

Parallel Session 8: The role of books and literature in public communication of science

WHY THERE ARE NO PROFESSIONAL POPULAR SCIENCE BOOK AUTHORS IN CHINA

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There are no full-time professional popular science book authors in China. To investigate the reasons behind this anomaly, we interviewed several authors and publishers in China. Remedies are proposed. A way out is to increase dramatically the sale of popular science books through their use in the teaching of science in high schools and the universities. The findings and lessons are also relevant to other parts of the world.

Key Words: popular science books, teaching science courses, China

Text

1. Introduction

Popular science (PS) books have a long history in existence (Gregory and Miller 1998). They are a neglected tool in the science education of students and ordinary citizens (Lam 2001). PS books are unique among the science media.

- (1) They are available in every bookstore in every town, unlike the technical science books which are available in special book stores in a university town.
- (2) Many of the PS books are written by the pioneers themselves, Nobel laureates, or very gifted science writers who could be journalists or other scientists.
- (3) These books are affordable to almost everybody (about 20 yuans in China, and 15 dollars for a paperback in USA).
- (4) These books are the places to learn how research was actually done and discovery were made in very recent times.
- (5) These books, at least in the USA and for the majority of them, contain no equations and are easy and very entertaining to read.

To ensure the continuous appearance of new and good PS books, a large number of competent authors are called for.

2. Popular science book authors in china

China is a country of 1.3 billion in population. Yet, there is not a single *full-time* professional PS book author in this vast country. This is in contrast to the case in literature, because China does have professional writers who can support themselves by publishing novels. And this is not due to lack of support from the Chinese government. In fact, the Chinese government recognizes science and technology as an important pillar in raising the living standard of its population and the economic well being of the country as a whole. Two years ago, China passed the laws that protect and encourage science population at every level of government (Popular Science Press 2002).

In the years from 1949 to about 25 years ago, before the market economy was introduced every writer in China was government employed. The government at that time saw the need to support full-time novelists, but not full-time PS book writers. Obviously in China (and everywhere else in the world) PS books are not deemed to be equally important as literary books.

These days, when market economy is in place, and self-employed literary writers do exist, we still see no full-time PS book authors in China, self employed or government employed. Why?

To find out we interviewed a number of PS book authors and publishers in China. We are told that:

- (1) Science popularization is considered lower in status compared to science research or teaching.
- (2) Work in science popularization is not counted in job evaluations in many places.
- (3) Lack of systematic and large-scale government effort or plan to train PS professionals.
- (4) Insufficient income to support free-lance full-time PS writers.

While points (1) and (2) are definitely true in almost every other country, some countries are doing something to tackle point (3), while point (4) is not true at least in the USA.

Point (4) is particularly interesting. With such a large population in China, how can this happen? These days, an average PS book in China sells less than 5,000 copies. (There are exceptions. For example, *The Complete Book of Raising Pigs* did sell 3 million copies.)

3. What can be done

To address point (4) in China, here are some recommendations.

- (1) The government could extend the new policy of supporting literary book projects to PS books, too. That is, prospective authors can apply for a grant to write a particular PS book.
- (2) In every science funding agency, for example, the Chinese National Natural Science Foundation, a new division of funding should be set up to support PS activities, including book writing.

- (3) In major research institutes, such as those in the Chinese Academy of Sciences, one-year visiting positions for prospective writers could be established, enabling them to observe the research in action, learn about major research findings, and discuss with the experts and perhaps even collaborate with them to write PS books.
- (4) Most importantly, to guarantee that PS books will be sold in large quantities in the immediate future, all science teachers in high schools and universities should incorporate the use of PS books in their classes. It is done by offering the students extra credit if they buy a PS book, read it and write a brief report. This is a sure way to excite the students in science and to enlarge their knowledge base. (For more details, see Lam 2001.)
- (5) Since natural science forms the basis of all social sciences (Lam 2002, Wilson 1998), and science and literature are equally important in shaping modern lives, the time has come to include several PS books—such as James Watson’s *The Double Helix*—into the list of required readings in the general education of every student in every university.

For points (1)-(3), the prospective authors may come from any source, such as from magazines and newspapers. Naturally, points (4) and (5) are equally applicable to other countries.

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