

RUSSIA AND GREATER CHINA

Learning just an open book

Visitors to fair keen to discover more about the 'mystery' surrounding a huge neighbour, writes **Lisa Tam**

In Hong Kong, where even taxi drivers snatch a couple of minutes to read a page of their favourite book at traffic lights, it is no wonder the Hong Kong Book Fair draws enormous crowds.

Russia and Greater China (RGC) exhibited at the fair's International Cultural Village at this year's event, thanks to the Russian consulate which secured the agreement with the fair's organisers.

Organised by the Hong Kong Trade Development Council, the fair is dedicated to exhibiting and selling all kinds of printed matter, from the works of local and international authors to children's books and travel guides.

This year's fair saw more than 500 exhibitors and thousands of book lovers roaming the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre last month.

Visitors were reluctant to leave, even in the face of the approaching typhoon Vicente.

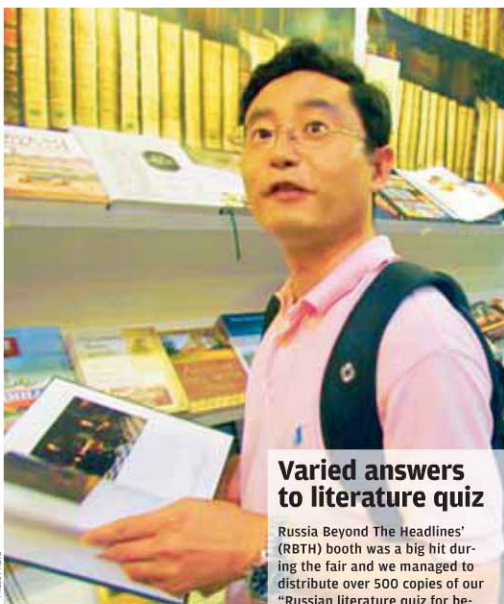
Attracted by bargains, author interviews and autograph sessions, many visited the International Cultural Village "street" in the middle of which RGC had a booth and represented Russia, its culture and the project.

Visitors expressed strong interest in the RGC supplement, noting that this is the only source of information about Russia in Hong Kong. Many had read previous issues while others browsed through issues at the booth.

"Russia is such a mystery for Hong Kong people. But we want to explore and learn more about it. I don't know much about your country besides the fact that it's big and very beautiful," said Michael To, an accountant, while his two sons looked over a photo album of Russian scenery.

A quiz, with questions about *Russia Beyond the Headlines* (RBTH), the Russian language and literature was run.

Winners received a set of bookmarks with quotes from Russian writers and



Varied answers to literature quiz

Russia Beyond The Headlines' (RBTH) booth was a big hit during the fair and we managed to distribute over 500 copies of our "Russian literature quiz for beginners". The majority of answers were correct, but we also received some strange entries. Some 20 per cent thought that Vladimir Lenin was the greatest Russian poet, and the Russian alphabet has 120 or 88 letters. We also asked you what RBTH stands for, and 30 per cent said it stood for "Russian idea of paradise", while 1 per cent thought that it was a "Russian swear word". But 60 per cent said RBTH was a media organisation.

Many visitors to the Hong Kong Book Fair knew little about Russia, but were keen to know more about its culture, cuisine and sights.

an RBTH Asia gift bag. Many visitors asked about Russian culture, cuisine and sights. "I have always wanted to go to Moscow and Saint Petersburg, but I had no idea where to start looking for information," visitor Rainbow Wong said. It was a pleasure to introduce Russia and it is hoped there will be more opportunities to talk of things involving Russia and China.

Martial arts school facing tough fight

Oleg Kozlov

Hong Kong is one of the martial arts capitals of the world, crowded with wushu wannabes and old ladies doing morning tai chi.

However there is a special school that dares to be different and compete with the rest of them.

Systema is a unique martial arts school that embraces ancient traditions that have been adopted from multiple foreign cultures by medieval Russia and incorporated into the ingenious fighting style of Russian warriors.

Its reputation as the martial arts school used by the Russian Spetsnaz - elite special forces unit - created a strong base for recognition around the world.

Even so, systema is still relatively unpopular in Hong Kong, probably due to the city's obsession with local heroes and fighting styles.

Dating back to 10th century and rooted deeply in native Slavic culture, systema looks exotic among Hong Kong's wing chun and tai chi classes.

"Systema cannot be compared to wing chun or any other Eastern martial arts because it is based on a different concept that implies more flexibility, ability to react to circumstances and essentially thinking outside the box," says Janik Litalien, a Canadian systema instructor who brought the school to Hong Kong.

Apart from physical training, systema offers a unique philosophical aspect of self-development based on Russian Orthodox Christianity doctrine that emphasises humility and striving to understand yourself.

The spacious studio in Tai Kok Tsui is decorated with banners that feature the five basic principles of systema: breathe, relax, know, move and have fun. Heavy kettlebells - Russian exercise tools that resemble cannonballs - and *nagakas* - short, thick whips - are used here very often. One of the instructors is a native Hongkonger.

This establishment is the first school in Hong Kong and the mainland to serve as a systema ambassador. There are about 30 students learning relaxation and self-defence techniques from two instructors, which makes it a more serious endeavour than the school's humble beginnings in 2010.

CITY

"We used to exercise in Kowloon Park with the Symphony of Lights laser show [as] our background and inspiration," says Litalien. He is also optimistic about the future progress of the school: "We have already organised three seminars with international instructors and we are planning the next one now." However, he is not so sure about expansion since students are hard to come by.

Litalien recognises that while systema is potentially interesting as it is customisable for individual qualities and abilities, and has already created curiosity, not everyone will instantly convert to it.

Attracting new students can be difficult, particularly in a city where it is quite unlikely that they will have a chance to put any new skills to use, and where Bruce Lee is still the No 1 martial arts role model for many.



Attracting new students is proving tough for the little-known school.



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Russian Language Center (701, Asian Commercial Centre 2-12 Queen's Road West, Sheung Wan)
Sun Studio (Unit 3, G/F, Westley Square, 48 Hoi Yuen Rd, Kwun Tong)
Red Square Gallery (11 Yuk Saa Street, Happy Valley)
ATC AVIA (Room 3105, 31/F, Tower 1, Lippo Centre, 89 Queensway)
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