



The original Fudan Used Bookstore was too small, with a higgledy-piggledy stock of books. — Ti Gong



The Isolated Island Bookstore was hidden away deep in a lane in downtown Huangpu District. — Lu Feiran



Zhang Qiang

to modernize their premises and expand their businesses to include cafés and organized events like literary lectures and book clubs.

Zhang, too, is going with the trend. He plans to divide his new shop into three sections: bookshelves, a coffee corner and an exhibition area featuring his own collections of rare editions, old newspapers and vintage Chinese comic books.

"I have always believed that a real store with books and people, rather than an online one visited only on a screen, is important because it influences the cultural environment of an area," Zhang said.

He admitted to some pangs of anxiety about relocating. It took him around two decades to create the popular brand of his original bookstore, and he was a bit unsure how long it might take to rebuild it at a new location.

But any doubts he harbored have been assuaged by the enthusiasm of loyal patrons. When he announced the closure of the original shop, they turned up in droves to show their support — even standing on one foot to squeeze into the checkout line, he said.

The Internet was flooded with messages of hope that the store would be resurrected somewhere.

Zhang also received community

help. A nearby residential complex provided storage for the overflow of books that wouldn't fit in his main warehouse in Chongming District. A non-profit organization purchased 10,000 books to sell in a charity bookstore. And companies from other districts, even from other provinces, called him offering venues for a new shop.

"All this outpouring of support gave me faith that I could continue the bookstore as long as my energy allows," Zhang said.

A sad last chapter

Not all bookstores have been so lucky.

Last Saturday, Isolated Island Bookstore, the only one in China specializing in detective stories, closed. The shop managed to stay in business for only 11 months.

Its owner, detective story writer Shi Chen, said he was not surprised.

The bookstore suffered what he called "affordable losses" after its initial popularity ebbed. When the lease came up for renewal, Shi decided to shut it down.

Still, Shi is proud of its short life.

"It was a store that sold only paperbacks, so we were braced for possible failure the day it opened," Shi said. "The store attracted many

patrons who had hardly read any detective novels before, and online review sites recommended us. I believe our little bookstore was a success. We just didn't have strong investors behind us."

Saying farewell is always hard. The bookstore's fans are no doubt disappointed, especially those who knew about the shop but never got the chance to visit it.

"I thought that I could always visit the shop after coronavirus passed," said Liang Cheng, who lives in Guangzhou, capital of the southern province of Guangdong. "But waves of the pandemic still hit from time to time, and now the bookstore is gone."

Shi said there are, of course, some regrets.

In the beginning, he had hoped the bookstore might evolve into a venue for lectures on detective fiction. He had plans to start a magazine where amateurs could contribute their own detective stories. He even wanted to set up an award for first-time writers in the genre.

But there just wasn't the money or the time.

The bookstore is still running fan chat groups on WeChat, attracting thousands of readers.

"There is always hope for a possible revival in the future if the passion of readers remains," Shi said.



Shi Chen

