

## China's Books-in-Print System: A Troubled History and the Way Forward

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### Abstract

The high-quality development of modern publishing and distribution, as well as library resource construction, urgently requires the timely and open dissemination of new, comprehensive, and accurate China Books in Print. However, the exploration of China Books in Print from 1983 to 2014 has experienced numerous setbacks and remains unsuccessful. This article systematically reviews this history, analyzes the deep-seated reasons for the failure of the commercialization model of China Books in Print, identifies the development direction and feasible implementation strategies for the construction of China Books in Print, and aims to promote the early establishment of a genuine China Books in Print platform that can efficiently serve society.

### Full Text

### Preamble

**Chinese Offer Booklist: A Tortuous Journey and the Path Forward**  
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### Abstract

Modern publishing and high-quality library resource development urgently require a timely, comprehensive, and accurate Chinese offer booklist disseminated through open channels. However, despite three decades of exploration from 1983 to 2014, the development of a Chinese offer booklist has endured numerous setbacks and remains unrealized. This article systematically reviews this history, analyzes the deep-seated causes behind the failure of commercial models for the Chinese offer booklist, and identifies both the developmental direction and practical implementation strategies to facilitate the early establishment of a genuine Chinese offer booklist platform that efficiently serves society.

**Keywords** Chinese booklist; Offer booklist; Construction model; Interest balance; Chinese Offer Booklist Service Platform

In 2013, China published 444,000 book titles, an increase of 30,000 from 2012, including 256,000 new titles [1]. Who can provide a catalog of these 444,000 titles? Total print runs reached 8.31 billion copies, yet year-end inventory at Xinhua Bookstore systems and publisher-owned distribution units stood at 6.519 billion copies, a 16.42% increase from the previous year [2]. Meanwhile, libraries—major book purchasers—cannot acquire needed titles from this inventory due to difficulties in accessing bibliographic information. As Yang Yufen noted in 2013, China’s bibliographic information still fails to fully meet the needs of upstream publishers, midstream distributors (wholesalers and retailers), and downstream libraries and the public [3]. Clearly, an open Chinese offer booklist network platform has become a social imperative. In fact, exploration of a Chinese offer booklist began as early as 1983, spanning thirty years of trials and tribulations without achieving success. This paper attempts to systematically review the theory and practice of these three decades, analyze the reasons, and stimulate further discussion.

## 1. The Developmental History of Chinese Offer Booklist Construction

Through careful examination of published literature, this study identifies four stages in the thirty-year exploration of the Chinese offer booklist: theoretical sprouting, initial practice, booming development, and disappearance. While this periodization may not be scientifically precise, it serves as a framework for analysis.

### 1.1 Theoretical Sprouting Stage: 1983-1995

In 1983, Zheng Shuzhi published “On Publishing Catalogs” [4], illustrating the importance of publishing catalogs for library supplementary procurement—arguably the earliest publicly available theoretical exploration of offer booklists in China. In the same year, Chen Weichang published “Bowker’s Books in Print in the United States” [5], introducing its powerful information capabilities: in 1980-1981, it included 538,000 book titles from 8,400 publishers. However, these two articles failed to attract attention or discussion within China’s publishing, distribution, and library communities.

In 1985, after investigating the U.S. Bowker Company, renowned Chinese publishing expert Wang Yi repeatedly elaborated on the necessity of building an offer booklist database, yet the publishing, distribution, and library sectors still showed no interest or discussion. In 1991, Gu Ben from the National Library of China pointed out that Western countries all had publicly issued books-in-print catalogs, while China had none. He argued that the *National Bibliography of China* and *National New Books* only reflected publishing records or library collection scopes during certain periods, not book availability or price fluctuations,

making an in-print catalog essential. Gu further suggested that the National Press and Publication Administration was most suitable for undertaking this work [6]. In the same year, the Administration organized the development of the national standard *CIP Data for National In-Print Cataloging* (GB12451-90), implemented in March 1991.

In 1994, *Publishing Reference* magazine published “Global Books in Print CD-ROM Released,” noting that “this CD-ROM is priced at £1,695,” enabling users to directly place electronic orders with desired wholesalers quickly and efficiently [7]. In the same year, Liu Zhibin published an article promoting the Bowker/Whitaker Global Books in Print CD-ROM, which contained over 2 million English-language book titles, representing an authoritative and comprehensive bibliographic database [8]. These two announcements demonstrated through concrete examples that large-scale, high-quality bibliographic information databases possess tremendous social and economic value, catalyzing the concept of a “Chinese offer booklist.”

During this stage, the concept of a “Chinese offer booklist” had not yet been proposed; discussions focused on the market significance of “publishing catalogs” and “in-print catalogs,” with limited impact on the publishing and distribution community. Nevertheless, these efforts 促成了 the birth of the *CIP Data for National In-Print Cataloging* national standard.

## 1.2 Initial Practice Stage: 1996–2003

In 1996, China Financial Publishing House published “China Financial Publishing House Offer Booklist” in issue 4 of *China Finance* magazine (page 32), listing 24 book titles (including only title and price fields) along with purchase methods, remittance information, and contact telephone numbers [9]. This marked China’s first public issuance of an “offer booklist,” sounding the call to action. In the same year, Yang Muzhi, Deputy Director of the former Press and Publication Administration, after investigating Germany’s publishing industry, identified the lack of an offer booklist database as a major shortcoming in China’s industry development and advocated for forceful measures to build a Chinese offer booklist database. This represented the first explicit proposal for constructing a “Chinese offer booklist database.”

In January 1998, the Sino-foreign joint venture Beijing Kewen Shiye Information Co., Ltd. collected over 100,000 available booklist titles from more than 300 publishers and produced the CD-ROM edition of *Chinese Offer Booklist* [10]. Although still limited in scope, this milestone carried significant practical importance.

In 1998, Yue Ya published “Construction and Development of In-Print Booklist Databases” [11], proposing to build a CTP booklist database using in-print book CIP data as the source, promptly adding new CIP data records to a national-level Chinese booklist database, and disseminating it through computer networks to various users (book acquisition librarians, publishing and distribution

institutions, and readers). Wang Haifeng published “A Comparison Between National Bibliography and Offer Booklist” [12], arguing that offer booklists constitute a type of commercial bibliography. Subsequent articles such as “On Commercial Bibliographies,” “Preliminary Exploration of Network Publishing Bibliographies,” and “On the Modernization of China’s Publishing Bibliography Work” were published in core journals, yet none conducted comparative analysis or in-depth discussion on whether Chinese offer booklist construction should follow commercial or official operation models.

During this stage, China saw the practice of “offer booklists” and “Chinese offer booklists,” while theoretically, two different opinions emerged regarding government versus commercial models. However, neither side designed concrete, feasible control mechanisms or implementation methods for Chinese offer booklist construction.

### 1.3 Booming Development Stage: 2004-2007

From a societal perspective, the booming stage of Chinese offer booklist development correlates with the implementation of China’s regular undergraduate teaching quality assessment in higher education institutions. In 2003, the Ministry of Education launched the “Higher Education Teaching Quality and Teaching Reform Project,” deciding to conduct a five-year cycle of teaching quality assessments for regular undergraduate institutions. In 2004, the Ministry issued the *Pilot Scheme for Regular Undergraduate Teaching Quality Assessment in Higher Education Institutions*, causing tremendous shock in the library community—the collection standard was 100 books per student! University libraries received substantial book procurement funds without solicitation and had to make rushed purchases. One university in Guangxi even planned to invest nearly 10 million yuan in Chinese book procurement in a single year to meet the “100 books per student” requirement [13], creating absolute and urgent demand for a Chinese offer booklist!

In 2004, *National New Books* published “Offer Booklist is an Extremely Important Link in the Book Publishing and Distribution Chain” [14], raising the “Chinese offer booklist” topic once again and arguing that it should be a government initiative. The number of book titles available annually reflects a nation’s publishing level and supply capacity. By the end of 2004, the China Library Society proposed building the largest offer booklist network, creating an interactive communication platform integrating customers, publishers, retailers, and readers [15]. Simultaneously, commercial bibliography thinking began to expand. The Xinhua Distribution Group publicly stated it would establish a Chinese offer booklist database including rolling release data information for all in-print and inventory books from mainland Chinese publishers and Xinhua bookstores [16].

The year 2005 could be called the “Year of Chinese Offer Booklist,” with numerous articles published including “The Urgency of Compiling Chinese ‘Books

in Print’ ,” “Commercial Operation of Chinese Offer Booklist,” “Preliminary Exploration of Building a Chinese Characteristic Offer Booklist System,” “On Publishing Bibliography Systems,” “Resource Sharing and Co-construction of Bibliographic Information Should be Realized—My Views on Offer Booklist,” “Co-operative Construction of Chinese In-Print Booklist Network,” and “Accelerating Construction of Chinese Offer Booklist Database.” Yang Yufen from the Press and Publication Administration Information Center argued that the publishing bibliography system is the cornerstone of the entire publishing and distribution industry, running through book publishing, distribution, and consumption. In the early stage of Chinese offer booklist construction, government and industry institutions could guide its direction and adopt semi-mandatory measures to encourage publishers to join the system [3]. Kan Yuanhan noted that offer booklists are urgently needed information products for management departments, publishing and distribution institutions, and readers, especially library group purchasers who desperately need offer booklist products providing information on all publishers’ books with guaranteed supply. He argued that developing offer booklists in China required government leadership and step-by-step operation [17]. However, some distributors, considering their own interests, disagreed. Zou Jin, General Manager of Beijing Ren Tian Bookstore Co., Ltd. (hereinafter “Ren Tian Bookstore” ), published “Commercial Operation of Chinese Offer Booklist,” explicitly advocating that commercial operation was more appropriate [18]. In March 2005, Ren Tian Bookstore began issuing the CD-ROM version of *Chinese Offer Booklist* and subsequently established the “Chinese Offer Booklist” database. Faced with enormous business opportunities, other companies were not to be outdone. On October 27, 2005, Zhongbantong (Beijing) Data Information Technology Co., Ltd. (hereinafter “Zhongbantong” ) was established with great fanfare in Beijing. General Manager Yang Wensheng stated plans to build a relatively complete Chinese offer booklist within three years, providing comprehensive bibliographic information services to publishing units, distribution units, libraries, educational and research institution reference rooms, and other purchasing groups and readers. The company would further expand into book search platforms, market information feedback, and large-scale comprehensive market analysis and decision-making systems, providing comprehensive information services based on internet platforms for China’ s publishing industry group [19]. In November 2005, the Press and Publication Administration Publications Distribution Standardization Technical Committee reviewed and approved the *Rules for Book Circulation Information Exchange*, China’ s first information management standard for the publishing industry.

Amidst the vigorous construction of Chinese offer booklists, the media remained less confident. Chen Yuanyan believed that completing “Chinese Books in Print” construction within 3-5 years was possible but required coordinated cooperation from all parties and full utilization of domestic and international experience [20]. Xiao Wu explicitly pointed out that whether the China Publishing Group could gain industry response and support was also an indispensable factor determining whether its Chinese offer booklist database could be established as

scheduled and achieve its intended benefits [21]. Gu Ben also clearly stated that truly establishing a Chinese offer booklist system required certain time, human resources, and financial resources, as well as government support and policy guarantees [22]. Theoretical researchers were clearly concerned about the go-it-alone commercial model.

In 2006, Chinese offer booklist theory and practice entered deeper waters. *China Book Business Post* published “Offer Booklist Again Becomes Focus of Industry Upgrading” [23], pushing Chinese offer booklist construction to a new climax. The China Publishing Group invested 20 million yuan in Zhongbantong’s “Chinese Offer Booklist” database construction [24]. Whether this huge investment was necessary or fully allocated remains unknown, but its industry publicity effect was evident. While distributors like Ren Tian Bookstore and Zhongbantong vigorously promoted Chinese offer booklist construction, the media issued rational calls. *China Press and Publication News* called for “the urgent establishment of a national unique offer booklist database” [25]. At the 2006 China Nanjing Library Collection Book Fair, Ai Limin, then Director of the Press and Publication Administration Information Center, also called for establishing an authoritative national book offer booklist database as quickly as possible [26]. In fact, Chinese offer booklist construction clearly encountered difficulties less than one year after its launch: Zhongbantong General Manager Yang Wensheng called for government departments to formulate corresponding policies and provide support and assistance; hoped publishers would actively participate, giving more attention even if they temporarily couldn’t see the dawn of offer booklists; and hoped researchers inside and outside the industry would participate in attention and research on offer booklists, enabling rapid and orderly information flow and strengthening feedback between buyers and sellers [27].

The “cooling” of Chinese offer booklist construction beginning in 2007 still had a subtle relationship with the Ministry of Education’s university assessment. This assessment cycle ran from 2003 to 2007 (with a few institutions assessed in early 2008), involving 592 higher education institutions [28], meaning the assessment work concluded in 2008. Due to the enormous cataloging and processing workload, libraries at the last batch of assessed institutions had to complete book procurement ahead of schedule—by 2007, large-scale book purchasing by university libraries had essentially ended.

Despite two years of vigorous development, the library community still felt no benefit. In 2007, Jiang Honghui published an article bluntly pointing out that China’s more than 10,000 libraries lacked a unified offer booklist platform for book procurement, relying instead on book suppliers for bibliographic data, while the traditional “four catalogs” had become largely ineffective [29]. In the same year, Zhao Xuejun published “Chinese Offer Booklist Database Construction Has a Long Way to Go,” noting that Chinese offer booklist construction lacked unified and standardized information production standards and relevant management methods, that publishing units failed to strictly implement the *China Standard Book Number National Standard*, and that the government, as

the macro-regulator of the publishing industry, bore responsibility for formulating specific policies to guarantee offer booklist construction [30]. However, the article still failed to propose practical and feasible measures.

#### 1.4 Disappearance Stage: 2008-2014

During this stage, the author feels deeply disappointed, having found only two articles on offer booklists, neither presenting new ideas or proposals. Media reports on “Chinese offer booklist” also became rare.

## 2. Analysis of Reasons for the Difficult Birth of Chinese Offer Booklist

Offer booklist construction has been advocated for 30 years, and eight years have passed since the large-scale launch of “Chinese offer booklist” construction in 2005, yet hope remains elusive. The historical process of Chinese offer booklist construction clearly reveals that both theoretical research and practical actions have ignored research on potential interest conflicts and feasible construction schemes.

The first unavoidable question is: Who should build it? Most scholars advocate government construction, while businessmen or those with intricate interests connected to business advocate commercialization. A very few individuals with official backgrounds, for unknown reasons, also echo commercialization. Consequently, the two “Chinese offer booklist databases” initiated in 2005 both adopted “commercial model operation.” After nearly ten years of construction, what is the current status of these two “Chinese offer booklist” databases [31-32]? Out of courtesy, the author can only say they are unimpressive! Simply examining the inclusion of catalogs from major publishers—such as Higher Education Press, People’s Literature Publishing House, and Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press—reveals they are unworthy of their names.

The second question that must be confronted is: How can interest conflicts be resolved? In a 2012 article, Yang Hui publicly pointed out that Zhongbantong’s “Chinese offer booklist database” suffered from severely lagging bibliographic releases that failed to reflect actual availability, making it unusable for library collection development. Library acquisition staff commonly use bibliographic data provided by book suppliers, who, driven by economic interests, deliberately 屏蔽 bibliographic information from publishers with high wholesale discounts [33]. In fact, neither commercial “Chinese offer booklist” database displays ISBN numbers in search results, preventing libraries from directly using them to form orders. Zhongbantong company provides clear data pricing: 5 yuan per record for EXCEL or DBF format acquisition data, 5 yuan per record for ISO format CNMARC data, and 10 yuan per record for ISO format USMARC data [34]. Library book acquisition requires comprehensive bibliographic coverage for extensive selection, often involving tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of records. At Zhongbantong’s prices, some libraries’ book procurement

funds would be insufficient to purchase the bibliographic data alone. Would libraries be willing to spend huge sums on acquisition data with unsatisfactory coverage and currency? The number of library users for Zhongbantong can be imagined, and distributor users would also be few, because in the internet age, most distributors directly request bibliographic data from publishers. Would publishers then be willing to pay to timely provide bibliographic information to the “Chinese offer booklist” ? Therefore, based on the characteristics of peer competition and profit pursuit, practice has cruelly proven that genuine Chinese offer booklist database construction is unsuitable for distributors to undertake.

Is third-party commercial operation feasible then? The author still gives a negative answer. Advocates often cite developed country cases, but after 30 years, has this been useful? We must calmly and objectively examine the issue from the standpoint of all parties’ interests. Third-party commercial operation would inevitably involve charging publishers for bibliographic dissemination and users for bibliographic access, triggering a “chicken-and-egg” problem: For publishers, paying for publicity naturally requires the information platform to have a huge audience, especially libraries; for library-dominated users, paying for bibliographic data naturally requires the data to be new, comprehensive, accurate, and affordably priced. Thus, the bibliographic operator must first solve the bibliographic source problem, primarily by explaining to publishers how quickly their bibliographic information can reach how many libraries and attract how many public users.

The problem emerges: In the internet age, bibliographic information is already released through numerous free channels, such as online bookstores, Xinhua groups, and publisher websites. Naturally, a paid “Chinese offer booklist” has very limited appeal. If the operator provides bibliographic data free to the public, they can certainly obtain many customers, but would then need to charge publishers high fees for bibliographic dissemination to sustain operations. However, large publishers who are not concerned about sales would be reluctant to pay for dissemination, especially for out-of-stock or exclusive-distribution titles. The contradictions are irreconcilable.

### 3. The Path Forward for Chinese Offer Booklist

The positioning of “Chinese offer booklist.”The author believes it should contain two meanings: (1) Chinese bibliography, i.e., all Chinese bibliographies, including all books published in mainland China from ancient times to the present, and even Chinese-language books published in Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and overseas; (2) “Offer booklist,” which researchers basically refer to as “books in print,” meaning books available from publishers. In the author’s view, the “offer” aspect should be defined as socially available, even breaking through purchase-oriented availability to expand to utilization-oriented availability (such as remote library borrowing). Therefore, the Chinese offer booklist platform should be a comprehensive service platform integrating supply and demand elements including publishers, distributors, retailers, financial service providers, libraries,

the general public, and government departments.

Regarding library book procurement, the Chinese bibliography is primary, while “availability” is less critical. Because “unavailability” as defined by book suppliers generally means publisher stockouts, but as long as libraries obtain the “Chinese bibliography,” the problem becomes much simpler—forming a high-quality procurement list for book suppliers, verifying their refusal-to-supply behavior through direct communication with publishers, and conducting supplementary procurement. When publishers are out of stock, procurement can be conducted through network searches of major Xinhua group inventories, online bookstores, and other channels.

In summary, upstream publishers require Chinese offer booklist to be timely, broad, and unfiltered in social dissemination, while downstream libraries and the public need Chinese offer booklist to be new, comprehensive, accurate, and free. Only this can stimulate publishers’ enthusiasm for actively submitting bibliographies and attract library-dominated customers to actively utilize the service. This decisively eliminates the feasibility of distributor construction and so-called “third-party” commercial operation. Consequently, the heavy responsibility for genuine Chinese offer booklist construction naturally falls on the shoulders of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People’ s Republic of China, to be implemented in phases: Phase one, control new bibliography submission through ISBN issuance and construct a “China Bibliography Database” for free public access. Phase two, expand the China Bibliography Database with open interface functions, freely attracting marketing publishers, book distributors, and third-party settlement financial enterprises like Alipay, thereby forming a Chinese offer booklist service platform similar to Taobao and Amazon where “one book is competitively sold by multiple vendors,” even accepting major library systems to join the platform and provide remote book borrowing services. Phase three, operate on a non-profit principle, symbolically charging fees to publishers and sellers to support self-sustaining operation of the Chinese offer booklist platform. As for what specific strategies the State Administration should adopt to construct the Chinese offer booklist, the author will elaborate in a separate article due to space limitations.

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