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The Habitus Construction and Strategic Contention in the Publishing Field of the Republican Era: A Study on the Popular Publishing Practices of the World Book Company (1921–1930)

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Abstract

Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's Field Theory as an analytical framework, this paper focuses on the historical experience of the World Book Company in navigating and breaking through the highly monopolized and elite-oriented publishing field between 1921 and 1930. Facing the cultural and economic capital barriers established by the Commercial Press and the Zhonghua Book Company, the World Book Company leveraged the "commercial habitus" of its founder, Shen Zhifang. It keenly captured the burgeoning demand for popular and entertaining cultural products among the emerging urban middle class, proactively opening up a "blue ocean" of mass culture that had been overlooked by the mainstream. The World Book Company developed three core strategies: first, establishing visual cognitive habitus through highly recognizable symbols; second, constructing an author-content matrix to transform author influence into social currency and consumer motivation; and third, implementing a transmedia operation model that formed the early stages of IP (Intellectual Property) value enhancement. Despite ongoing shifts in media technology and market structures, the mass content production paradigm pioneered by the World Book Company continues to offer profound historical archetypes and theoretical insights for understanding the evolution of contemporary and future publishing and cultural industries.

Keywords

World Book Company; Shen Zhifang; Field Theory

1. Market Rules: Theoretical Application of the Publishing Field

1.1. Core Essentials of Bourdieu's Field Theory

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu proposed viewing social reality as a collection of

various large and small, relatively independent "fields." [1] His field theory primarily comprises three core concepts: field, habitus, and capital. The social world is composed of relatively autonomous "fields," which are social spaces where agents engage in struggles centered around specific forms of capital. Agents rely on their habitus to perceive the specific logic of a field and utilize the capital they possess to participate in competition. Their goal is to establish and enhance their positions within the dynamic contention of the field. Bourdieu's field theory provides a powerful set of conceptual tools and an analytical framework that helps us analyze the fundamental reasons for an agent's success within a deep logic of dynamism and relationality.

1.2. Applicability of the Publishing Field

Building upon Bourdieu's field theory, British sociologist John B. Thompson introduced the concept of the "field" into publishing research, proposing the concept of the "publishing field." Taking the publishing industries of Europe and America as his research subjects, he constructed a theoretical framework for the publishing field: the publishing field is a space of positions composed of different publishing entities, where the position of each entity depends on the amount of capital it possesses.[2]

The value of publishing includes both cultural value and market value; thus, the publishing field is also a space for competing for cultural legitimacy and market profits. On one hand, the cultural nature of a publishing house determines its status and influence within the field. On the other hand, a publishing house requires economic profit to sustain its continuous operation. Therefore, the core of competition within the publishing field lies in economic capital and cultural capital.

In the Chinese publishing field, publishing houses act as the publishing entities; these entities are the acting bodies that carry habitus and possess capital. A publishing house's books, author resources, and editorial strength are equivalent to the key capital carried by the publishing entity itself. The background of the publishing house and the philosophy of its founder together shape the habitus of the publishing entity. Publishing entities form differentiated publishing business philosophies through different habitus, helping themselves undergo development and transformation. Consequently, within the publishing field, different entities compete by relying on differentiated capital and their own habitus to accumulate more capital. Through this process, the market rules and power positions of the publishing field are gradually established.

2. Competition and Breakthrough: The Positioning of the World Book Company in the Publishing Field of the Republican Era

2.1. The Power Structure and Capital Distribution within the Publishing Field of the Republican Era

In the early 20th century, Shanghai emerged with a new momentum characterized by technological leadership, capital concentration, a gathering of talents, and a vast market. Coupled with the relaxed political environment of the foreign concessions and the tide of intellectual enlightenment, these factors collectively forged the "Golden Decade" and even the "Golden Thirty Years" of the Shanghai publishing industry. By the golden period of the publishing industry in the 1930s, Fuzhou Road, a district renowned for its publishing culture, had gathered more than 300 large and small publishing and printing enterprises. According to statistics from the 1937 English version of the China Year Book, out of 6,185 new book titles nationwide in 1936, Shanghai accounted for 5,721 titles, exceeding 90%. [3] In the publishing field of that time, despite the exponential growth in the number of publishing houses, a duopoly pattern dominated by the Commercial Press and the Zhonghua Book Company gradually emerged.

The Commercial Press established its dominant position through the compilation and publication of modern textbooks. Xia Ruifang, the founder of the Commercial Press, keenly perceived the need for "salvation through education" during the late Qing Dynasty. He actively recruited intellectuals such as Zhang Yuanji to collectively establish a business philosophy centered on textbooks. In the early 20th century, the Commercial Press closely aligned its own development with the educational reform blueprint of the late Qing government. Through the systematic compilation and distribution of modern textbooks, it rapidly occupied a core position in the emerging education market. The publication and distribution of textbooks allowed the Commercial Press to quickly attain a dominant position in the publishing field and monopolize the textbook market within the publishing sector.

Meanwhile, as the second-largest publisher at the time, the Zhonghua Book Company successfully established its footing in the publishing field of the Republican Era through a strategy of differentiation. In the early 20th century, Lu Feikui, the founder of the Zhonghua Book Company, linked the company's identity to the "Republican Revolution." By launching textbooks for the "new era," the company quickly captured market share and forged an authority of "sub-orthodoxy" within the publishing field. Starting from the 1930s, the Zhonghua Book Company implemented a differentiated publishing strategy by shifting its focus toward the collation of classical texts. This systematically built its authority in the field of inheriting China's excellent traditional culture, effectively transforming its early-acquired political symbolic capital into more enduring cultural symbolic capital.

Consequently, a distinct differentiation emerged within the publishing field of the Republican Era. On one hand, the majority of publishing houses focused on the publication of textbooks and classical texts, competing for the cultural and symbolic capital these sectors provided. On the other hand, the wave of urbanization in Shanghai gave rise to a vast urban middle class, which became a massive entity of

cultural consumption. The cultural and entertainment needs of this urban class were largely neglected, triggering a structural fission within the publishing field and turning the popular literature market into an untapped "blue ocean."

2.2. The Entry of the World Book Company: "Heterogeneous" Habitus and Initial Capital

Shen Zhifang, the founder of the World Book Company, began his career as an apprentice in a traditional bookstore during the late Qing Dynasty and subsequently worked at both the Commercial Press and the Zhonghua Book Company. His tenure as the deputy manager of the distribution department at the Commercial Press honed his business acumen and market intuition. In 1921, Shen Zhifang founded the World Book Company on Fuzhou Road in Shanghai.

Deeply attuned to reader psychology and proficient in the art of marketing, Shen established a business philosophy dominated by a commercial model from the very beginning, rooted in his "merchant habitus." Simultaneously, he accurately captured the reading preferences of the urban citizenry, launching a series of popular periodicals to satisfy the demand for mass culture. This business strategy, distinct from those of the Commercial Press and the Zhonghua Book Company, allowed the World Book Company to become unique and rapidly occupy the mass culture market.

Bourdieu primarily categorizes capital into forms such as economic, cultural, and social capital. The initial capital of the World Book Company exhibited an asymmetrical structure. In its founding period, its economic capital was quite meager; Shen Zhifang started with only 3,000 yuan. When the company was reorganized into a joint-stock company in 1921, he raised 25,000 silver yuan in capital with the help of friends, transforming the World Book Company from a sole proprietorship into a limited liability company. [4]

However, the competitive advantage of the World Book Company's initial capital lay in its cultural and social capital. Its cultural capital was embodied in the publishing experience and market insight Shen Zhifang had accumulated at the Commercial Press and within the industry. Its social capital was reflected in Shen's powerful network of relationships, which included authors and editors of the "Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies" school (popular romantic fiction), as well as distribution channels that reached deep into various cities. These three types of capital helped the World Book Company gain a firm foothold in the publishing field of the Republican Era.

2.3. The Rise of the Mass Cultural Consumption Market

Since the mid-19th century, with the opening of Shanghai as a treaty port and the establishment of foreign concessions, a massive influx of capital and technology poured into the city. During this period, Shanghai's population began to skyrocket,

and the process of urbanization accelerated significantly, gathering an urban citizenry represented by workers and merchants. This urban class longed to alleviate the pressures of a fast-paced and high-stress lifestyle. They sought emotional resonance and projection in books, making popular literature—such as wuxia (martial arts) and romance novels—their "spiritual food" for escaping the realities of life. At the same time, they needed newspapers, periodicals, and books to acquire knowledge. The mass cultural consumption market was urgently awaiting development.

3. Constructing a Mass Production Field: The Triple Strategy of the World Book Company

3.1. Visual Conquest: The Cultivation of Habitus in Space and Content

The World Book Company intruded into the lives of the urban citizenry with an almost aggressive visual posture. In traditional Chinese culture, the color red symbolizes auspiciousness and festivity. As the target audience of the World Book Company was the urban middle class, Shen Zhifang catered to their preferences by boldly choosing red as the primary color for the company. The "World Book Company Red" not only achieved a visual impact in its physical form but also deepened its spiritual permeation into the citizenry, becoming a kind of collective unconscious cultural identity.

On one hand, when Shen Zhifang founded the World Book Company on Fuzhou Road in Shanghai in 1920, he painted the building's exterior a vibrant red, calling it the "Sima Road Red House World Book Company," which people at the time simply referred to as the "Red House." [5] This splash of red became an unavoidable visual anchor, and the building itself became the representative and promotional advertisement for the company, leading readers to bind the "Red House" with the World Book Company brand. This building was transformed from a mere marketing venue into a landmark "check-in" spot and the facade of the brand image, causing readers to develop an embodied habitus of "stopping at the Red House whenever passing Sima Road." The brand image of the World Book Company gradually precipitated into the daily embodied habitus of the masses, and its symbolic capital continued to grow accordingly.

On the other hand, the World Book Company continued its use of vibrant red when establishing its magazines and periodicals. Not only did the titles often feature the word "Red"—such as The Red Magazine and The Red Rose founded by editor-in-chief Yan Duhe—but the covers also highlighted the character "Red" in bold, stylized artistic fonts to make it stand out. During the sales process, readers could immediately associate the familiar red color with magazines from the World Book Company. This strong correlation significantly reduced the "selection cost" for readers, thereby cultivating a habitual purchasing and reading pattern.

Furthermore, many of the World Book Company's magazines serialized "Mandarin

Ducks and Butterflies" style wuxia or romance novels. The core drivers of these stories were love, hatred, ambition, and desire. Red, as a color representing passion, love, and danger, echoed the narratives within the magazines. The color itself served as a silent manifesto, promising readers popular and stimulating content. The synchronization between cover color and plot created a powerful "cover-content" dual narrative; even before a reader turned the first page, the shaping and confirmation of their reading expectations had already been successfully completed.

Shen Zhifang utilized color to reinforce mass memory. Through the linkage between visual elements and literary works, he bridged the physical and intellectual spaces of the readers, forming a closed loop of reading experience and rapidly constructing a brand image unique to the World Book Company. This strategy cultivated reading habits within the subconscious of the citizenry and continuously increased the company's symbolic capital.

3.2. Author Matrix: The Operation of Cultural Capital and Symbolic Power

Shen Zhifang deeply understood that content is the primary priority of publishing. For the general reader, the author is the core motivation for selecting a book. At that time, the popular literature of the "Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies" school was the favorite reading material for the general public in their leisure time. [6] The World Book Company grasped the reading psychology of its audience, selected the popular "Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies" authors of the day, and established an "author matrix" to build its own core competitiveness.

Firstly, the World Book Company accurately identified the cultural capital inherent in the "Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies" school of authors and adopted a monopoly strategy toward them. The World Book Company actively recruited different types of authors to establish its own "author matrix." For example, regarding romance novel authors, Shen Zhifang utilized the personal networks he had accumulated at the Commercial Press to take the lead in collaborating with Zhang Henshui, purchasing the copyrights for The Unofficial History of Beijing (Chunming Waishi) and The Story of a Noble Family (Jinfen Shijia) at a price of four yuan per thousand words. [7] Regarding martial arts (Wuxia) novel authors, the company went all out to promote the works of Xiang Kairan (Bu Xiaosheng), publishing The Legend of the Strange Swordsmen from Rivers and Lakes (Jianghu Qixia Zhuan) in formats ranging from periodicals to standalone novels, and even later as films. In terms of detective novels, the World Book Company actively collaborated with Cheng Xiaoqing. By monopolizing the works of these authors, the World Book Company ensured the uniqueness of its books and periodicals in the market. For popular literature masters like Pingjiang Bu Xiaosheng and Zhang Henshui, the company spent lavishly to buy out their work and maintain an exclusive monopoly. These measures made the World Book Company the

absolute leader in the popular literature market between 1920 and 1930. [4] This series of operations not only brought about huge economic benefits but also further strengthened the authors' cultural capital.

Secondly, the World Book Company knew how to leverage the "celebrity aura" of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies authors to deepen its own symbolic capital.

On one hand, the World Book Company used the fame of these authors to enhance the reputation of its periodicals, creating a "brand of masters." In 1922, when Shen Zhifang launched the ten-day periodical Happiness (Kuaihuo), he printed the name of Li Hanqiu—a prominent figure of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school—as the Editor-in-Chief, while the person actually performing the editorial duties, Zhang Yunshi, was merely titled the "Managing Editor."[6] Through this tactic, Happiness expanded its renown and increased its acceptance among urban citizens.

On the other hand, the World Book Company used "specially invited contributors" to further boost the visibility of its periodicals. They used classic commentary from famous authors to attract readers, linking readers and authors together through these critiques. This encouraged readers to express their own opinions, thereby increasing interaction among citizens and improving the "stickiness" of the magazines.

By establishing an author matrix, the World Book Company directly and efficiently converted the authors' cultural capital into economic capital. Through the monopoly of authors, they achieved a monopoly over the readers' attention. This strategy was not merely about popularizing pulp fiction for the masses; more importantly, it transformed popular literature into a form of social currency. It turned the discussion of popular literature into a social habit, thereby reinforcing the consumer habit of purchasing books from the World Book Company. This non-linear cyclical mode of operation pushed the World Book Company's symbolic capital to its peak.

3.3. Transmedia Appreciation: The Rudiment of Early IP Operations

A century ago, the World Book Company was among the first to realize the value of transmedia. Through different forms of expression across various media, cultural capital could flow and be amplified between platforms, achieving maximum value. Transmedia appreciation not only opens up new revenue streams but also, in turn, stimulates the sales of the original works, creating a mutually reinforcing ecosystem. The transmedia operations of the World Book Company were primarily divided into three types: first, using "civilized plays" (modern drama) to promote publications; second, planning "reverse adaptations" from traditional opera to novels; and third, a linked promotion cycle involving periodicals, books, and films. [11] Among these, the most successful case of transmedia operation for the World Book Company was Bu Xiaosheng's The Legend of the Strange Swordsmen from Rivers and Lakes

(Jianghu Qixia Zhuan).

Firstly, the novel was serialized in the World Book Company's Red Magazine (Hong Zazhi). Through this format, it continuously attracted readers and cultivated a fan base, accumulating initial cultural capital. Once the serialization reached a certain length, standalone volumes were printed. Since readers had developed a habit of following the story and the author, the sales of these volumes were a natural success. In November 1923, the first collection of The Legend of the Strange Swordsmen from Rivers and Lakes was published, selling over 30,000 copies within six months. [8] This marked the first large-scale conversion of cultural capital into economic capital.

Subsequently, Shen Zhifang actively pushed for a film adaptation of the novel. At the end of 1928, in collaboration with the Mingxing Film Company, they produced the Wuxia film The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple (Huoshao Honglian Si), pioneering the genre of Chinese martial arts cinema. As an emerging medium, film visualized the spectacular feats described in the book—such as "flying over eaves and walking on walls"—presenting the "Jianghu" (underworld/martial arts world) to the public. Its influence far exceeded the original circle of readers, reaching a broader urban population. The success of the film, in turn, drove "reading reflux," bringing even greater profits to the World Book Company. Through this ecological operation, the World Book Company successfully nurtured the novel into a sustainable, value-added Cultural IP, facilitating the flow of cultural capital across different fields and amplifying its symbolic capital.

4. Historical Echoes: The Strategic DNA of World Book Company and Publishing Logic in the Digital Age

Amidst the fierce competition of the publishing industry during the Republican era, the reason the World Book Company was able to stand out and construct an influential field of mass cultural production lay in its formation of a highly integrated set of publishing strategies. These strategies did not exist in isolation; instead, they were interconnected and mutually reinforcing, collectively constituting the unique business model of the World Book Company.

Although the arrival of the current digital age has transformed the publishing environment, and technical media and market forms have undergone earth-shaking changes, the operational strategies of the World Book Company have not vanished with the passing of time. They remain clearly visible within the publishing logic of the digital age: namely, cultivating user consumption habits and maximizing the capture of readers' attention resources.

Firstly, the logic of the World Book Company's symbolic branding has been further reinforced in the age of information explosion. The visual identity system constructed by the World Book Company through its "Red House" (headquarters) and Red Magazine was essentially about establishing "cognitive shortcuts" in an

environment where mass communication efficiency was limited.

In the contemporary era, this strategy has evolved into highly systematic Brand IP practices. For example, Duke Culture (Duku) uses its panda logo and high-contrast black covers with white text to reinforce reader memory, while CITIC Press establishes "cognitive anchors" for financial and economic content through its "Yellow Jacket" book series. These visual symbols no longer serve merely a recognition function; they have become external labels for a user's identity and cultural taste. In this way, it is still possible to capture the user's mind with the lowest cognitive cost in an environment characterized by a scarcity of attention.

Secondly, contemporary operational strategies have evolved from the World Book Company's "author matrix" into the Creator Economy. The World Book Company once used high remuneration to monopolize "Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies" authors like Zhang Henshui and Pingjiang Bu Xiaosheng, converting their narrative authority and emotional bond with readers into best-selling book volumes.

Today, this logic has been vastly amplified by digital platforms. Online literature platforms, such as China Literature Group (Yuewen), build fan communities around web novelists. Creators are no longer just content producers; they have become traffic gateways, trust intermediaries, and nuclei of community cohesion. This approach is precisely the contemporary evolution of the World Book Company's method of amplifying the cultural capital carried by its authors.

Finally, ecological operations have evolved from the early "periodical-book-film" linkage into a full-chain IP industry ecosystem. Although the World Book Company's transmedia development of The Legend of the Strange Swordsmen from Rivers and Lakes was limited by the technical conditions of the time, it already possessed the rudimentary form of IP thinking. Today, this model has become systematized and scaled. Currently, a single novel can be simultaneously planned for film and television adaptations, audio dramas, animation, games, and even trendy designer toys and derivatives.

For example, the development of The Three-Body Problem—starting from the novel and extending into animation, series, games, and peripheral merchandise—is precisely a digital upgrade of the World Book Company's "periodical-book-film" logic. Its goal is not only to expand audience coverage but also to cultivate the consumer habit of "transmedia following" through multi-scenario touchpoints. This ensures the cyclical appreciation and value maximization of cultural capital across different platforms.

It is evident that the three strategic genes established by the World Book Company (Shijie Shuju) not only shaped the production paradigm of popular culture during the Republican era, but also provide profound historical insights for today's publishing industry on how to reconstruct user connections and activate cultural capital amidst a landscape of scarce attention and fragmented media. This century-spanning inheritance and mutation of strategies aptly demonstrate the

structural resilience and evolutionary capacity inherent in superior business models.

5. Conclusion

Taking a comprehensive view of the World Book Company's historical trajectory within the publishing field of the Republican era, its significance extends far beyond the commercial success of a single private bookstore. Rather, it structurally reveals the operational logic within the field of cultural production. Bourdieu's concept of "habitus," defined as a system of structured dispositions, was manifested at that time through readers' persistent preferences and behavioral patterns toward specific symbols, authors, or media combinations. In the present day, the field has shifted from a limited communication space dominated by paper media to a digital content ecosystem driven by algorithms and platform monopolies. Paradoxically, this increased complexity reinforces the strategic value of habitus-shaping. The success of the World Book Company signals that in our current era of accelerated technological iteration and diversified media forms, any effective cultural production strategy must return to a deep understanding of the audience's cognitive structures, emotional connections, and consumption habits. Only through such an approach can a sustainable coupling of cultural value and market logic be achieved within a constantly reconstructing field.

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