

How to talk about Malaysian novels in English without reading any

The Lean Years 1965 – 1993: The Publishing Scene

Third of ten weekly articles by Chuah Guat Eng, published on 18 August 2015

In my previous article, I noted that of the 17 Malaysian novels in English (MNEs) published between 1965 and 1993, five are studied by scholars, another five are mentioned in books about MNEs, and the remaining seven (about 41 percent) have been forgotten, or perhaps never been known to exist. Significantly, the forgotten seven were self-published (or author-funded): two through foreign vanity presses, two through a local ad-hoc press, and three through direct arrangement with printers.

This self-publishing trend is by no means confined to that period. Between 1994 and 2014, about 44 percent of the novels published by home-based writers were self-published. Why is this so? In this article, we seek answers in the local book publishing industry.

It is pointless to speculate on the literary merit (or lack thereof) of the self-published novels because we can't read them. The only assumption we can reasonably make is that the needs of self-publishing novelists and those of mainstream publishers somehow did not converge. There are many reasons for non-convergence, and mismatch of literary standards is only one. The novelist may have sent in his (or her) manuscript at a time when publishers were only interested in publishing non-fiction. He may not have the right social connections to the decision makers in the publishing house. He may have had no higher ambition than to print out his literary efforts for his family and friends. Or he may have found that local publishers' production standards didn't meet his own higher standards. This last possibility may sound sacrilegious to contemporary readers (and publishers), but it is a valid reason when talking about the mainstream-published MNEs of this period.

I can't discuss the production quality of the self-published novels because I've been able to find only one, Alex Ling's *Golden Dreams of Borneo* (1993). But a survey of existing first editions of several "mainstream" MNEs suggests that, in terms of production quality, the novelists and their readers were not particularly well served by their publishers. Many of the novels have (at least in my opinion) unattractive covers, inappropriate choices of papers and fonts, erratic page layouts, and multiple misprints. Indeed, the only novel from that period

with a professional and international “look and feel” is Alex Ling’s self-published novel. More shockingly, an examination of the publishers’ information pages of the available novels reveals that some mainstream publishers in Singapore and Malaysia seemed ignorant of their novelists’ legal rights. In the case of two novels, both re-publications undertaken as late as 1992, the publishers ignored the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, and retained the copyright of the works instead of assigning it to the authors.

Why this low level of competence and quality control? The most obvious answer is that the local book industry was then still in its infancy, and locally based publishers – whether internationally linked or otherwise – lacked the editorial and artistic expertise required for the publication of MNEs.

During the colonial era, locally published English-language books consisted mainly of publications required by the government and the Christian missions for their work. Some literary works – short stories, novels, and memoirs – by colonial officers such as Hugh Clifford and R. O. Winstedt were locally published, but this happened infrequently. After Independence, capital investment centred on building hard infrastructure and developing basic human skills for economic development; the need for school textbooks far outweighed the need for literary works – and most English-language textbooks were imported. The implementation of the National Language and the National Literature policies in 1971, aimed at promoting the nationwide use of Malay for administrative, educational, and literary purposes, further reduced the need for locally published books in English. But because the policies created a huge demand for locally produced school textbooks, textbooks became the lucrative mainstay of the local book industry.

Seen in this light, we have to celebrate the mainstream publishers who had the foresight to invest some of their textbook profits in the MNEs that are now part of our literary canon. Who were they? Why did they do it? And why are they not part of our local MNE publishing scene today?

Among the locally based mainstream publishers involved in publishing MNEs were Heinemann, Times Book International, Pesaka, Aspatra Quest and Arenabuku. Heinemann’s Writers in Asia Series published their first volume, a collection of short stories, in 1966; Times Books International, together with its imprint Federal Publications, was established in 1968. The local independents, Pesaka, Aspatra Quest, and Arenabuku, were established in the early 1970s, mainly to meet the demand for school textbooks in Malay. But they also

attempted to take the lead in encouraging and nurturing the growth of local literature in English, publishing collections of short fiction, poetry, and plays before moving on to novels.

From the mid-1980s onward, however, these local publishers stopped producing MNEs. I haven't been able to find any information about Aspatra Quest, but Pesaka and Arenabuku returned to textbook publishing. Meanwhile Heinemann and Times Books began operating almost exclusively out of Singapore. These business moves may have been influenced by the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) 1984, which further tightened the restrictions imposed by the PPPA of 1974. On the other hand, for Heinemann and Times, Singapore would certainly have been a more congenial place to do business; not only because of its English-language policy, but also because its government was then aiming to establish a world publishing hub on the island and offering incentives to multinationals prepared to set up their headquarters there.

As a result, of the four MNEs published between 1989 and 1993, one was published by a mainstream Singapore publisher; two by small, short-lived local presses; and one was self-published. This fractured profile of the local MNE publishing scene was to prevail well into the new millennium.