Malaysia—a multicultural nation of 30 million people made up of Malay, English, Chinese, and Tamil speakers—is a relatively small and divided book market. Such fragmentation has created a unique publishing industry, in which bookstores are heavily stocked with direct imports (instead of translations), and in which local publishers have to compete with their counterparts from English-speaking territories (especially in trade books).

Recent years have seen the publication of around 20,000 titles annually in Malaysia, with Malay-language romance novels dominating the local fiction list. Growth in the industry is mostly driven by the purchasing power of the middle class, observes CEO Sayed Munawar of Perbadanan Kota Buku (literally, Book City Corp.), which was established in 2011 to be a one-stop hub for readers, authors, illustrators, and publishers. “This is a young nation where nearly half of its population is below 24 years of age, and, naturally, the emphasis is always on education, with an increasing demand on newer and more varied reading materials.”

Developing and Exporting Content
Sayed says his mission is to “expand the market share of Malaysian content and intellectual properties [IPs] globally.” He adds, “One way of doing this is to participate in international book fairs to gain exposure and experience, and to organize seminars, workshops, and forums to develop homegrown talents and publishers for international trade.” Sayed’s company manages Malaysia’s pavilions at the Beijing, Bologna, and Shanghai trade fairs, and it organizes the Kuala Lumpur Trade and Copyright Centre (KLTCC, see p. 30), which focus on content-related trade within the region and beyond.
Country Spotlight: Malaysia

This year, for the first time, Sayed and his team will publish a book industry report to help local and international players identify opportunities in the Malaysian market. “At the same time, we are asking ourselves what kind of Malaysian content would appeal to the international markets, especially whenever we exhibit at a major fair,” he says. “Since what works at Bologna may not work in Shanghai, we really need to understand the right content to bring to a specific fair and employ the appropriate strategy to generate attention on the appropriate content.”

On the other hand, CEO Mohd Khair Ngadiron of Institut Terjemahan Buku Malaysia (ITBM)—the Malaysian Institute of Translation and Books—is focused on translating and promoting national works such as The Epic of Hang Tuah; Mek Mulung: A Transitional Art Form Between Man and the Realm of the Supernatural; The Pasai Chronicles; and Shadow Play: The Folk Epic of the Malay Archipelago, which were showcased at previous Frankfurt fairs. “Books should not be confined to just words on paper when transforming the content into a different medium will further broaden its appeal and popularity across borders and languages,” he says, citing cartoonist Lat’s Kampung Boy: A Musical and joint performances of shadow play and traditional Japanese puppetry as examples.

So far, ITBM has translated 1,488 titles into English and other languages, including French, German, and Spanish. “These are selected content that remains relevant and interesting across geographic barriers, such as Wan Nor Azriq’s DUBLIN, about an ageing writer and his complex relationship with his research assistant, or Jong Chian Lai’s Ah Fook, which centers on the struggles of a young Chinese migrant in Southeast Asia,” Mohd Khair says. In fact, these two titles were the first-prize winners of the institute’s first and second writing competitions.

“Young writers have few avenues to get their works recognized and published, and competitions provide an opportunity to do both,” Mohd Khair notes. “For us, the goals are to publish original works, and to translate and promote the best of Malaysian authors, titles, and culture overseas. By doing these well, we will produce even more homegrown talents and content for international trade.” Mohd Khair’s team is bringing out several new titles in the next six months, including Pulau Perak (on Perak Island’s manta rays), Anthology of Short Stories: Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, and Sangkuriang’s Love, Oedipus’ Longing.

Networking Locally and Regionally

Another Kota Buku initiative, the Kota Buku Academy, was recently set up to “hold talks and share business insights with the industry, and help in determining policy advocacy roles that we should play for the betterment of the Malaysian book industry,” says Sayed, who is well-known locally as the host of a weekly book discussion program and a unique “book travelogue” docu-series on national television.

Recent months have also seen Kota Buku expanding into the rights business. “Instead of looking for profit, we represent authors or illustrators who may not get a fair chance to be showcased at international rights events, or those who are overlooked by rights agencies due to the specific nature of their works,” says senior manager Hasri Hasan, who leads the team in signing memorandum of understandings (MOUs) with several ASEAN countries on rights. He adds that his agency does not aim to compete with privately owned rights agencies, which are few and far between in Southeast Asia. “One of the authors whom we are bringing to Frankfurt is Mohana Gill, who will be honored at the Best of the Best Gourmand Award. Kota Buku represents Gill on copyright of her works. Our role is to champion underrepresented works and authors. We did not offer any funding or cash up front as rewards at these signings. Rather, we picture ourselves as an alternative for rights owners to work with in putting their portfolios out there in the international arena.”

Kota Buku has another project, called Malaysiana Digital Township, aimed at creating a repository of Malaysian content. Hasri explains: “Our content, of about 1,500 e-books that are not available elsewhere, is accessible to the public and libraries throughout the country. We currently have 50,000 readers’ club members.”

Prize-winning works such as DUBLIN and Ah Fook have been translated into English and other languages
members, since its soft launch in May. We will also host a virtual meeting place and marketplace for authors, illustrators, publishers, and readers, and parts of this are in the works.”

Building a Reading Nation First
Meanwhile, the 195-member Malaysian Book Publishers Association (MABOPA) organized the nation’s first-ever digital content fair, Baca World (or Reading World), from March 30 to April 1 of this year. “A segment of the fair was about digital lifestyle, which includes e-books and digital reading,” says MABOPA president Ishak Hamzah, who is also managing director of E-Media Publications. “With our daily lives continuing to change with the ubiquitous digital technology, we believe that great contents should do the same as well.” Ishak is planning for a bigger and better Baca World in 2016.

In general, Ishak finds that there are insufficient campaigns to get locals reading, which would further invigorate and expand the local publishing industry, and he says that there is also a lack of governmental involvement in developing the sector. “There must be a realization that helping the publishing industry means developing a reading nation, which, in turn, is about human development, critical thinking, and quality content. For MABOPA, it is about communicating the needs from the publishing side to the government and pressuring publishing-related GLCs [government-linked companies] to up their game.”

The biggest task for the book community, Ishak says, “is to find ways to make a child fall in love with the first book he or she picks up.” He adds: “This should be a collaborative effort involving parents, teachers, publishers, libraries, and the community at large. Presently, we are missing some links here.”

But the National Library, which oversees four community libraries and 509 rural libraries, is facing cuts in government funding (this year’s allocation is down more than half from 2014, to just about 5.5 million MYR) that have crippled its abilities to purchase titles from local publishers. “We purchase between 3,860 and 6,270 local titles annually—ranging between 197,000 and 360,000 copies—and less funds means fewer titles, which is not conducive to supporting our local publishing market,” says director general Nafisah Ahmad, whose team is currently focused on e-reading and is busy working on equipping community and rural libraries with the infrastructure and capabilities required to provide and promote it.

“Collaboration with private companies is the answer to get content to the masses, and last year, we unveiled the country’s first Samsung Smart Library,” Nafisah notes. “Three sites are up and running now to provide readers, especially children and youth, a new and interactive reading experience.”

Nafisah says that Malaysians are reading more: “In 1996, people read two books per year. Ten years later, they read between eight and 12 books. We believe the upcoming reading survey will reveal a much higher number. Naturally, we want every Malaysian to read more and have a voracious appetite for books. That was the reason we supported and championed in excess of 1,000 reading programs last year, and we want to do more going forward.”

Overcoming Challenges Big and Small
For Ishak of MABOPA, the number of publishers participating at major fairs such as Beijing, Bologna, Frankfurt, and Shanghai remains small, and “a lot of our local publishers do not understand the potential, process, and art of selling rights.” He adds, “Publishers need to seriously think about selling rights internationally, and they should go about translating potential titles into English—and consider that as an upfront investment.”

Ishak laments the low turnout of local publishers at KLTCC, an event that his organization cosponsors with Kota Buku. “We are working closely with Kota Buku to increase the participation of local publishers to 30% next year.”

Raman Krishnan, of independent publisher Silverfish Books, says: “The main challenges facing the Malaysian book industry are the lack of a writing culture, and a small population that is
divided into several language groups and political affiliations. But the smaller population is not a major problem. Just look at Iceland: despite having only 600,000 people, it was Frankfurt’s Guest of Honor in 2011.”

The educational and political systems of Malaysia, Raman says, “are the main causes for the limited market size.” He adds: “Schools are required to produce factory fodder and teach some higher ‘unthinking’ skills. Creative thinking is not encouraged, and writing skills taught are mostly functional. The position taken by the government is that culture is for tourists, and literature is elitist. Since we work very much in an anti-intellectual environment, creating a diverse and quality publishing industry is an uphill battle. Fortunately, the reading habit in Malaysia is fairly well developed considering our education and political system.”

Booming Small Press Scene
But with the slow and evident progression from romance-heavy lists from local publishers to serious nonfiction on religion, human rights, alternative/critical thinking, and current issues, Ishak of MABOPA is hoping for a much-improved Malaysian book industry in the near future. “Five years ago, our publishing industry was predominantly educational based,” he says. “Now, we have fiction, nonfiction, and children’s titles. The potential for delivering quality content is there, but publishers need to work further on packaging and marketing. The task for publishers is to maintain the progress and improve and build it up.”

Small presses have become a fixture in the Malaysian book scene in the past two years, with publishers such as Buku Fixi and DuBook now regarded as mainstream. “These presses have a lot of titles, substantial revenues, and an extensive distribution network; some even have their own storefronts,” says Arief Hakim, managing director of PTS Media Group and deputy president of MABOPA. He adds that small presses are important to the industry as they open up new readership: “They publish unconventional and, at times, antidogmatic subjects, in predominantly conservative Malaysia, and because of that, they become cultish, attracting a whole generation of new readers made up mostly of college and university students—essentially, young adults. Such expansion in readership is crucial to the long-term sustainability of the Malaysian book market.” (See “A Flourishing Small Press Scene” at publisher-weekly.com/malaysia2015 for more details.)

Arief admits that “innovations in any industry, more likely than not, come from outsiders or those new to the trade.” He adds, “The challenge for mainstream publishers like us is to adapt to this new mind-set and playing field, and to try to view things as outsiders to find new opportunities and growth.”

With mainstream publishers such as PTS expanding into new areas and small presses attracting masses of new readers, the Malaysian publishing industry is gearing up for more growth, despite the challenges outlined above.

For this report, PW talks with key players from different segments—Buku Fixi, Karangkraf Media Group, Oyez!Books, Pelangi Publishing Group, PTS Media Group, Silverfish, and University Book Store Malaysia—as well as booksellers, rights agencies, and those in the digital segment and small press scene to round up our coverage on Malaysia’s book market.

Buku Fixi

Fun is the word that best describes Buku Fixi, according to founder and publisher Amir Muhammad, “because that is what reading should be.” Amir started the press in 2011 with a niche focus on contemporary urban fiction: “You can say that I publish for a younger version of myself, because when I was a teenager, I didn’t read much local fiction in Malay, as I found [the books] either too saccharine—90% of the titles were romances—or literary with historical or religious themes. So I imagine that, in some way, I’m answering a need that I myself once had.” Publishing is also, to Amir, “a way to discover my country through its young and not-so-young readers, and their feedback.”

Complacency, Amir admits, is his biggest challenge: “I’m not very business minded. I do whatever is amusing to me, and it just so happens that this particular venture is financially successful.” Recent bestsellers Asrama (Hostel), Gantung (Hanging), Gelap (Dark), Kacau (Disturbance), and Kelabu (Gray), for instance, have sold between 20,000 and 34,000 copies each—rare achievements for homegrown urban fiction in Malaysia. The next few months will see Amir publishing Tunku Halim’s Horror Stories 2 (“cashing in on the first compilation, which was the bestselling local fiction in English”),

continued on p. 30
With publishers large and small putting on road shows, holding minifairs, and participating in major book events, and with chain bookstores and remainder sellers holding their own shows, there are plenty of opportunities for book lovers and content creators to congregate across Malaysia. Of note are five events (listed here in alphabetical order) that have been growing and attracting international participation over the years.

**Children’s Literature Festival**

The third installment of this festival, organized by Kota Buku in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and several other government agencies, will feature a One World, Many Stories theme. “We will host South Korea’s Nami Island Forest Library, which will demonstrate the principle that a library need not be confined within four walls, and that it can coexist with the nature around us,” says Kota Buku CEO Sayed Munawar. “It’s a concept that promotes a reading culture that stems from nature for a better future.” Sayed will be giving away the company’s first-ever Best Children’s Book Award to winners in 11 categories.

The festival, which runs October 29–November 1 at Dataran Merdeka in Kuala Lumpur, will feature a mini-safari, science exhibits, cultural performances, arts and crafts, and digital learning opportunities, alongside workshops for parents and professionals. “There will be plenty of works by local authors and illustrators on exhibit, as well as workshops and seminars on child development,” Sayed says. He aims to make the event even bigger than the 2014 edition, which welcomed around 13,000 visitors.

**George Town Literary Festival**

Commencing on November 27, the fifth edition of the three-day George Town Literary Festival seeks to address issues of identity, the deterioration of values, the human condition, and the imposition of judgments and prejudices. Invited speakers and writers will take a critical look at where people are, what they have become, and where they think they are going. Malaysian author and social activist Marina Mahathir, cartoonist Zunar, and writers Shirley Lim Geok-Lin, Chua Guat Eng, and Lim Swee Tin are expected to attend, alongside invited international guests such as Maureen Freeley, Robin Hemley, Anne Provoost, and Anja Utler. Panel discussions, book launches, readings, a migrant worker poetry competition, live music, and wayang kulit (shadow puppet) performances have been lined up.

**Kuala Lumpur Alternative Bookfest**

This fair, concurrently held with Arts for Grabs (on artisanal goods), celebrated its eighth outing on March 21–22. More than 20 of the 70-plus stalls were occupied by Malaysian small presses, such as Buku Fixi (which was also the sponsor), DuBook, Merpati Jingga, Moka Mocha Ink, Terfaktab, and Thukul Cetak. For visitors to Dataran Underground, it was a chance to purchase books that are not normally found in chain bookstores, and to enjoy various book launches (including events for three new titles each from Buku Fixi and DuBook), readings, forums, and underground short film screenings. A quote from Joseph Brodsky was prominently featured on this year’s Bookfest poster and throughout the venue: “There are worse crimes than burning books. One of them is not reading them.”

**Kuala Lumpur International Book Fair**

The Kuala Lumpur International Book Fair (KLIBF)—the biggest event on the local publishing calendar—is held over 10 days at the end of April each year. The 34th edition featured 918 booths and around 2.5 million visitors. The fair is organized by the National Book Council of Malaysia, with support from the Ministry of Education, and cosponsored by six other local book industry associations, such as the Malaysian Publishers Association.

“Crowds at the Kuala Lumpur International Book Fair 2015

“This is the fair where one can spot market trends, identify new titles and authors, and get to see all local book players—mainstream publishers and indie houses—under one roof,” says Arief Hakim, deputy president of the Malaysian Publishers Association, which launched a campaign to mark down the prices of 20,000 titles at the 2015 fair to assure the public that books are zero-rated under the GST scheme. Sales at this year’s fair were up by 20% compared to the 2014 event, but Arief noted that there were more discounts and promotions this year. “Trendwise, it’s clear that indie publishing is booming, and so is the horror/thriller genre, which is reflective of the new reading demographic made up of young adults and college and university students. In contrast, the market for romance, which is targeted primarily at women, is less robust, and this is in line with less disposable income and higher living costs in the city.”

continued on p. 30
Country Spotlight: Malaysia

Hungry in Ipoh (“a location-specific anthology, also in English”), and the Malay translation of David Cronenberg’s Consumed (“because I like his films, and I know a translator who is ideal for it”).

For Amir, translation is less about topic or author and “more about new titles and page length, since translating English to Malay invariably lengthens the text by 30%.” He adds, “I don’t want thick books, as our pricing has to be consistent.” So readers can enjoy Stephen King’s Joyland, Neil Gaiman’s Ocean at the End of the Lane, and John Green’s Paper Towns and The Fault in Our Stars in Malay editions from two-year-old imprint Fixi Verso.

As for selling rights, Buku Fixi titles are probably not exotic enough for English-speaking markets, says Amir. “But those that are thematically more adventurous, such as Sanctuaria, on a religious cult; Perjalanan, on a transgender person’s life; and Brazil, a fake travelogue with digressions, may pique their interest.”

With 110 titles in print, 40 in the pipeline, and a loyal following to serve, it made perfect sense for Buku Fixi to establish its own bookstore. Kedai Fixi, which opened in April, sells titles from publishers such as DuBook, Lejen, Matahari Books, and Thukul Cetak, as well as Buku Fixi books. Amir says he is not planning more outlets but is mulling over the idea of kiosks in malls that have no chain bookstores.

Karangkraf Media Group

A local writer’s analysis of the Malay Annals, published in 1977, essentially launched Karangkraf. That first title and its ensuing success gave company founder Hussamuddin Yaacub the impetus to start a children’s magazine, which went on to sell upwards of 150,000 copies per week. Today, Karangkraf, with its staff of 1,200 and annual revenues exceeding 500 million MYR is one of the biggest publishing companies in Malaysia. Its four business groups have 21 magazines, three book imprints, the daily newspaper Sinar Harian, and Ultimate Print, which is the nation’s biggest commercial printer.

The three imprints are Alaf 21 (fiction and general trade), Buku Prima (children’s and YA books), and Karya Bestari (for Islamic titles). Together these imprints offer about 15 new titles per month. Its catalogue has in excess of 1,000 titles, including bestsellers by Mohammad Kazim Elias and Ramlee Awang Murshid, and Cerita Cinta Ahmad Ammar, an anthology of 15 stories on the life of activist Ahmad Ammar, who died in a road accident in Turkey at the age of 20. The Karya Bestari imprint also publishes more than 15 variants of the Qur’an, making Karangkraf the biggest publisher in this niche segment.

For Firdaus Hussamuddin, COO and chief editor of the book group (and daughter of the company founder), the focus for the next two to three years will be on “garnering a bigger share of the local market by building on our leading position in the fiction and nonfiction genres, while moving more aggressively into the international scene.” She adds, “Our present target remains the local market with Malay language titles.” One challenge stands in Firdaus’s path: “There is a lack of good writers, especially for novels and children’s storybooks. I would also like to see more creative and imaginative works in the sci-fi genre.”
Country Spotlight: Malaysia

For the Malaysian bookselling and publishing communities, the first quarter of the year leading up to the 6% goods and services tax (GST) implementation on April 1 was tumultuous and disruptive. (The GST—a value-added tax—is a broad-based tax on most goods, services, and other items sold or consumed in Malaysia. It replaces the 5%–10% sales and services tax that was in effect for the previous several decades.)

“It was a time when returns hit the roof, purchases slowed down substantially, and bookstores were mostly in waiting mode,” recalls Arief Hakim, managing director of PTS Media Group, which had the worst first-quarter sales in its 15-year history due to the uncertainties wrought by the GST implementation. “Nobody knows the status of books vis-à-vis the GST scheme. But the industry rallied together, lobbied hard, and had books placed under a GST zero-rated item at the last minute.”

Fortunately, the government gave out 250 MYR in early April to each of about 1.3 million students through its book voucher program—up from the 200 MYR allocated in the past three years—totaling 325 million MYR (at the time, worth almost $90 million). The vouchers, which were valid till June 30, gave publishers and booksellers a much-needed break.

For Koichiro Satomi, managing director of Kinokuniya Malaysia, “the voucher scheme drew students to our store to purchase academic titles, and gave us an opportunity to recommend new authors and genres to them for leisure reading.” At the same time, he adds, “we were able to observe what the younger demographics read when they have the purchasing power.”

Keith Thong, president of the 100-member Malaysian Booksellers Association, says the book voucher system, though it boosts readership and benefits the publishing industry, is open to abuse by recipients, who could exchange the vouchers for cash on the black market. “With the vouchers given out, funding for public libraries and universities has been slashed, and that is not good for educational publishers or the community at large,” he says.

The plummeting value of the Malaysian ringgit—exchanging at 4.23 MYR to the dollar at press time, which is down 20% since the beginning of the year—has also made imported books more expensive. “This has afforded book remainder companies such as BookXcess phenomenal growth, which goes to show that there are a lot of readers out there, but they have become more selective in their purchases due to limited resources,” Satomi says. He adds that booksellers are offering bestsellers at lower prices, and he also notes the emergence of pop-up book fairs and deep discounting of key backlist titles. “At Kinokuniya, we see stable readership and sales, and growth in every segment, especially in Malay-language publications.”

Local publishing is definitely thriving at the expense of costlier imports, Thong concurs. “Romance is huge, and most titles sold are leisure based,” he says. “At the same time, there are many new left-wing, young, social media-driven publishers out there making big bucks from our heated political climate. Some of their new publications have sold upwards of 50,000 copies within a short period of time.”

The growth of small presses is undeniable, Satomi says. “Their titles mostly originate from social media content, and since the content creators often have huge followings, the poten-

The entrance to Books Kinokuniya at the Suria KLCC

A MIXED BAG FOR BOOKSELLING
Country Spotlight: Malaysia

Total book sales are very high,” he notes. “This is a trend similar to that in the U.S. and U.K., where YouTube personalities and Tumblr bloggers become bestselling authors.”

Located in the capital city’s Petronas Twin Towers, Kinokuniya is the biggest bookstore in Malaysia, at 35,000 sq. ft. Currently, it offers nearly 27,000 titles, of which 70% are English books and magazines. But there will be more local titles on the shelves, promises Satomi, who finds that titles from small presses—mostly raw and unedited—appeal to urbanites who don’t not read or enjoy mainstream Malay titles. Pulp fiction, poetry and short essays from such publishers are becoming very popular, he adds. “Given the potential, we are certainly hoping that there will be more small presses with quality titles and more diverse writings, not just in Malay but also in English or any other language. As long as there are books being sold, there will be readers who can be persuaded into trying other titles, authors, or genres.”

In fact, within the small press community, Kinokuniya is known for being neutral in displaying titles that are deemed controversial. For Satomi, it is a matter of “wanting variety in our store while respecting local regulations and market sentiments.” He says, “If it is within the law for us to carry a title, we will do that in order to give readers the opportunity to enjoy the book and broaden their perspectives.”

Chain stores such as Kinokuniya, which mostly deal with trade books, have more challenges than traditional sellers of textbooks, workbooks, and stationeries, says Thong. “Consumer behavior and purchasing patterns change constantly, influenced by demand for other media content for learning and entertainment,” he notes. “Then there is the question of rising rent, especially with the recent implementation of 6% GST. The growth of remainder businesses has also given the public a taste of imported titles at low prices. So chain stores are doing constant promotions and cutting margins to survive. We should learn from the French on administering price control and having a healthier respect for books and the bookselling industry.”

For Satomi, the store is much more than just books, trade or otherwise. PW’s visit in May, for instance, coincided with the start of Gakken Science Experimental workshop, where a dozen kids attended each of the sessions and got to know recommended titles from Japanese publisher Gakken. A jewelry-making workshop was held not long ago, and now plans are afoot for a coffee-related event. “It is very important for a bricks-and-mortar store to provide a unique experience and ambience to the customer,” Satomi says. “We need to experiment and gauge market interest, and to do that, we must have more, better, and varied events. We want Kinokuniya to be a sociocultural center where people come not just to buy books but also to read, interact, relax, and learn new things.”

Satomi’s counterparts—at chains such as Borders, MPH, Popular, and Times—are no doubt also working on expanding the concept of a retail bookstore into something so much more.—Teri Tan
Meanwhile, Firdaus’s team has already started publishing English-language titles, such as Alphabet Kids series, children’s and YA short stories, cookbooks, and parenting guides. Rights to cookbooks, children’s titles, and novels have also been sold to Indonesian publishers.

“Our company slogan—Energizing the Soul and Mind—is about shaping and building a progressive, modern, and intellectual Malaysian society through our products,” Firdaus says. She adds: “As a mainstream publisher, we have been paying close attention to the small press movement, which has managed to attract people who may not be interested in reading mainstream titles and encourage those who don’t normally pick up a book to start reading. So we have plans afoot to provide an alternative to these small presses, with titles that avoid provocative language or materials and yet still embody our vision.”

Oyez!Books

Rare—and courageous—is the publishing house that focuses on English-language picture books in Malaysia, competing with local Malay-language titles on price and with imports on quality. But Oyez!Books, established in 2008, has been defying the odds with 100-plus titles in its catalogue, 30 projects in the pipeline, and a budding rights business. Its recent collaboration with the British Council to collect folktales from indigenous peoples in East Malaysia is another feather in its cap. Three picture books, accompanied by audio in indigenous languages, are now available from the Storybook Project.

“We just published four middle-grade titles in English—our very first attempt in this age category—and everyone has been telling us that it’s very difficult to sell,” says publisher and owner Linda Tan-Lingard. “But then again, that’s what we were told when we published our first picture book.” Tan-Lingard is also the managing partner of literary agency YGL Media (see “Heating Up the Rights Market,” p. 36). The middle-grade titles include Heidi Shamsuddin’s Door Under the Stairs series, about three children traveling to the past to meet (and assist) key historical figures in Malaysia’s history; the first two titles are out and selling well.

Recent months have also seen Tan-Lingard buying rights for Malay translations. “Since the market is saturated with U.K. and U.S. imports, we are looking at titles from Europe, especially France and Germany. But we are moving cautiously as the market for Malay picture books is limited to mostly urban areas.”

At the Frankfurt Book Fair in October, Tan-Lingard will be promoting several new titles. Science educator Nor Azhar Ishak’s Under the Sea, for instance, features bright illustrations on one side and line drawings for children to color on the facing page, while Legendary Princesses of the World from Emila Yusof (My Mother’s Garden) has contributors from 13 countries, including Estonia, Finland, Germany, Indonesia, Romania, and Vietnam. Then there is the new edition of The Real Elephant by Yusof Gajah, Malaysia’s foremost naive artist.

“Our titles have local context as we do not publish just to sell overseas,” Tan-Lingard says, pointing out that local illustrators such as Nami Concours winners Yusof Gajah, Awang Fadilah, and Jainal Amambing, and new talents Wen Dee Tan, Khairul Amir Shoib, and Emila Yusof, are making a name for themselves internationally. “Some illustrators are able to cross boundaries, some aren’t,” she notes. “However, people from different countries view illustrations differently—and that means there are no hard-and-fast rules about what works abroad.”

Pelangi Publishing Group

Pelangi owes its humble start to being in the right place at the right time. When the British examination and education system was replaced by the local system, with Malay as the language of instruction, in 1979, teacher and Pelangi cofounder Samuel Sum seized the opportunity by translating and publishing past-year questions with model answers for mathematics and science. The guides were best-sellers, and the company he started went on to become a brand name in the educational market.

Thirty-seven years on, Pelangi is publicly listed and has moved beyond Malaysia’s shores, with subsidiaries in China, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and the U.K. (as Dickens Publishing); its catalogue has more than 15,000 titles, and its share of the Malaysian educational market is approximately 35%.

“Product differentiation is the key to maintaining our competitive edge in a tight market,” says Sum, who is now the executive chairman and group managing director. “But frequent changes in our national curriculum have led to demands for new teaching and reference materials at rapid intervals. This means that more investment in editorial resources has to be allocated to meet newer requirements, while older editions, which may have been published just a year ago, are returned to our warehouse.”
Meanwhile, school textbooks are no longer traded in the open market, unlike in most other countries. “The government purchases the textbooks only once when there is a new project tender, and the copies are reused by subsequent batches of students,” Sum says. “These challenges put immense pressure on sales margin and operating overheads on us and our counterparts.”

Sum, who started investing in digital publishing a decade ago, is eyeing digital textbooks—a key component in the latest Malaysian education blueprint, will be launched in 2017—as an opportunity to be the first mover to get his e-titles adopted by schools and communities nationwide. “Presently, the direction in school market vis-à-vis digital learning is unclear, while consumer demand in retail markets for digital products remains low. We hope that will change for the better soon. For our part, we have continued working with technology companies to experiment with different digital products and implement initiatives to grow this market segment.”

The increasing number of international schools in Malaysia is good for business, but it also means heightened competition from overseas publishers. Sum says: “International schools invariably adopt overseas curriculum and prefer educational materials by overseas publishers as well. For Pelangi, this has motivated us to improve our educational materials to match the standards of overseas publishers in order to compete in the international school markets. At the same time, we are working on getting more of our publications adopted—and adapted—for other Asian countries.”

PTS Media Group
Founded in 1988 as a consultancy firm for publishing, editing, and typesetting services, PTS has since evolved to become one of the biggest mainstream publishers in Malaysia, with nine imprints and three distribution companies.

For managing director Arief Hakim, the year’s biggest challenge is the depreciating ringgit, which has declined more than 20% against the greenback in the past six months. A 24-month slowdown in the country’s general economy and consumer spending is imminent, he says. “Inflation is up, and so is the cost of living due to the weaker ringgit. As a trade book publisher, these factors will definitely affect us. It has certainly affected our translation program, necessitating renegotiation of advances and, in a few cases, postponement of projects.”

PTS’s translation program is mostly focused on business and education.
Rights traffic, as expected in a small book market like Malaysia, typically flows one way, with English-to-Malay translations mostly found in the education and reference segments. Given that English is read and spoken throughout Malaysia—especially by those in their 50s and older who went through English-language schools—fiction, non-fiction, and other genres are directly (and widely) imported from the U.K. and U.S.

Local publications are tailored for domestic consumption, and rights negotiation, if any, tends to be with neighboring Indonesia, where the language is similar and translation is thus easier. Heavily illustrated children’s books with little text, on the other hand, are made for translations anywhere. Throw in cultural nuances and local context, and homgrown children’s titles—from YGL Media (see below), for instance—have found favor with parents and kids in countries as far away as Germany and Switzerland. But selling rights as a business is new, with most publishers relying on in-house rights departments to buy and sell titles. So independent rights agencies are very few and small.

For Jonathan Ng, whose eponymous publishing agency represents Weldon Owen, Highlights, Geddes & Grosset/Waverley Books, Compass Media, and eight other publishers for the Southeast Asian markets, it’s all about coeditions and rights sales. “Both 2013 and 2014 were good years. But the sliding ringgit, 6% GST, and the ensuing softer consumer demand have cast a pall over the current Malaysian market. Hopefully, this is temporary, and, if so, then the overall outlook for children’s segment remains strong.”

Recent months have seen Ng selling eight of Highlights’ Hidden Picture Puzzles (“with the local licensee, who has sold more than 20,000 copies within two months, preparing to sign up for another eight titles,” he says), Webster’s Concise Dictionary and Thesaurus, Webster’s Word Power English, Sunshine Books’ Discovering Asia series, and Weldon Owen’s Children’s Encyclopedia of Animals. “Reference titles tend to do well in Malaysia,” he adds. Ng negotiated the rights of 70-odd titles and directly imported several hundreds more last year.

“In view of the small market, I usually encourage local publishers to do about 3,000–5,000 copies to get better rights or coedition deals,” Ng says. “But some will go for 2,000 to minimize the risk factor. The final figure mostly depends on the genre.” Ng also represents several French and American comics, “but local publishers remain more enthusiastic about Japanese manga, and so I’m looking to expand my list, especially with those on science or supernatural themes.” With his B2C business model, he places less emphasis on authors and more on new products, such as English course books, graded readers, classic storybooks, and puzzle-based activity book series.

“The growth of children’s titles, comics, and YA titles in recent years has been steady, but hard figures are, well, hard to come by,” Ng says. “A lot of this growth is directly linked to the way publishers and retailers position and market the products. Several major book-store chains, for instance, have established their own publishing arm, which makes sense since they own the shelf space, and consumers stand to benefit from the wider book varieties and lower prices on offer. Local publishers are also finding ways to work with retail chains on exclusive deals.” Ng adds that there remains a gap between urban and rural readership in multiracial and multilingual Malaysia, with English titles selling better in urban areas.

Over at YGL Media, formerly known as Yusof Gajah Lingard Literary Agency, managing partner Linda Tan-Lingard is looking into leveraging her authors’ IPs into merchandising (toys, stationery, gifts, and novelty items) and book spin-offs. “We have already turned some of the picture books published by our sister company, Oyez!Books, into animated products and apps through our partnership with Taipei-based Moker,” she says. “We have also licensed some of our illustrators’ works to hotels, for instance. In that sense, we are not a traditional literary agency. So we dropped the old name, which is quite a mouthful, and chose YGL Media to sum up our offerings across print and digital.”

Right sales of Oyez!Books publications have been growing over the months, Tan-Lingard adds. “Our titles have been translated into Arabic, French, German, Korean, and simplified and traditional Chinese. Folk artist Yusof Gajah’s works—Where Is My Red Ball?, Roads, At the Foot of the Hill, Let’s Build, and Elephant Teapot—are among our bestsellers, which also include Emilia Yusof’s My Mother’s Garden and Norico Chua’s A Cake Reaching to the Sky.”

Works by two new illustrators—Evi Shelvia and Chooi Ling Keiong—is currently setting YGL Media abuzz: Chooi illustrated a retelling of Hans Christian Andersen’s The Last Dream of the Old Oak Tree, while Shelvia did The Castle Library and The Wild Treehouse of Borneo. “We will be bringing these outstanding works to Frankfurt and Shanghai, and hopefully, will close some deals for these titles and others in our catalogue.”

The agency’s regular participation at international fairs has helped in “broadening our reach in promoting our writers and illustrators. At the same time, we hope that KLTCC [Kuala Lumpur Trade and Copyright Centre] will continue to grow and encourage more rights sales,” Tan-Lingard says, adding that, in general, the children’s book segment is on an upturn due to a push by the government to encourage reading and get publishers to increase their output.

With the new agency name also comes a broader portfolio that covers local publishers of fiction such as Buku Fixi, PTS, and Silverfish Books. These publishers, Tan-Lingard says, prefer to deal directly with the authors rather than going through an agent, perhaps due to the perception that an agent-driven deal may increase the advance and royalty rates. “But they are happy for the agent to sell the rights overseas—and so we adapt to such preference by representing the publishers instead of the authors on fiction. We are definitely here for the authors, but now we are in a good position to work with both publishers and authors to promote their titles.”

—Teri Tan
Country Spotlight: Malaysia

management (including titles by Dale Carnegie, Stephen Covey, Michael Gordin, Robert Kiyosaki, and Brian Tracy) and self-help/relationship (John Gray, Barbara and Allan Pease, and Tony Robbins). “Bestsellers in these categories are always great for translation into the Malay language, as the authors are brands that presell the titles,” says Arief. His editorial team will add 250 new publications to PTS’s catalogue of around 2,000 active titles this year.

As for PTS bestsellers, homegrown titles take the lead, with Catatan Mat Luthfi (based on a diary of a young man, with stories real and mystical), Deme Wasap, Ambe Reply (a Q&A with a Muslim scholar on young adult issues), and Dracula vs. Al-Fateh (set during the time of the Ottoman Empire), ahead of the Malay edition of Jerry D. Gray’s The Final Chapter. Mat Luthfi is the biggest seller, with more than 120,000 copies sold, while the other four have sold more than 20,000 copies each. Rights to several Islamic titles have also been sold to Indonesian publishers.

On the e-book front, more international names entering the market will help, Arief says. “When Google Play Books came to Malaysia about a year ago, e-book sales jumped significantly. The big players have attractive e-stores that make mobile users want to try e-reading—and that is important, because local readers still overwhelmingly prefer print, while the rise of remainders means that imports are available at low prices. The latter negates the need for an alternative format to print, at least for the time being.”

But tough times are good for out-of-the-box thinking. “Our direct-to-reader channel, for instance, is showing great potential,” Arief says. “Aside from creating an online store called Bookcafe, we have also ventured into the exhibition business, based on a book-truck concept, which is most appropriate for school fairs.” Arief is hoping for a new global blockbuster to help stimulate book sales while working on closer collaboration with rights and translation teams at major publishing houses.

Silverfish Books

Silverfish Books, one of the few publishers offering Malaysian literature and English-language titles, came onto the scene in 1999 as an indie bookstore. “There were no other bookshops in Kuala Lumpur with the range of titles we carried,” recalls owner Raman Krishnan. “Then came megabookstore chains, led by Borders, which stocked almost every book in print in their upmarket locales and offered deep discounts. I didn’t think it would
last but in the meantime, we had to survive. That was when I started publishing books.”

But the lack of good writers, Raman says, remains a challenge to this day: “We can fix poor language skills but not uninteresting stories. So we look for good storytellers and good stories, and we go from there.” Dina Zaman’s I Am Muslim is one such great (and controversial) story, having sold more than 20,000 copies to date (“which is pretty good for a country of 30 million, where the English-language market comes after the Malay and Chinese”). Then there are Farish A. Noor’s The Other Malaysia and From Majapahit to Putrajaya, which have sold 10,000 and 5,000 copies, respectively.

Average sales for a Silverfish title is about 2,000 copies, and “5,000 is considered a bestseller for an English-language title,” Raman says. He adds, “Those in Malay language can exceed 100,000 copies.”

Selling rights is not a priority for the company, given Raman’s philosophy of publishing books for Malaysians by Malaysians. But it sold Shih-li Kow’s The Sum of Our Follies to Italian publisher Metropoli d’Asia even before it was published locally. “If someone else likes our books, that is great, but we do not publish with rights selling in mind,” Raman adds.

Over at Silverfish Books store (“a boutique without the high prices”), 70% of the titles are local. Raman says: “We work on the principle of a community. We recommend and choose books for our customers, but we also learn from them about their preferences. Although we are not genre specific, we do avoid self-help, business, and romance—titles that we think do not contribute to raising the level of intellectual debate in this country. We are snobbish that way, which our customers know and like.”

Aside from making good books available to the public, the bookstore is also a venue for talks and events. It is currently hosting a two-month-long Silverfish Festival of Cabbages (the name is a reference to Mark Twain’s Pudd’nhead Wilson), where discussions every weekend range from music to counterculture.

Leisure reading in Malaysia, Raman notes, “is a work in progress: the bad news is that the market is small; the good news is that it can only expand.”

University Book Store Malaysia (UBSM)

A reseller for international brands in Southeast Asia since 1956, UBSM represents almost every academic publisher operating in Malaysia, including Cengage, McGraw-Hill, Pearson, and Wiley. And for those without local presence, such as Britannica Learning, ChemQuest, EnglishCentral, MeBooks, National Geographic, and PressReader, second-generation owner Keith Thong has exclusive or preferred channel partnership deals in place.

With 60 team members operating from 12 branches throughout Malaysia, UBSM is focused on imported academic titles from the U.S. and U.K. But recent years have seen the company moving into e-books and databases. “Digital is the future, and we thank Britannica Learning for sharing their global vision, which in turn helps to form our own vision for a digital business,” Thong says. “We grew from a few hundred Britannica subscribers to a few million within two years, and now we are responsible for selling Britannica digital products in Southeast Asia.”

“Getting subscribers is tough, but maintaining them is even tougher, as the database needs to justify its ROI in this budget-challenged environment,” Thong says. He adds that selling print products is not without challenges: “Government funding to schools can be reduced or cut at any time, while photocopying activities remain rampant, despite the enforcement of copyright legislation. On the other hand, the book industry is deemed ‘unsexy,’ and so maintaining skilled staff is tough. Parallel exporting used to be a big hurdle in Asia but fortunately, international publishers have done a lot to curtail this issue.”

Thong used the lessons he learned from starting and operating a digital business in his latest brainchild, the UBSM Digital Education Odyssey, which was held on June 4. “It was a CSR initiative that we co-sponsored with the Malaysian English Language Teaching Association and Nottingham University’s Education Faculty,” he says. “The aim was to educate and expose educators—from schools, colleges, the education ministry, nongovernmental organizations, and rural development authorities—and librarians about digital education and products. We limited the participation to only 100, but the next Odyssey will definitely have more seats, presenters, and product trials.”

Thong, who is also the president of the Malaysian Booksellers Association, adds: “In the near future, we hope to sell academic titles from Malaysia to the international market by providing either physical books through our e-commerce engine or electronic content via our e-book platform at Ebigator.com.”

(For more on this, see “Digital Segment on the Move,” at publishersweekly.com/malaysia2015.)