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Maggie Greene

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On the Joys of Online Book Shopping

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By Maggie Greene

In the fall of 2010, I advanced to candidacy at the University of California, San Diego, and bearing the new title of PhD *candidate* in modern Chinese history, I set off for that great and time-honored pilgrimage to the People's Republic of China to start researching my dissertation. I've been here four months, and while the process of researching Chinese opera (particularly *kun* opera and ghost plays) in the PRC has not been as smooth as I would have hoped, there is one thing that's been going swimmingly: book shopping. More precisely, shopping online for books related to my dissertation.

There are numerous sites out there dedicated to selling books: in the PRC, [Dang Dang](#) ships internationally and has a wide variety. My perennial favorite (both for their brick and mortar stores and online selection) is the Taiwanese chain [Eslite](#) (they also ship internationally, with reasonable shipping rates to boot). But for someone on the hunt for books and materials beyond recent publications, there is the holy grail of Chinese book websites: [Kong fuzi](#), the Chinese portal for thousands of individual bookstores and countless titles, both recent and antique. And, unlike many other sites, it's one that can really only be used while one is in China.

For a bibliophile like myself, who likes to own every bit of material related to my research that I can get my hands on, book shopping in China can be an unparalleled paradise. I was first introduced to the wonders of kongfz.com in 2009 by a classmate, who kindly offered to pick up some purchases for me when she returned home to Guilin. My spoils from that first foray included a 1960s practice edition of *Li Huiniang* used by the Northern Kun Opera Troupe in the first performance of the opera—mimeographed, torn cover, printed on appallingly bad paper (that I now realize is standard issue for mimeographed *anything* from 1950s and 1960s China), and with old school brads holding the whole thing together (and adding nice rust stains on the cover). I think I paid a whopping 20 RMB for it (about \$3 USD). I was hooked—it was like the Chinese Alibris, but cheaper!

Although I had said I'd be in a buying frenzy as soon as my feet hit Shanghainese earth on this research trip, it actually took me a couple of months before I got around to mining the wonderful treasure trove I had been introduced to. While I mentioned the site to a number of friends, general skittishness about dealing with the Chinese banking system and other pressing concerns put book shopping on the back burner until this month.

"Buying books online, is this not a good thing?": Shopping with Kong fuzi

As mentioned above, kongfz.com can really only be used while you're in China. There are a couple of reasons for this: first, you buy from individual sellers and there's no site-wide policy of international shipping. While I suppose it would be possible to contact every seller to ask if they would be willing to ship internationally, the bigger problem is method of payment. Your foreign credit or debit card is of no use on Kong fuzi. All sellers are set up to take forms of online payment (each of which rely on having a Chinese internet banking account) and/or the "traditional" method of depositing directly into the seller's bank account by getting yourself to the bank with carefully filled out deposit slip and cash in hand. If you're stuck in the States and drooling over volumes you can't buy, I suggest asking a friend in China to help you out!

On banking: as anyone who has ever been to a Chinese bank can probably attest, "slow" sometimes doesn't even begin to describe it. The last time I had to go to ICBC (one of the major Chinese banks that every seller seems to have an account with), I drew number 244—unfortunately for me, they were only on number 190. Which is to say, if you're going to be buying more than the odd volume here or there, it makes sense to set up online banking. I discovered early on that having to go from bank to bank with deposit slips for ten different sellers got tedious very quickly.

Getting a bank account set up is surprisingly easy, and at ICBC, all you need is your passport and a 100 RMB note. There is a great post on Black Dragon Café on [how to open an ICBC online bank account](#) that walks you through the process. [Fair warning to those who use Macs: ICBC software (like a lot of things in China) is only compatible with Windows and IE, and you must use the proprietary

software to actually buy things online. I browse and buy on my Mac, and use my little Windows netbook for actually sending payment.] When you finally walk out of the bank, you'll be in possession of a debit card, a bank register that you'll use if you need to do anything at the bank with your account, and a little USB key you'll plug in and use when sending payment.

After registering for an account on kongfz.com, you're ready to start browsing. I have a couple of different search strings I run somewhat regularly, just to see if anything new has been added. Coming up with a several different keywords that describe your topic will help maximize the useful books that pop up (e.g., if you are looking for specific years, this includes searching for 1961 and 61)—while I've generally found sellers to be pretty thorough and precise, occasionally things do slip through the cracks. An example would be a 1960s edition of *Li Huiniang* I purchased—the seller misread the last character, so it was listed as *Li Huigen*; I found it while doing a search for *kunqu* instead.

Sorting by price and publication date helps you wade through results. An author I study (Meng Chao) unfortunately shares part of a name with a doctor who has published prolifically (Wu Mengchao)—the sorting options let me bypass 500 volumes unrelated to *my* Meng Chao. When you're ready to buy, you wait for the seller to confirm and send payment information (if you have your online banking account ready to go, the process is really easy—if not, you'll need to take note of what bank and account number to submit payment to in person). If given the option of shipping speeds, I usually select registered mail (which is cheaper than express, but faster than "regular" mail). This generally adds between 4 and 8 RMB (around \$1 or less) to your total—I've found things show up three or four days after the seller confirms they've shipped the item, and sometimes faster!

The treasures of Kong fuzi

Offerings on Kong fuzi run the gamut from old letters to recently published secondary sources. When I finally started poking through the offerings from bookstores all over China, I had a hard time reining myself in. Everything was fair game—old journals? Check. Old practice editions used by Chinese opera troupes in the 1950s and 1960s, like that very first one I had bought? Absolutely. Picture book editions (*lianhuanhua*) of classic plays? Well, I *have* been looking to start a book collection of some type for a while ... Even less thrilling finds were still exciting. Secondary sources I'd found useful for 8RMB including shipping (\$1), books I didn't even know existed (the collected poems of a 17th century woman poet I adore).

Not everything comes cheap. As a PRC historian, I'm lucky that many of my sources are widely available and inexpensive; however, books and journals from the Republican period (and earlier) tend to have much higher price tags than post-1949 offerings. I was excited to discover a number of 1940s journals I'd been looking for, until I noticed the price—1500 RMB *each* (over \$200). By comparison, I purchased a beautifully bound set of *Xiju bao* from 1955 to 1959 (nearly 100 individual issues in total) for 1000 RMB (\$150)—and individual issues of the same magazine can be had for as little as 8 RMB, or just over \$1.

So, what can you get—and what will it cost you? Obviously, a lot depends on condition and rarity: you can have a field day comparison shopping with editions that are widely available, while you may find yourself paying more than you expected for an edition that is in good shape and only has one copy listed on the site. Here are a few examples of my recent purchases:



• A four volume *Peiwen yunfu*, 1980s edition (a Qing dynasty rhyming dictionary): 750 RMB (\$114) and a specialized two volume dictionary for poetry and drama,

1970s edition: 40 RMB (\$6). I narrowly missed scoring the former for 350 RMB (\$53), but all the other editions were 1000 RMB and up—all the way up, in fact, to an early 18th century version for 450,000 RMB (\$68,400).

- A collection of essays related to a *kunqu* conference, 1957: 110 RMB (\$16), reminiscences of *kunqu* artists, 1961: 100 RMB (\$15), and a script/musical score used by the Jiangsu Su-Kun Troupe, 1962: 60 RMB (\$9)



- A complete set of *Xiju bao*, 1955-1959, with library quality binding: 1000 RMB (\$150) and *Xiju bao*, 1960 (January-June), with binding that has seen better days: 100 RMB (\$15). These two illustrate neatly the wide variety of condition materials can be in; while I could have put together the 1950s magazines for cheaper by purchasing individual years, the very nice binding was worth the extra money for me. As a bit of a cautionary tale, the 1960 *Xiju bao* has been my only disappointing purchase to date. The seller had it listed as a complete year (months 月 1-12), when in fact it is only *half* a year (numbers 期 1-12). Kong fuzi does let you ask questions of sellers, and you can also complain (or leave feedback) describing any issues after receiving the items—I didn't do that here, as I felt it was my own fault for not checking more closely and suspected it was an honest mistake on the part of the seller (and it wasn't a very expensive error for me), but it is something to be aware of.

- A collection of materials related to the "*Li Huiniang* problem," 1966: 95 RMB (\$14) and a collection of materials related to *Hai Rui baguan*, *Xie Yaohuan*, and *Li Huiniang*, 1966: 10 RMB (\$1.50). The latter is in somewhat battered condition (and there were a few copies available), while the former is pristine and the only one I saw on the site.



- *Li Huiniang* picture books, two from the early 1980s (10-35 RMB, \$1.50 - \$5), one from 2009 (20 RMB, \$3).

- Modern volumes published in the last 15 years, 22-30 RMB (\$3-\$4.50). "Why not just go to a bookstore?" you may ask. Well, these were books I knew existed, but could not find when I went to look at brick and mortar stores on Fuzhou lu. Prices on Kong fuzi also tend to be cheaper (sometimes as much as half off) than list price for recently published books, even in brand new condition (as two of these were).

On the joys of book shopping and doing research with your bank account in tow

My packages arrive every day—usually little ones, but sometimes big ones. Recently, my beautiful set of *Xiju bao* arrived in a very large (and very heavy) box. A Chinese friend asked me why I bothered buying the magazines, since I could just walk to the Shanghai Library and use theirs. Despite the availability of the magazine in libraries (both here and back in the US) and online, I find there is something so useful about flipping through hard copies of journals and newspapers. Our databases

make it easy to find every occurrence of a search term with a few keystrokes. But it's so hard to replicate the experience of simply paging through a source and seeing what leaps out when one is dealing in links and PDFs, and I'm thrilled to have my very own copies now.

A lot has changed since my advisors were doing their dissertation research. The fact that we now have access to libraries and archives in the PRC is something that was only a pipe dream for a few decades. Fantastic online databases mean we can access journals, books, and newspapers from the late Qing on (and, in some cases, things much older than that). But I can't help thinking that one of the coolest things, and certainly quite different, is the fact that I can hop online, type in a few search terms, and get kicked back a list of potential sources—sources that I can buy with my trusty USB key card from ICBC, and that will arrive at my house in a few days, carried by my harried post person (who still screams out my Chinese name at the top of her lungs upon arriving). In the past few days, things have shown up on my doorstep that I didn't even know existed before I found them on the world's best second hand book website.

I always sit down with my new-to-me books, look through their sometimes crisp, often battered pages, and write my name and date of acquisition on the inside cover. It's an insipid ritual, but there is something that is so wonderful about handling these bits of history (even if I, as a PRC historian, only handle things that are at most 60 years old). I've always liked the Japanese historian E.H. Norman's description of the pleasures of the historian (as related by John Dower in *Origins of the Modern Japanese State: Selected Writings of E.H. Norman*):

On the most simple and intimate level, he spoke (in "History: Its Uses and Pleasure") of "the magical pleasure that the reading of history can give"—the realization that there is no last word on any given subject; the recognition that when written by the greats, history has the pathos of a Greek tragedy; the dimensions of irony, mystery and poetry; and this: "that peculiar pleasure of reading in the calm of one's study of turbulent events, of great triumphs and failures or simply of the everyday life of people in bygone ages. To cast one's mind into the past and to have described vividly for one the passions and ambitions, the hopes and disappointments not only of great men, but of people like ourselves, is to feel an intimation of man's immortal spirit. (5)

... and can't help thinking that it's all the more delightful when kicking back with an aged book that has somehow survived long enough to fall into my hands—here, now, in 2011—all thanks to the wonder that is online book shopping.

Maggie Greene is a PhD candidate in modern Chinese history at UC San Diego; her research interests include classical opera after 1949 and contemporary digital gaming culture in the PRC. An earlier version of this post appeared at her own [website](#).

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