malaysia (KUTKM) and Majlis Penerbitan Ilmiah Malaysia (MAPIM), Hotel Century Mahkota, Bandar Hilir Melaka.*

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