

PERILS OF PUBLISHING IN SABAH AND SARAWAK

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BY TERENCE TOH

STAR 2

There has been Sarawakian literature in English since the 1960s, mainly beginning after the Borneo Literature Bureau was established in 1958 to encourage writing in English in Sabah and Sarawak. And in the later years of the last century and the early years of the new millennium, “there have been several notable new publications in English from Sarawak,” says Kuching-based academic Patrick Yeoh.

However, it has not always been easy to give books from the two states the audience they deserve.

Problems with publishing, distribution and marketing have plagued the book industry there for years. Many great titles from Sabah and Sarawak remain where they were published, never even making their way to Peninsular Malaysia much less the rest of the world.

According to Yeoh, a researcher of Borneo literature in English, there are pockets of active creative writers in English in some parts of Sarawak. The problem most of these writers face, however, is a lack of publishing opportunities.

“Many people write but few know how to go about getting published and Peninsular Malaysian publishers do not seem to be interested in listbuilding for manuscripts from East Malaysia,” Yeoh says in an e-mail interview.

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Yeoh: ‘Many people write but few know how to go about getting published. Filepic

Yeoh, a playwright, author and lecturer currently working on a PhD, previously taught in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and Universiti Putra Malaysia. While at UPM, he introduced Sarawak Literature in English (SLIE) to students studying Malaysian Literature in English (MLIE), an area that has since spawned at least six academic works.

“SLIE is distinctly different from mainstream Malaysian Literature in English in terms of the themes that concern the writers. Most if not all of the traditional MLIE authors studied over the past few decades have been from the peninsula and they have mostly concerned themselves with themes of nation-building, patriarchy, post-colonialism and feminism, to mention the most obvious,” Yeoh says.

“Authors writing in English from Sarawak have other concerns: they tell stories of life in Sarawak, deal with the theme of love and attachment among families and community, of daily survival, preservation of their culture and of socioeconomic development.”

Sarawak writers, he says, tend to be happy to be read and known only at home, and make little effort to promote their works outside the region. There are exceptions to this rule, of course; he mentions writers like Angela Yong, who has managed to get her works published in the United States with some help from her children based there.

The main reason he feels most Sabah and Sarawak works are unknown even in Peninsular Malaysia, however, is the selective nature of texts in the Malaysian Literature in English courses in Malaysian universities.

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Ong, author of 'Death Of A Longhouse And Other Stories', wrote a short story a week for almost two years. Photo: Filepic

“The same half dozen or so peninsula-based MLIE authors have remained practically unchanged over the years. However, there is hope for change. A student from a public university in Peninsular Malaysia who proposed a project paper on Cecilia Ong and Sarawakian literature was congratulated by her dean for attempting something refreshingly new,” Yeoh says.

Yeoh feels there hasn't been enough done to promote Sabah and Sarawakian writing over the years, although inroads have been made, he adds.

“SLIE may be different but it is refreshingly different and reflects another side of the Malaysian literary face. It is a pity that SLIE together with MLIE and other creative writing in languages other than Bahasa Melayu are excluded from National literature because I think literature belongs to the people and should be inclusive rather than exclusive,” Yeoh says.

“I believe that the true literature of a nation is a chorus of the many different voices of her people, and each voice deserves to be heard, not necessarily only the loudest.”

Peninsula problems

According to indie bookstore Silverfish Books founder Raman Krishnan, Sabahan and Sarawakian books are not widely known in the peninsula due to several issues, including the “provincial” nature of the Malaysian book industry, and a lack of interest among Malaysian bookstores to carry local titles.

image: http://www1.star2.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ttsabahsidebar_terencetoh_1.jpg



Raman: 'East Malaysia is a specific problem because it costs money to bring books from there to (the peninsula).'
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"There's an interesting scene going on over there, as there would be in Kuala Lumpur, or Ipoh, or anywhere else. Go to Kuching or Kota Kinabalu, and you will find wonderful titles being written over there. But the big bookstores are not interested in selling or promoting them here. It's easier for them to sell a John Grisham, so why bother?" Raman says.

Silverfish Books, which is based in Kuala Lumpur, has published a few Sabahan and Sarawakian writers, especially of children's books. But a major problem that smaller bookstores like his face, he says, is the volume of books.

"East Malaysia is a specific problem because it costs money to bring books from there to (the peninsula). Someone has to fly them here, and as a small organisation, I cannot afford that. We need someone a bit bigger, someone who is interested in the future of publishing here, to do that," he says.

MPH Group Publishing senior editor Eric Forbes says that while his company has not received many submissions from the region, it has published several fiction, nonfiction and children's titles by Sabahans and Sarawakians over the years. This includes Robert Raymer's *Lovers And Strangers Revisited* (2008), Geoffrey Walker's *The Bomoh's Apprentice* (2010, with a sequel in 2011), and Tina Kisil's *Footprints In The Paddy Fields* (2010).

"We don't receive many manuscripts from East Malaysia. However, in the works are a couple of books on East Malaysian cuisine. The quality of the manuscripts is about the same as those from West Malaysia. Nothing distinctive about them. They all require lots of editing and rewriting," Forbes says.

Forbes says that while many believe publishing in Sabah and Sarawak is not as up-to-date as publishing in Peninsular Malaysia, this may no longer be true due to the rise of technology.

"More East Malaysians are getting published and receiving attention – and not just in Peninsular Malaysia. If there is a gap in the publishing sectors between East and West Malaysia, it is increasingly narrowing," he says.

Does he believe fiction set in Sabah and Sarawak would sell well in Malaysia overall?

According to him, it depends on the book's quality and storytelling, as it does with any book.

"Malaysian fiction has always been a tough sell. However, we must go on looking for good manuscripts written by Malaysians in all genres," Forbes says.

"I believe that in light of recent events people are now more curious about East Malaysia than before.

"There have been differences on both sides of this country but few attempts have been made to explore and understand those differences, such as their culture, history and their views of statehood and social integration, among others. Literature is one place to start."

A publisher's perspective

According to Natural History Publications Borneo (NHP) managing director Datuk Chan Chew Lun, books on Sabah and Sarawak do not sell well in Sabah, with most sales attributed to foreign visitors instead of locals.

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Chan: Getting into the market in Peninsular Malaysia is difficult. Filepic

Additionally, while publishing books can sometimes be an uphill task, distribution offers far more problems.

"Getting into the market in Peninsular Malaysia is difficult because of the discounts that chain bookshops want, which is between 45% and 50%.

"For a small publisher like us, when our print run is so small (300 to 400 copies for specialised titles) and we don't mark up our prices to allow such discounts, there is no way we can sell to Peninsular Malaysia advantageously.

"The international market is far better. They know and appreciate the value of our books," Chan says in an e-mail interview.

Established in 1992, NPH is an independent publisher based in Kota Kinabalu, founded after Chan, a naturalist, discovered he could not find any books about the local flora and fauna of Borneo. The company is now among the leading English language and natural history publishers in Malaysia and South-East Asia.

“It is greatly because of the specialised nature of our titles that makes marketing within Malaysia so difficult.

“Any books supplied to a chain bookshop that don’t move within three months are considered not worth taking and, hence, returned. Many of our titles fall within this category, which is very tragic,” he says.

According to Chan, his company receives 10 or more manuscripts every year; most submissions are sent in by non-Malaysians from Western countries – in his opinion, this is because local writers can easily get published by government publishers.

He adds that publishing is often seen as a “sunset industry”, as many people prefer to get their information off the Internet nowadays.

Yet despite all these obstacles, he feels it is still very important to keep publishing local writing. This is to retain knowledge for the future, he explains, citing *The Genus Melastoma In Borneo*, a title his company recently published, as an example.

“We managed to publish this title because there is a sponsor who kindly footed the printing cost. Only 500 copies are being printed,” Chan says.

“It is important to document such things. If we don’t encourage the publishing of many unusual titles like *The Genus Melastoma In Borneo*, the information will be lost.

“Or even if it is published, it would usually only be found in obscure journals that general readers have no access to.”

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