

The Commercial Press

The First Chapter of Chinese Bookstores

Founder | Xia Rui Fang (夏瑞芳), Bao Xian Chang (鲍咸昌), Bao Xian En (鲍咸恩),
Gao Feng Chi (高凤池), Zhang Yuan Ji (张元济), Yin You Mo (印有模)
Year Founded | 1915
Address | 172, South Bridge Rd



商务印书馆： 华文书局第一章

成立于1897年的商务印书馆是中国第一家现代出版机构，因应新式教科书的需求日增，这家书局在1915年于新加坡设店后掀开了岛国华文书店业的第一章。二战前，商务和中华书局凭中国版教科书长踞南洋教科书市场的龙头宝座，并进而专为本地学子规划教科书。惟如今书局门市已结业，仅保留网售与分销业务，让不少老顾客为之惋惜。

“A family can last several generations with meritorious deeds, and the most beneficial of them all is reading,” reads a couplet written by Zhang Yuan Ji, the founder of the first modern press in China – The Commercial Press. This nationally-recognised cultural publisher in China was set up on 11 February 1897 in Shanghai, China by four typesetting staff of a foreign newspaper agency, Xia Rui Fang, Bao Xian Chang, Bao Xian En, and Gao Feng Chi. Zhang, an outstanding Chinese scholar, joined the management team with a capital injection in 1901, and set up an editorial and translation department to launch The Commercial Press’ publishing business. The Commercial Press moved its headquarters to Beijing in 1954.

Shanghai’s publishing industry was experiencing rapid growth and increasing patriotism in China during this time. The unique combination of opportunities gave The Commercial Press a good platform to emerge as one of the two iconic contemporary cultural organisations, along with Peking University (北京大学). The Commercial Press continued to be a leader in the industry when it travelled south as it was the first Chinese bookstore in Singapore.

Starting with Chinese Products and Textbooks

After the Republic of China was established in 1911, Chinese schools in Singapore and Malaya began to flourish. Though located in China, The Commercial Press was quick to notice the demand for updated textbooks in Southeast Asia. Singapore became its first overseas stop; Cao Wan Feng National Products Company (曹万丰国货公司, “Cao Wan Feng”), was appointed as the local agent for The Commercial Press in 1912. The company was located across Masjid Jamae on South Bridge Road, known locally as Da Po’s Main Road (大坡大马路) back then. It was a careful approach of The Commercial Press to test the local market’s demand through an agent first before mounting a full frontal charge. According to an advertisement (dated 27 November 1915) in the 20 March 1916 issue of *Cheng Nam Jit Poh* (《振南日报》), Cao Wan Feng highlighted that besides publications of The Commercial Press, it was also retailing publications of Chung

The Commercial Press cancelled its agency contract with Cao Wan Feng National Products Company on 3 December 1915 and would be opening its own branch in Singapore on 27 March 1916

(Source: *Cheng Nam Jit Poh*, 22 March 1916, p.6)



Hwa Book Company (中华书局), Sao Ye Shan Fang (扫叶山房), and Zhonghua Tushu Company (中华图书公司). Founded by Chinese migrants from Shanghai and Wuxi (无锡), the company was one of the two distributors in Nanyang (Southeast Asia) for the important ideological magazine in China, *La Jeunesse* (《新青年》) (1915-1922), and the first art publication in China, *The True Record* (《真相画报》) (1912-1913).

In response to the increasing demand for new local textbooks, The Commercial Press decided to set up its first overseas branch in Singapore in 1915, with Qiu Pei Mei (邱培枚) appointed as its first manager. From its opening notice in the 22 March 1916 issue of *Cheng Nam Jit Poh*, we know that the official opening of the Singapore branch of The Commercial Press was on 27 March 1916. The range of products included books (textbooks, reference books, periodicals, novels, etc.), printing supplies like copper mould and type, as well as stationery. In addition, it offered services for printing books, illustrated books, shares and trademarks. The setting up of the Singapore branch was not plain sailing as The Commercial Press' management did not see eye to eye on the overseas expansion. Zhang was a proponent of choosing Singapore and his strong support was probably a result of what he lamented as a contemptible state of affairs in Singapore, having witnessed the exploitation of the Chinese labourers in Singapore and the widespread gambling.

With many of the Chinese migrants in the region pinning for their homeland, the demand for Chinese goods was naturally high. Chinese publications – nourishment for the mind – were no



different. The Commercial Press and Chung Hwa Book Company were two of the bookstores that had taken on the responsibility of meeting that demand while promoting Chinese culture, local literary and education. Most of the textbooks used in the Chinese schools at both primary and secondary levels were published by these two giants of the Chinese bookstore industry. The Commercial Press started producing textbooks in 1903 and up till the Second Sino-Japanese War, it had published some 18 series of textbooks for primary and secondary schools. Though there were no statistics to prove its dominance in the local textbook market,

Before the Second World War, The Commercial Press was located in a three-storey building at Da Po's Main Road, with its warehouse found at 32 Mosque Street

(Source: 《商务印书馆建馆八十周年纪念 1897-1977》, 页106。)