Small, But Perfectly Formed

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Publishing is at a crossroads. As an industry that notoriously lags a good decade behind the rest, it is still facing the upheavals of the take-over culture. Specialist small publishers and university presses – the lifeblood of trade and academic books and journals – are being snapped up by faceless globals, often simply in a bid to buy out the competition or acquire tax losses to offset profits. The majority are eventually absorbed, their specialist editors discarded, precious backlists remaindered, and the writers cherrypicked.

The good new is that there are more books than ever being published. In the United Kingdom alone 180,000 new titles hit the bookshops each year, an increasing number of them self-published. And the exact number produced on the internet with its numerous formats such as e-books and online journals is impossible to estimate. That brings its own problems, especially for booksellers, who can hardly be expected to stock every title, although for readers there is the mixed blessing of internet bookshops such as Amazon.

And this huge number of new books is the basic problem facing us all, small publishers, writers, independent booksellers and readers alike: working out how to get around the twin obstacles of the stagnant large publishers and the giant bookselling chains with their throttlehold on the market. There is no doubt that publishing is in great need of fresh energy and new attitudes – and this is fast on the way, in the shape of new, independent publishers who specialize, as all small non-fiction publishers must, in publishing books within the fields that they know best.

Disillusioned at the whittling away of the specialist presses, the incessant take-overs by the majors, and the growing distance between author and publisher, we took the plunge and set up a new publishing company a few years ago. But we had to first ask ourselves why this seemingly mammoth undertaking seemed so worthwhile. The answer was clear: satisfaction at being able to facilitate the organic process of taking a book from idea to reader.

Small publishers with a small number of staff cannot expect to be able to handle every single task in-house, so one important factor that gave us the confidence to go for it was that we were able to contract with a specialized marketing agency to help us publicise and distribute our books, deal with the complexities of warehousing and help raise our profile on the academic conference circuit. We also took inspiration from a variety of models such as that of Hippocrene Press, a small and highly focused press that has being going since the early seventies. This New York-based company has refused to compromise and has steadily developed a wide-ranging popular list that includes phrasebooks, coursebooks and dictionaries for more than 120 languages at the time of writing. It is hard to think of any other publisher today who offers that many languages actively in print.

Our own objectives are simple: to narrow the gap between writer and readership. Part ethos and part cost-cutting exercise, we also aim to reduce the distance between the writer and the production process, and to get the writer involved at every stage. The accepted idea is that small publishers are much more nimble than large commercial or university presses – being able to turn manuscripts into books more quickly, being better able to deal with unusual projects, and most important of all, being in a better position to give personal service to authors. Being small obviously means being without huge staff, and that again means that most staff and many freelancers must be able to fill more than one role. Our commissioning editors must also do the work of copy editors and proofreaders, our designers must also act as typesetters and print buyers – and nobody gets much of a salary, but the bonus is that absolutely everyone can be involved in guiding the business forward.

This inter-weaving of roles is probably the real reason that small publishers can be quick off the mark: it is possible to achieve real team spirit where everyone can get personally invested in each book project and has the opportunity to make a significant difference to how the business develops. But all is not rosy. The level of influence of everyone involved in the business also means that small publishers are more at risk if one of the main players is incapacitated. And the small profit margins together with the need to invest every available penny in new titles in order to build up a healthy backlist means we are more at the mercy of the market than older, established presses.

Being new and small also means we need to work hard to make both authors and readers happy with what we do. For instance, two common complaints we hear from authors concerns illustrations and book pricing. One of our writers was told by a major multinational publisher that he could have a maximum of ten illustrations for his book, but it would rather it was less than five. Flexibility here is an obvious way for a new press to distinguish itself as today's technology means authors can have as many black and white illustrations as they like at no extra printing cost. On pricing, we are only too aware that any publisher has to make money, but it seems that many publishers are being run by their accounts departments and shareholders who are interested mainly in their dividends. The trend among large publishers is for small print-runs and high prices, which can be good for the bottom line, but we prefer instead to risk our necks with large print-runs at lower prices in order to help our books reach the readership we feel they deserve. Indeed, low prices are an essential element of our business strategy, and, backed by good marketing, we believe that far from limiting our books to the specialists and libraries, we can bring them to the shelves of the general reader and even cash-strapped students.

What makes life as a small publisher worthwhile is really knowing each author and being personally invested in every project. What makes life difficult is the lack of cash and the lack of support systems. It saddens us when big publishers drop their specialist staff, or when they reject many book proposals that deserve success. But rather selfishly, it also cheers us up, because it means there will always be a place for the likes of us.

In many ways what ultimately counts is communication – with authors as well as with readers. In a world where corporate anonymity seems to rule, we would like to think we're putting a bit of heart back into the business. ∎

ICAS Book Prizes List 2005

You can find the shortlists in the IIAS Newsletter, in the announcement section under ICAS 4. Shortlists are not included here as this section was produced before the judges made their decisions.

List of Books received:
(H = Humanities; SS = Social Sciences)

1. Timothy P. Barnard, Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries (Singapore: Singapore University Press 2004) - H

2. Daniel A. Bell and Hahm Chaibong, Confucianism for the Modern World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003) - H

3. Tommy Bengston, Cameron Campbell, James Z. Lee, et al., Life under Pressure: Mortality and Living Standards in Europe and Asia, 1700-1900 (Cambridge / London: The MIT Press 2004) -SS

4. Kingsley Bolton, Chinese Englishes. A sociolinguistic History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003) - H

5. John R. Bowen, Islam, Law and Equality in Indonesia. Anthropology of public reasoning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003) -H

6. C.C. Chin and Karl Hack, Dialogues with Chin Peng: New Light on the Malayan Communist Party (Singapore: Singapore University Press 2004) - H

7. Pierry-Arnaud Chouvy and Joel Meissonnier, Yaa Baa: Production, Traffic and Consumption of Methamphetamine in Mainland Southeast Asia (Singapore: Singapore University Press 2004) - SS

8. Gregory Chow, Knowing China (Singapore: World Scientifc Publishing 2004) - SS

9. Helen Creese, Women in Kakawin World: Marriage and Sexuality in the Indic Courts of Java and Bali (M.E. Sharpe 2004) - H

10. Elisabeth De Michelis, A History of Modern Yoga. Patanjali and Western Esotericism (London / New York: Continuum 2004) -H

11. Stephen Dobbs, The Singapore River: A Social History 1819-2002 (Singapore: Singapore University Press 2003) - H

12. Lisa Drummond and Helle Rydstrom, Gender Practices in Contemporary Vietnam (Singapore: Singapore University Press 2004) - SS

13. Elizabeth C. Economy, The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge to China's Future (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2004) - SS

14. Anne Feldhaus, Connected Places: Religion, Pilgrimage, and Geographical Imagination in India (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2003) - H

15. Barbara Harris-White, India Working: Essays on Society and Economy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003) - SS

16. Farhat Hasan, State and Locality in Mughal India. Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572-1730 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004). University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 61. - H

17. Allan Hockley, The Prints of Isoda Koryusai. Floating World Culture and its Consumers in Eighteenth-Century Japan (Seattle / London: University of Washington Press 2003) - H

18. Valerie M. Hudson and Andrea M. den Boer, Bare Branches: The Security Implications of Asia's Surplus Male Population (Cambridge / London: The MIT Press 2004) - SS

19. Sanjeev Khagram, Dams and Development: Transnational Struggles for Water and Power (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2004) - SS

20. Vera Mackie, Feminism in Modern Japan. Citizenship, Embodiment and Sexuality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003) - H

21. John Miksic, Earthenware in Southeast Asia (Singapore: Singapore University Press 2003) - H

22. Junya Nagakuni and Junji Kitadai, Drifting toward the Southeast. The Story of Five Japanese Castaways told in 1852 by John Manjiro (New Bradford: Spinner Publications, Inc 2003) - H

23. Joseph Needham, Science and Civilisation in China 7/2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003) - H

24. Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, Vietnamese Voices, Gender and Cultural Identity in the Vietnamese Francophone (DeKalb, Illinois: Southeast Asia Publications, 2003) - SS

25. Franklin Perkins, Leibniz and China. A commerce of light (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003) - H

26. Christopher A. Reed, Gutenberg in Shanghai: Chinese Print Capitalism, 1876-1937 (Vancouver: UBC Press 2003) - H

27. Anthony Reid, An Indonesian Frontier: Acehnese and Other Histories of Sumatra (Singapore: Singapore University Press 2004) - H

28. Michael Roberts, Sinhala Consciousness in the Kandyan Period 1590s to 1815 (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications 2004) - H

29. Jordan Sand, House and Home in Modern Japan: Architecture, Domestic Space, and Bourgeois Culture, 1880-1930 (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press 2004) - H

30. Frank J. Schwartz and Susan J. Pharr, The State of Civil Society in Japan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003) - SS

31. Patricia Sieber, Theaters of Desire: Authors, Readers, and the Reproduction of Early Chinese Song-Drama, 1300-2000 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003) - H

32. Jerome Silbergeld, Hitchcock with a Chinese Face. Cinematic Doubles, Oedipal Triangles, and China's Moral Voice (Seattle / London: University of Washington Press 2004) - H

33. Marie-Aimée Tourres, The Tragedy that didn't Happen (Kuala Lumpur: ISIS Malaysia 2003) - SS

34. Andrew N. Weintraub, Power Plays: Wayang Golek Puppet Theatre of West Java (Athens: Ohio University Press 2004) - H

35. Kenneth E. Wilkening, Acid Rain Science and Politics in Japan: A History of Knowledge and Action toward Sustainability (Cambridge / London: The MIT Press 2004) - SS

36. Andrew R. Wilson, Ambition and Identity. Chinese Merchant Elites in Colonial Manila, 1880-1916 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 2004) - SS

37. Yongnian Zheng, Globalization and State Transformation in China (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004) - SS

Humanities 23; Social Sciences 14. In all: 37.

List of theses:

1. Xiangqun Chang, Lishang-Wanglai: Social Support Networks, Reciprocity and Creativity in a Chinese Village (City University, London, 2004)

2. Wai-Yip Ho, Understanding the Civilizing Process of Islamic Modernity: Conceptualizing Ethnographic Voices of the Muslim Diaspora (The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, 2004)

3. Key-young Son, South Korean Identities in Strategies of Engagement with North Korea: A Case Study of President Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy (2 Volumes) (The University of Sheffield, 2004)

4. Sammuel Kwok-Fu Wong, Community participation of Mainland Chinese migrants in Hong Kong - Rethinking agency, institutions and authority in social capital theory (University of Bradford, 2004)

5. Francesca Tarroco, Attuning the Dharma. The Cultural Practices of Modern Chinese Buddhists (University of London, SOAS, 2003)