

SPOTLIGHT

Bookstores discover new lifestyle niche

In cities around the world, building beautiful book-selling venues with a focus on cultural and creative offerings is a strategy to help such shops survive

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The streets around Chunxi Road in downtown Chengdu, Sichuan province, help make up one of the wealthiest areas you will find in Southwest China.

In the hustle and bustle of the sprawling low-rise Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li shopping center, exquisitely dressed young women pose for photos that, with the glass-clad Gucci store or the pastel blue walls of a Tiffany store as their glamorous backdrop, will no doubt shortly adorn the pages of social media or websites. It is quite likely that the car that roars by now and again will be a Ferrari or a Porsche.

At 10 pm, when the commercial areas of most of China's biggest cities empty out as people make their way home, it seems that Chengdu's citizens simply begin another shift of their relaxed lives. On nearby Shamao Street, long lines, made up predominantly of young people, form in front of tea shops or stores selling local delicacies such as roasted pigs' feet or spicy dumplings.

Tranquility and excitement

Fashion, food and luxuries are not the only attractions there. Among the others are the 1,700-year-old Daci Temple, where the Buddhist monk, traveler and translator Xuan Zang was ordained in 622 AD. And Fang Suo Commune, on the basement level of Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li, offers a shopping experience that is out of the ordinary in what the website architecturaldigest.com listed last December as among the 17 most beautiful bookstores in the world.

Walking into Fang Suo Commune is like entering a cavernous subterranean world that is all but invisible from the outside. Once you are through the small, dark entrance, you are struck by the airy space, which covers 5,500 square meters and is 8 meters high, and a well-lit, clean and cozy atmosphere that offers both intimate tranquility and a buzz of excitement.

The place is a repository not only for a huge range of books, but also goods like clothing, teapots, cups, accessories, jigsaws, aromatherapy oils and other cultural and creative products such as bags printed with quotes from well-known authors and notebooks. You can peruse these as pleasant



Yunxi is one of the branches of the Librairie Avant-Garde in Nanjing, in East China's Jiangsu province.

background music and the hum of the assembled masses waft into your ears. Tucked in the corners of the store are at least two cafes, which could be categorized as regular and large, where shoppers can grab a coffee and relax, read, meet friends, work or study. At one point, a shop assistant gently reminds a reader that books can be taken to the cafes only after having been paid for. A cup of apple and kiwi-fruit juice costs 42 yuan (\$6.30), and a cup of coffee about 50 yuan.

Holding a book in their hands, some readers sit on the steps that lead to the lounge bridges, where shelves of books occupy whole walls. For others the urge to have their photos taken in front of the world's most beautiful bookstores is irresistible.

There are about 300,000 books, or about 100,000 titles, in the store, and the owners say book sales account for half the store's revenue, but if it is best-sellers you are looking for, you will not find them in the most conspicuous spots.

Books are organized according to theme, knowledge system and lines of thought: Literature, arts, cookbooks, decoration and lifestyle, and so on.

At the entrance are albums of paintings by masters such as Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Leonardo da Vinci. Walking into the store, you can see the newly published Chinese edition of the novel *Hag-Seed*, by the Canadian Margaret Atwood, and the Chinese edition of *Das Buch der verbrannten Buecher*, about Nazis burning books in Hitler's Germany, by Volker Weidermann.

The shop's multipurpose function

is alluded to in the name Fang Suo Commune. The idea is of a third space, an alternative to home and the workplace, where people can read, drink, date, hang out with friends, attend a lecture or an exhibition, buy interesting things, or just wander about the place.

In short, it is a lifestyle, Fang Suo Commune being just one of the answers to why people still need bookstores and what kinds of bookstores they need in an age when buying books online is more convenient and cheaper.

In early September, bookstore owners from 10 countries and regions gathered in Fang Suo Commune to discuss how to run a bookstore. They were from Librairie Avant-Garde, of Nanjing; Tales on Moon Lane Children's Bookshop, London; Livraria Cultura, Sao Paulo, Brazil; La Feltrinelli, Milan; Actes Sud, Arles, France; Do You Read Me?!, Berlin; The Last Bookstore, Los Angeles; JXJ Books, Taipei; Avid Reader, Brisbane, Australia; and B&B, Tokyo. For them, building beautiful and creative bookstores is a strategy aimed at helping them survive and a social responsibility that will bring changes in neighborhoods and cities.

A presentation and question-and-answer session given by the owner of B&B, Shintaro Uchinuma, had the audience laughing, and that reaction extended to his explanation of his shop's name, which he said stands for Book and Beer. For 500 yen (\$4.50) you get a cup of beer, and the right to read any book in the 100-sq-m shop.

Social responsibility

In addition, the shop's owners sell food and English lessons, make television programs about books and publish their own books.

"But we don't want to run a bar, a furniture store or a space specifically for hosting events," Uchinuma said. "The shop is very small. To sell the best books we are trying to survive in other ways so we can help people find interesting books. They come to our store to read and drink beer."

In Nanjing, in East China's Jiangsu province, Qian Xiaohua is the founder of Librairie Avant-Garde, which also deserves to be called one of the most beautiful bookstores in the world. He said it is very important for a book to keep the spirit of a time.

"A bookstore is as equally important



Junhui, part of the Librairie Avant-Garde chain, features traditional Chinese interior designs. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



From left: The Last Bookstore in Los Angeles opens its doors to everyone, including the homeless; Readers listen to a lecture; A tunnel-like interior in the store.



Livraria Cultura, in Sao Paulo, Brazil, is among bookstores around the world that offer a shopping experience that is out of the ordinary.

as clean air, sufficient sunshine and green plants for a city," Qian said. "The accumulation of knowledge drives the progress of human beings, and books are our best food.

"So we, as bookstore proprietors, should have the awareness and bear the social responsibility to create good bookstores and sell the best books."

Qian now has 13 bookstores in

Nanjing and other cities. While the Nanjing store bears the name Librairie Avant-Garde, the other 12 have their own names, and Qian said a 14th store will open in Nanjing this year.

Creativity is one important factor in Qian's success. He never replicates what he is doing, all the other 12 shops having their own distinct styles, not just architecturally, but also in

book categories, he said. "A good bookstore is the fruit of all book lovers' imagination."

The Last Bookstore in Los Angeles started as a secondhand bookstore in 2009, was on architecturaldigest.com's list of the world's most beautiful bookstores last year, and every year attracts thousands of visitors from around the world.

Katherine Orphan, the manager, said it opens its doors to various kinds of readers, including the homeless and the down and out.

Bookshops should not reject these people, she said, and The Last Bookstore allows them to buy books at \$1 apiece. She hopes that for those who are homeless or who have little money, the shop can be a haven.



More than 40 bookstores took part in the Shanghai Book Fair this year. PHOTOS BY GAO ERQIANG / CHINA DAILY

Backing for bricks and mortar

With government help, physical retail spaces are experiencing a revival and winning over consumers despite competition from online vendors

By ZHANG KUN in Shanghai
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Though they were once affected by competition from online merchants, brick-and-mortar bookstores are making a comeback thanks to government support, according to Peng Weiguo, deputy director of the Shanghai municipal administration of press and publication.

In 2012, Shanghai became the first city in China to introduce policies aimed at supporting and subsidizing physical bookshops. Two years later, the State administration of press and publication launched nationwide measures to help with the development of these businesses.

"All these policies, to a large degree, propelled the development of brick-and-mortar bookstores," said Peng.

According to the annual forum on the innovation and development of physical bookstores which took place during the Shanghai Book Fair — held at the Shanghai Exhibition Center from Aug 16 to 22 — more than 20 new bookstores have opened in the city or will be opening this year.

In addition, more than 40 brick-and-mortar bookstores participated in the Shanghai Book Fair this year by becoming venues for reading events and book launches. Some bookshops also set up pavilions at the book fair to showcase their products.

In Shanghai, Zhongshu Ge bookstore in Reel Mall celebrated its first anniversary on Aug 18. Luo Song, the store manager, said that sales have been steady. Located at the heart of the bustling West Nanjing Road com-



Bookstores with distinctive themes have opened in Shanghai in recent years.

mercial area, Zhongshu Ge ("planting trees") is a popular destination for young readers.

During the book fair, the store hosted reading events featuring *You Touched Me*, the latest novel by American Chinese author Yan Geling.

Apart from Zhongshu Ge bookstore, a large number of other boutique bookshops, each sporting a distinctive theme, have opened in Shanghai over the past few years. In addition to books, many of these shops also stock cultural products and have cafe areas where visitors can enjoy a cup of coffee while reading.

JIC Bookstore, which is situated in an old building by the Huangpu River in Hongkou district, even boasts a view of the Bund. The store is known for its collection of biographies.

Over at The Mix Place, a three-story bookshop on Hengshan Road in Xujiahui area, readers can find a large col-

lection of art magazines. Both shops play an active role in the local cultural scene by regularly hosting lectures, panels and themed events.

Peng noted that Shanghai's bookshops have developed a vibrant ecology featuring diverse styles and characteristics. He added that the management teams of these shops consist of talented people who are truly dedicated to the city's cultural development.

A veteran in the publishing industry, the State-owned Xinhua Bookstore is celebrating its 80th birthday this year. During the Shanghai Book Fair, representatives of the Xinhua group — from Northeast China's Heilongjiang province, Shenzhen in South China's Guangdong province, Sichuan in the southwest, and East China's Anhui province — shared their experience of reforming and

developing physical bookstores.