

A Successful Quest

Founded in 1995, Advantage Quest Publications (www.advanquest.com) is now one of the largest English-language publishers in Malaysia. *InterLit's* Kim Pettit spoke with Carol Toh and Daniel Khong about its success.

Do not be tricked into thinking that there are no crocodiles just because the water is still,"



says a Malay proverb. This is a good maxim for Christian publishers to remember in an Islamic country where it is illegal to proselytize Muslims, who make up 60 percent of the population.

Malaysia, a country of 24 million people, is a multi-racial, multi-ethnic nation. Fifty percent of its population is of Malay descent; almost all are Muslim. Islam also claims adherents among the 24 percent of the country's population of Chinese descent, though the majority are Buddhist or Confucian.

Malaysia has a substantial number of tribal peoples, Indians, and immigrants. Christians constitute fewer than 10 percent of Malaysia's millions. Other minority faith communities include Hindus, Baha'is, Sikhs, and animists from traditional ethnic and tribal groups.

In this context, publisher Peter Khong and his family are unusual. Their company, Advantage Quest, has been extraordinarily successful in securing a place for Christian books in a secular market. How have they done this?

The right products

"Don't use an axe to embroider," directs one Malay proverb. In a market where Christian content will



not appeal to most consumers,

Advantage Quest offers motivational and professional titles. Its catalog includes books for self-help, business management, and English-language training, and titles in a broad range of categories including health, children, and religion.

Advantage Quest is the exclusive distributor for several general and Christian publishers from the United States and the United Kingdom, including Thomas Nelson, Sourcebooks, Publications International and Adams Media.

"Peter reviews every book we distribute," says executive director Carol Toh, Khong's wife and co-founder of Advantage Quest. "Both of us love books. When shipments come in it is like Christmas! We want to offer books with excellent content, books of substance. Every time you read a book you are teaching yourself something. Here in Malaysia, people want the ethics and values associated with Christianity. Zig Ziglar, Ken Blanchard, and John Maxwell are internationally-known authors. People buy their books whether or not they are Christian."

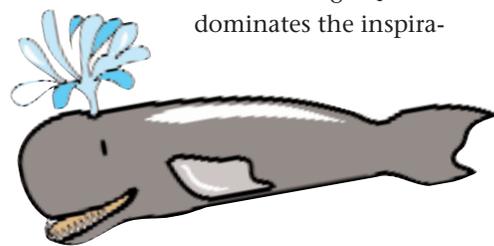
The company's emphasis on business and self-help titles makes sense. "Every goal and ambition can be achieved through determination and hard work," proclaims one Malay proverb. "If you really want to achieve something, work for it," says another. Risk-taking is encouraged in this society. "No matter how big the whale is, a tiny harpoon can kill him."

"To bend a bamboo, start when it is still a shoot," says another Malay proverb. Advantage Quest is always looking for ways to reach new audiences. "We began distributing a children's line three years ago," says Toh, "and it is doing very well."

"We are actively seeking Malaysian authors," says Daniel Khong, assistant director. He is responsible for developing a new imprint featuring local writers.

"We want to publish and distribute quality books at affordable prices that will impact lives," says Khong. The company publishes about 30 to 40 books per year and has an active backlist approaching 200 titles. "Between 70 to 80 percent of our books are general trade titles; the rest have explicitly Christian content." Many of the latter are part of the company's Blessing imprint.

"Advantage Quest dominates the inspira-



tional and self-help categories," he says, smiling. "A large percentage of the books on the shelf are ours. I know they impact readers."

The right service

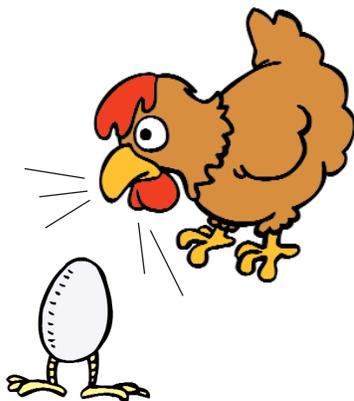
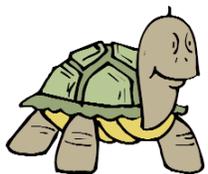
Toh handles operations, focusing on marketing, sales, and customer service. "I used to meet customers and make sales calls but they are now taken care of by Daniel. He expressed his interest in joining the family business after completing his legal studies and obviously we were delighted. We have no doubt he will be a significant player in due course," echoes the proud mother.

"A tortoise produces a myriad eggs and no one knows it; the hen lays one and tells the whole world," says another Malay proverb. Advertising is key to Advantage Quest's success. "We do monthly promotions," says Toh. "We celebrate school holidays or the seasons. At Christmas and Easter, buyers often think of us because we are a Christian company."

"Yet competition is a challenge," says Toh. "Stores want to buy direct, and some Indian publishers are seeking

a share in our market. There is price erosion. Discounts are more important than ever, pricing is not very elastic, and we must remember that customers' tastes do not necessarily match our tastes. We have to listen to our them."

High exchange rates are also a concern for us, so we



would like to increase our local publishing."

"About 95 percent of our business is in the general



Advantage Quest, one of Malaysia's most successful publishing houses, is a family business. Publisher Peter Khong, shown above with wife Carol Toh and son Daniel Khong, started the company. Toh and Daniel Khong have both attended Cook's International Christian Publishing Institute held in Colorado Springs, Colorado, U.S.A.

market," says Toh. This includes bookstores, network marketing companies, and direct selling. Advantage Quest also works within the Christian market.

"Our Christian titles are sold in various Christian bookstores including the leading Christian chain with about 20 bookstores. In addition, freelance agents sell our books in churches and bookfairs.

"There are tough days and easy days," says Toh. "The tough days are when orders and reorders must be transported and delivered within the week. Sometimes there are 100 cartons of books to deliver!"

The right attitude

"Weaving just one thread a day eventually results in cloth," is another Malay saying. One title at a time, this Christian company is reaching its market.

"Books are not a priority for Malaysians," says Toh, "but those who are driven to succeed will look for the resources they need. If someone who chose one of our books tells me that it changed their life, that's exciting!"

"When we first began we had to mortgage our home and invested everything we had," recalls Toh. "We also borrowed funds from relatives to start the business. And now, ten years later, our finances are much stronger! We are truly grateful, for we know the Lord provides. Relying on God's grace has strengthened us. Strangers extended credit terms to us and good employees just dropped in at the office to be hired! We have truly become richer in experiencing His grace in our lives and in our walk of faith." ▽