

OPINION

Why You Should Support Alternative Bookstores

When May Fung witnessed her beloved neighbourhood bookstore close down back in 2008, she took a huge gamble. Despite her hectic schedule as an artist, arts educator and administrator, she bought the failing business's remaining stock, and set up the non-profit art space and bookstore, Arts & Culture Outreach (ACO).

For Fung, the promotion of alternative bookstores in Hong Kong is a particularly important mission. Through ACO, she hopes to promote the virtues of the printed word on art, music and literature to the Hong Kong community. "In Hong Kong, reading culture has been heavily affected by the development of technology," Fung asserts, "and when a smart phone provides more than enough content to occupy people's attention, what is the meaning of reading a book in today's world?"

The question she poses is particularly pertinent, as the publishing industry is facing profound changes. In particular, the rising influence of electronic media has resulted in younger generations who are no longer experiencing the analogue sensation of the printed word. "How do we get young people to return to reading a physical book and enjoy that feeling?" Fung asks. These are the questions that she has been grappling with since the establishment of ACO.

Even more challenging for her business is how to bring a wider readership to the type of books that Fung believes are important to read. "We want books that are not available in mainstream bookstores, books that are mainly about the humanities such as art, culture, psychology, and philosophy. These are the books that enrich our inner lives." In doing so, she encourages all communities to engage with quality ideas and to be able to think critically.

Not being swayed by commercial concerns or popular trends, alternative bookstores are an important channel for values and habits that Fung believes are now more necessary than ever. This is especially so in a city such as Hong Kong where priorities often veer towards the lucrative, and technology facilitates a lifestyle of unhealthy convenience and immediacy. Alternative bookstores such as ACO promote ideals that go beyond the dollar sign, and gives space for books, people, and ideas that seek to benefit our minds and souls instead.

Of course, Fung is no stranger to social resistance. Her experience as an arts educator in both local high schools and universities has shown her exactly how difficult it is for youngsters in the city to sit down with a book and read. However Fung tackles this challenge by creating new reading experiences, hoping that this novel approach will draw out a love of reading.

"We have a program called 'Reading/Creation Project', which invites artists, dancers, musicians or other creatives to select a book and work together with participants to study the book or create something together," she explains. "If you are able to expand the experience beyond reading alone and respond to the book in a tangible way, you can increase desire and interest."

Despite the many challenges ahead of her, Fung's passion for the cause is fueled by an intangible feeling that she has always associated with books. "It is that feeling you get when you pick up a book and it strikes a chord in you: that ability for a book to take you to another world is irreplaceable." Alternative bookstores allow you to reach those places. We should encourage all communities to engage with them. "Reading culture really depends on how it is developed and handled. We shouldn't throw in the towel."

