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The Time to Give

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If you want to know about the potential of English-language publishing in Asia, just ask Jim Aitchison, better known by his pen name of James Lee. His 11 slim "Mr Midnight" volumes of horror and mystery for children have now sold 700,000 copies -- 100,000 in the past year, according to his small Singapore publisher, Flame of the Forest.

"By using Asian names for my heroes, putting them in Asian urban environments, the kids can really relate -- they just gobble up these books," says Mr. Aitchison, a 60-year-old Australian who has also penned a dozen business books since retiring in 1996 after more than 20 years as a Singapore advertising executive. There's more creepy tales in store, too: Twelve more "Mr Midnight" volumes are being planned and a Chinese-language printing of 180,000 is in the works.

"Mr. Midnight" has become a local phenomenon because most of the ideas for the stories -- such as "My Handphone Is Haunted" -- are suggested by the children themselves, through hundreds of fan letters. The most recently published "Mister Midnight," No. 11 in the series (Angsana/Flame of the Forest, Singapore, US\$6.95), features sinister sunglasses and a killer clown, making the title among the most scary, but hardly the most unusual, of a seasonal glut of books especially created with Asia in mind.

With such a barrage of new books, Personal Journal has hit the stores and Web sites to pluck out some of the more intriguing non-fiction gift titles. What we found was that never have there been so many lavishly designed volumes extolling the virtues of Asian design, Asian chefs, Asian collectibles, Asian beliefs, even, in one local hot seller, Asia's most notable bathrooms.

Not all of these are views of "the exotic East" coming from publishers in book centers such as London and New

York. Slick local upstarts like Flame of the Forest, founded in 1989, produce world-class designed books. And there's many longtime Asia-based publishers such as Penguin India, Singapore's Times Editions, Marshall Cavendish and Tuttle Publishing. Tuttle, founded in 1948 by Charles E. Tuttle as a tribute to Japanese culture, is now a grouping of five imprints with headquarters from Boston to Singapore and Tokyo.

Even on the Internet, there are a thriving number of specialized book-order outlets based in Asia such as Asia Books (www.asiabook.com) in Bangkok, the more academic Select Books (www.selectbooks.com.sg) in Singapore, and, amazingly, Pilgrims Books (www.pilgrimsbooks.com) in Kathmandu.

Following is a guide to some new titles (including the author's name, the publisher and approximate price in US\$) that would make smart gifts this season:

You know Asia has really hit the map when the season's choice can lead off with our very own sporting hero. "Yao: A Life in Two Worlds" (by Yao Ming with Ric Bucher; Miramax, New York; \$22.95) must be the first, rudimentary "as told to" sports-bio about a star from China. Shanghai's Yao Ming, now the established center for the N.B.A's Houston Rockets, turned to Ric Bucher, a writer for ESPN The Magazine, to turn his story into English. The result is hardly a sports classic, with a prose style not so much lost in translation as dumbed-down to the level of the average 12-year-old autograph hound. Still, the genuine humility of this gentle giant comes through on each page, and there are numerous intriguing and surprising profound observations about the differences between traditional Chinese and modern American notions of heroism.

A very different sort of hero-worship is showcased in "Warren Buffett" (Ayano Morio; John Wiley & Sons, Singapore; \$14.95). This is the first English translation of an illustrated comic, already popular in Japan, which turns the life and advice of "the world's most successful investor" into the stuff of Superman.

Amazingly, though the drawings are stick-like and big-eyed, the illustrator manages to make drama out of events such as Mr. Buffett's takeover of Berkshire Hathaway and teach some basic lessons of business in extolling the principles of a man whose solid values and conservative nature clearly strike a chord among the Japanese.

A more conventional, and exhaustive, effort from the same publisher, "The Chinese Tao of Business" (George and Usha Haley and Chin Tiong Tan; John Wiley & Sons, Singapore; \$19.95) is one of many guides to the minefield of making money in China. This one is a veritable textbook, at times drawing too heavily on simplistic stereotypes drawn from psychological studies or musty Confucian commandments about respecting superiors. But the book also offers numerous helpful examples, profiling foreign companies such as Acer and Coca-Cola that have already made, and survived, the great leap into the land of guanxi. (If you don't know what that word means, better get this book.)

Among volumes of local interest, one of the best in the litter is "Malaysia: A Pictorial History, 1400-2004" (Wendy Khadijah Moore; Archipelago Press, Kuala Lumpur; \$39.95). Sure to pique the curiosity of anyone who has lived or traveled in Malaysia, this is a satisfyingly large and thorough scrapbook of a time and land so quickly and completely vanished. More than 1,200 photographs have been collected and well-organized, showing everything from traditional costumes to political figures (though controversial reformer Anwar Ibrahim is conveniently omitted).

The prize for sumptuous design, as well as originality, goes to a soft-cover effort between dazzling white covers. "Kingyo: The Artistry Of Japanese Goldfish" (Kazuya Takaoka and Sachiko Kuru; Kodansha, Tokyo; \$37.50) is one of those curiosity pieces that can only be pulled off in book form. No Web site could replicate the fascination, and satisfaction, of flipping through these near-400 graphically bold evocations of resplendent breeds of fish, in paintings

and photos. For good measure, the book's middle pages contain a rare 20th-century novella of unrequited, if slightly fishy, love. "Kingyo" is more beautiful than owning an aquarium, and a lot less work.

Of course, some of the most striking coffee-table books these days are books about food. One stirring example is "Food and Travels Asia" (Alastair Hendy; Mitchell Beazley, London; \$35), a stunningly designed evocation of prize-winning photographer Hendy's adventures in search of true tastes in India, Thailand, Burma, Vietnam and more. The close-up photos, merged with verite shots of tropical scenes and street vendors, turn roadside banquets into Renaissance still lifes. The recipes collected by Mr. Hendy are authentic, even if the names are fanciful (like "Chatujak Satay," named for Bangkok's flea market). And Mr. Hendy's narrative, if not brilliant, is telegraphic.

Of more practical use in the kitchen is "A Cook's Guide to Asian Vegetables" (Wendy Hutton and Sui Chen Choi; Periplus, Singapore; \$24.95). This is an excellent basic dictionary of everything from the soil that eventually ends up on Asian tables, with nutritional as well as storage tips. The graceful illustrations make for a pleasant package, even if many of the recipes are well-worn and lean too heavily toward Malaysian fare. The visuals are less strong, but the information more unique, in the adjunct "Cooking With Asian Leaves" (Devagi Sanmugam and Christopher Tan; Marshall Cavendish, Singapore; \$18.50). The recipes make me want to run out and gather some stalks of drumstick, wild pepper or ponnangani.

For those who perform their meditations beyond the realm of the kitchen, there's much profound whimsy and modern-day enlightenment, as well as superb prose, in "The Best Buddhist Writing 2004" (Melvin McLeod, ed.; Shambhala, Boston and London; \$16.95). The 41 collected essays, memoirs and celebrated moments have a decidedly American flavor, a testament to the growing acceptance, as well as publishing presence, of Buddhist thought. Everyone from author Pico Iyer to Vietnamese sage Thich Nhat Hanh, Thai monk Bhikkhu Nyanasobhano and numerous Tibetan teachers can be found here.

A more personal awakening is the goal of "My Ear at His Heart" (Hanif Kureishi; Faber and Faber, London; \$24.95). This slight and somewhat confused memoir probably wouldn't have

been published weren't Mr. Kureishi well known for his cynical, hard-edged "My Beautiful Laundrette" and "The Buddha of Suburbia." This title is ostensibly an evocation of the author's father, occasioned by old manuscripts penned by Kureishi senior on the side while working for the Pakistani Embassy in London. Though the book ends up more about the author and his own early literary impulses, his brief, scathing gems of cross-cultural observation -- about Muslim relatives hooked on scotch and soda -- make it all worthwhile.

Finally, some books bring good news through their mere existence. If proof is needed that Thailand still has free discourse, it's provided by the recent appearance of "Thaksin: The Politics of Business in Thailand" (Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker; Silk-worm Books, Chiangmai; \$15). Ms. Pasuk, an economics professor at Chulalongkorn University, and freelance writer Mr. Baker have long been a muckracking team who expose flaws and corruption in the Thai body politic. Their account of the current Prime Minister's rise and government is heavy-going at times, but at base, a fascinating indictment not so much of Mr. Thaksin's personal thrust but of the kingdom's incestuous and duplicitous political culture.

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