Against the Grain

Volume 12 | Issue 2

November 2013

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3068

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International Dateline — A Brief Word in English

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English (together with Chinese) is one of the official languages of Hong Kong, and until recently it was overwhelming used in schools and at universities. Yet despite over a century and a half of British rule and the presence of a large expatriate community which is on the whole fairly impervious to the Chinese language, English has never become a medium of cultural expression. For 98% of the population Cantonese remains the language with which they are the most comfortable. Thus publication in English holds an interesting niche.

Walk into a major chain bookshop and the English titles run like this: novels, textbooks, management and books on the economy, mostly imported and with a great markup in price. Tourist “Chinabilia” books are prominent, which reflect the still “orientalist” approach that some in the publishing world seems to have towards China—the exotic east, fengshui, tai chi and so on into inscrutability. Did you know the year of the dragon kicks off the new millennium? Food and phrase books, and glossy coffee table tomes of the sights and sounds of the region are also quite prominent. It is quite comforting really. But, if you live in but are not of this region, then the “exoticness” does wear off.

Oxford University Press (China) publishes high quality books on China and Hong Kong in addition to its educational books. Local university presses generally stick to academic and educational topics, with several of them hosting Asian studies institutes, which sees these publications travel far and wide to the international community of scholars and the dusty recesses of the library shelf. Actually many books that deal with Asia are published by international firms like M. E. Sharpe and other publishers with an international focus.

The English language textbook is king. Ditto dictionaries. Addison-Wesley-Longman, Oxford and Macmillan are leading this field. Recently “mother tongue” education has come into being, that is, in Chinese. Previously schools taught in English. Some still do, so this area is still important. It remains to be seen if the type of textbooks or number published will change. Whatever the case, the need to improve the English standard of local residents has been acknowledged by many local educational authorities.

Fiction? Asia 2000 is probably the only publisher in Hong Kong to consider original English language fiction and non-fiction for publication. Expats were once the mainstay of this scene, but now they are slowly starting to publish more fiction by Hong Kong people. But it is hardly worth it. Only about 3,000-4,000 copies of a piece of fiction in English would be sold according to one publisher. There is a burgeoning literary scene for locals and foreigners, who turn up at poetry readings and book launchs. Grants from the Hong Kong Arts Development Council help publishers like Asia 2000 to publish non-profitable things like poetry.

Hong Kong Chinese who write in English, do so for a variety of reasons—they could be returnees from a lifetime of education abroad, where they have grown used to English as a continued on page 72