The R.F. Price Collection

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The R.F. Price Collection, held in the East Asian Library Rare Books Collection at the University of Melbourne, comprises Chinese educational and children’s books published from the 1960s to the 1980s and is unique among western library holdings. It includes a comprehensive collection of primary and secondary school textbooks; books on a variety of educational disciplines such as educational theory, administration, systems, and educational history; biographies of educators; directories of educational institutions in China; and a rich collection of children’s books, which are rarely found in Australian libraries. The collection, comprising over 1,000 titles, was donated to the University by Dr Ronald Francis Price in July 2007.

Dr Price is a scholar of comparative education. He has written widely on education in China, including the book Education in Communist China, first published in the World Education Series edited by Professor Brian Holmes of the London Institute of Education. Born in the UK, Dr Price taught there, in Bulgaria, and in Ghana. In 1965 he went to teach English at the Second Foreign Languages Institute in Beijing, returning to the UK in the summer of 1967. In 1971 he took up a post in the School of Education at La Trobe University, where he taught until his retirement in 1991. Some of the materials donated to the East Asian Collection were purchased by Dr Price during his stay in Beijing, others on subsequent visits to China, including periods spent teaching summer schools at the Xi’an Normal University (Xi’an Shifan Daxue) or in Hong Kong.

In 1966, during Dr Price’s first period of teaching in China, Mao Zedong launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, which led to ten years of chaos in China, with widespread suffering and loss of life. The Cultural Revolution was a struggle for power within the Communist Party between Mao, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, and later with Zhou Enlai and Lin Biao, and was only ended by the arrest of the Gang of Four. Red guards were formed by Mao to smash the ‘Four Olds’ (old ideas, old culture, old habits and old customs).

During the ten chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution, China suffered from a severe shortage of books. Publications during this period had a strong emphasis on politics: the propagation of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. The R.F. Price Collection has a good coverage of this type of political publication. One of the most important and popular works during the Cultural Revolution was the Little Red Book or Quotations of Chairman Mao, produced in pocket size with a red plastic jacket, more than one billion copies were printed for the Chinese people to study in schools and at workplaces and to carry at all times. Mao’s quotations were cited in boldface or in red in most editions. Other popular works were Mao’s Selected works and Mao’s Poems. From 1966 to 1969, nearly all schools in China were closed due to political instability. The schools gradually began to function again from late 1968, a process discussed by Dr Price.
in his book *Education in modern China.*

The collection is particularly strong in textbooks used in primary and secondary schools in the years concerned. There are several hundred of these volumes covering a variety of subjects such as history, geography, politics, arts, moral education, music, Chinese language, English language, biology, chemistry, physics, mathematics, calculus, geometry, hygiene and women’s health. There are texts and basic reference works for vocational groups such as the ‘barefoot doctors’, workers and peasants. Examination of the school textbooks shows the prevalence of the cult of Mao. For example, in lesson 30 of *Chinese language*, v. 1 for primary schools, the text includes ‘Chairman Mao loves us. Chairman Mao asks us to study hard … We need to listen to Chairman Mao and be the Chairman’s good Children.’

In addition to the textbooks, the R.F. Price Collection includes 250 volumes of children’s books. Young children in Mao’s time did not escape the Mao cult and communist ideology. Ranging from nursery rhymes to story-telling, children’s books were used as propaganda to brainwash children into loving the Communist Party and Chairman Mao, thus promoting Mao’s ideological campaigns. The children’s book collection includes picture books and children’s literature. There is a good coverage of books on anti-Confucianism and the anti-Lin Biao campaign of 1973–1974, books about revolutionary heroes such as Lei Feng (1940–1962), the Little Red Guards and anti-USA imperialism.

As well as this propaganda material, Dr Price collected a good sample of juvenile science literature. This aims to promote young children’s exploration of scientific knowledge. *The 100 thousand whys* 万个为什么 series, and the *We love science* 我们爱科学 series, both published by Shaonian ertong chubanshe in Shanghai in the 1960s and 1970s, were very popular children’s books. Critics considered *The sparking red star* 闪闪的红星 by Li Xintian, published by Beijing Renmin chubanshe in 1972, to be an excellent work. During the Cultural Revolution there was very little literature for children. What was published was compiled under the political dictates of class struggle. However, Dr Price’s collection of children’s books offers a rare insight into social and political trends in children’s literature for researchers studying the Cultural Revolution and post-Cultural Revolution eras.
The R.F. Price Collection is held in the East Asian Rare Books Collection in the Baillieu Library. Cataloguing of the collection was made possible by the generous support of the Russell and Mah Gumwade Miegunyah Fund and a cultural collections grant funded by the University’s Annual Appeal. Bibliographic information on the books can be searched from the University of Melbourne library catalogue http://cat.lib.unimelb.edu.au/. Because of their rarity, the books are not available for loan, but may be used in the Cultural Collections Reading Room on the 3rd floor of the Baillieu Library. Material can be ordered at the East Asian Information Desk or by calling (03) 8344 5365, or by email to Bick-har Yeung on bhy@unimelb.edu.au.

Bick-har Yeung is the East Asian Librarian at the University of Melbourne Library.

Notes


6 Price, *Education in modern China*.


8 Ying yu. Di 1 ce. 英语, [Xi’an: s.n., 197–?]. Gift of Dr R.F. Price, 2007, East Asian Rare Book Collection, University of Melbourne.

9 Shi wan ge wei shen me 十万个为什么, Shanghai: Shao nian er tong chu ban she, 1965. Gift of Dr R.F. Price, 2007, East Asian Rare Book Collection, University of Melbourne.

