

# Floods inundate paperback warehouses, leaving booksellers, readers high and dry

Lu Feiran

E-books may not be the demise of paperbacks, but Mother Nature might. BooksChina.com, one of the largest online book platforms, has reported that more than 4 million books in its warehouse in the flood-ravaged city of Zhuozhou were completely waterlogged and another warehouse remains in danger. The financial loss is estimated at more than 300 million yuan (US\$41.8 million).

The city of about 600,000 people in Hebei Province near Beijing was inundated by intense rainfall triggered by Typhoon Doksuri.

"We are undergoing the most fatal blow in our 25-year history," said BooksChina.com in a statement on its official Weibo account. "We lost not only money but also old books that have been out of print."

The platform is now selling 99-yuan "refueling packs" to try to recoup some of its losses. As of last Friday, more than 97,000 packages had been sold, each containing four random books on art, literature and social sciences, a seagull-shaped metal bookmark and a pin. The packages are due to be delivered in September.

Zhang Monian, a web fiction writer, said she booked a package as soon as she saw the offer.

"It wasn't easy because the website nearly crashed due to too many visits at one time," she said. "I was saddened by the news of the warehouse flooding because reading is my favorite pastime, and I prefer paperbacks to e-books, even though I write stories online. I just needed to do something to help the platform."

Indeed, netizens have poured out their support for the



Publishing house Unread shared on Weibo pictures of soaked books in Southwest Logistics Center in Zhuozhou in north China's Hebei Province.

second-hand book platform. On Weibo, netizens said they would be happy to buy soaked books, though their offers were declined by the website.

"Soaked from flooding is different from soaked from rain," the website explained on Weibo. "It's hard to turn the pages, and we wouldn't know if the books were tainted by germs, so we can't sell these soggy books to consumers."

Apart from its "refueling packages," BooksChina.com also began livestreaming to promote its plight.

On Friday, a livestream on e-commerce platform Taobao attracted nearly 90,000 viewers, and another 5,000-plus refueling packages were sold.

"I have been to our warehouse in Zhuozhou," said Huang Ping, founder of the company, during the livestream. "The flood has receded a bit, but I still can't grasp the full scope

of the situation."

BooksChina.com was not the only company to suffer great losses from the flooding in Zhuozhou flood. It is estimated that more than 200 booksellers and publishers from around China have goods stored in warehouses in the city's Southwest Logistics Center. None was untouched by the flooding.

Publisher Beijing Media Time issued a statement on Tuesday that it wouldn't be able to deliver books for the next 15 days or take any orders.

"The area was a blackout, and traffic was completely stopped," the group said in a statement. "The water was 2 meters deep in our warehouse, and all the books were soaked."

Another publishing house, Unread, told the media that it had nearly 1.5 million books in the logistics center and the

higher premiums than we couldn't afford. So we had to give up insurance altogether."

Insurance companies responded that book warehouses are at high risk from both flooding and fire. Even if a company offered such coverage, compensation would be very limited.

Zhuozhou has been a mecca for Chinese book lovers for quite a few years.

In 2017, BooksChina.com moved its warehouse to the city and held book fairs at the site, attracting buyers from all over the country.

Architecture reviewer You Xudong was a frequent participant at the fairs, including the last one held in April.

"I call it the Book Outlets," he said. "In this huge warehouse, you and thousands of other readers can browse through millions of books, many of which have disappeared from the normal market. You couldn't possibly know where any book you wanted was located, so you strolled through a sea of books, awaiting surprises. It felt entirely different from buying books online, and it felt good."

The books were also extremely cheap. Most of them were sold at discounts of between 50 and 80 percent, with some foreign-language books even offered at a price of 25 yuan per half kilogram of weight.

"The book fairs were a grand party for book lovers, and old bookworms brought along fledgling ones," he said, adding with a sad note, "Now it's over."

Fortunately it's not all bad news. The annual Shanghai Book Fair, scheduled on August 16-22, will go ahead as planned, organizers said, with books for the event delivered from warehouses not affected by the flooding.

loss could be well over 10 million yuan.

"We're planning to reprint the soaked books as quickly as possible," said Bian Jianqiang, deputy editor-in-chief of Unread. "And we're looking for spare warehouses to resume delivery services as soon as possible."

Industry insiders said that commercial insurance seldom covers book warehouses, leaving publishers and sellers to shoulder the full loss.

China News Service quoted BooksChina's Huang saying that the website once bought insurance for the warehouses, but when it tried to renew the policy, the insurer company said such coverage was no longer available.

"We tried other insurance companies," Huang said. "Some refused outright when they heard it was for book warehouses; others required