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THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF CHINA IN PROSPECT*

Dr. ZHAN Furui
Director
The National Library of China

Abstract

The National Library of China (NLC) is both the national repository for publications of China as well as a comprehensive research library. It provides services to the central government, to key research, educational, and production institutions, and to the general public. NLC is also responsible for carrying out cultural agreements with foreign countries on behalf of the Chinese government and promoting exchange and cooperation with libraries worldwide.

The strategic plan for the next five years for the NLC focuses on three areas: (1) developing an innovative infrastructure to support excellent services related to traditional materials, (2) further strengthening modern information services, and (3) establishing new service areas through staff training and continuing education.

The NLC priorities in the next five years include the following:

1. Complete the NLC Phase II Project and National Digital Library Project to achieve balanced collections and improved service structures leading to overall enhanced delivery of comprehensive knowledge services.
2. Implement creative methods to provide new services and improve service quality, and adopt new models to meet the information needs of governmental bodies, educational institutions, commerce and industry, and the general public.
3. Strengthen the collection and preservation of documents and information so as to build a high quality national repository of multimedia and multilingual content.
4. Establish a comprehensive and multidimensional exchange and cooperation system focused on China and globally responsive that follows the principle of "open construction, mutual benefit, collaboration in development and sharing."

Origin and Development of the National Library of China

The origins of the National Library of China (NLC) can be traced to the Capital Library that was founded on September 9, 1909. The Capital Library opened to the public in August 1912 and officially started to receive deposit copies of Chinese publications in 1916. In July 1928, the Capital Library was renamed National Beiping Library. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the National Beiping Library was renamed Beijing Library. On December 12, 1998, the name of the Beijing Library was changed to the National Library of China.

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The NLC's collections include items in foreign languages and many rare books. Presently, the library holds 270,000 volumes of rare books, 1.64 million of general ancient books, and 35,000 pieces of oracle bones of the Shang Dynasty (c.16th-11th century B.C.). NLC is well known for its collections of ancient rare books. The earliest book collection in NLC is that of the Royal Jixidian of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279 AD), which dates back seven hundred years. Rare books in foreign languages include incunabula printed in Europe between 1473 and 1477. NLC also has numerous special collections, including manuscripts of notable authors, historical documents of the Chinese revolution, local gazetteers, genealogies, Chinese doctoral dissertations, and publications of the United Nations and other international organizations. After years of unremitting effort, NLC has in place a structure that emphasizes both collection and access in all facets of collecting, processing, storing, supplying, and developing document and information resources.

NLC Today

NLC is the national repository for publications of China as well as a comprehensive research library. It provides services for the central government, research, educational, and production institutions, and the general public. NLC is also responsible for fulfilling cultural agreements on behalf of the government and promoting exchange and cooperation with libraries at home and abroad.

NLC has a floor space of 170,000 square meters and 47 reading rooms and is open to the public 363 days a year. By the end of 2005, the total collection of NLC had reached 25.05 million volumes/items, and the amount of home-developed digital resources had exceeded 120TB. According to statistics from the last five years, NLC received 4.45 million on-site users each year, circulated 26.9 million volumes/items, had 190 million visits to the NLC website, and handled 200,000 consultation sessions as well as over 30,000 interlibrary loan and document delivery requests. The NLC staff currently numbers 1,283.

Future Objectives of NLC

In its nearly one hundred years of existence, the National Library of China has seen many changes. Its workflow has evolved from manual processing to automated, network-based, and digitized operations, and its service model has developed from circulation-focused service to comprehensive and diversified knowledge services, as well as to national and international resource sharing that transcends the boundaries of time and space. In the past two decades, rapid development in information technology, including computer science, networking and communication, and database technology, has had a significant impact on the library community. NLC now faces the challenge of carrying forward its glorious accomplishments of the past century, at the same time promoting sustainable development for the Library of the future.

In the next five years, NLC must keep pace with the development of the ever-changing information environment. To attain its vision of strong modern information services joined with superb traditional document services, the NLC, by expanding opportunities for continuing education and staff training, will initiate a national document and information center, a center of library exchange and cooperation, and a center of cultural and educational activities, at the same time continuing its existing roles as a national general repository of publications, a national center of bibliographical records, a national center of

library information networks, and a national center of library research and development.

In the next five years, NLC intends to follow these basic principles: first, measured, carefully-planned implementation adhering to the principle of sustainable development; second, selective adoption of key areas prioritized based on strategic planning; third, a practical, realistic approach that looks to the future; fourth, strengthening fundamental library services while promoting innovation.

The first strategic focus of NLC is to complete the “National Library of China Phase II and National Digital Library Project” that will establishing a scientific, rational structure of collections and services to improve NLC’s overall service capabilities. Launched in December 2004, the “National Library of China Phase II and National Digital Library Project” is a key cultural project in China’s Tenth Five-Year Plan and China’s first national digital library construction project. With a total government investment of RMB 1.235 billion *yuan*, the library construction area totals nearly 80,000 square meters. It will increase seating by 2,900 seats and the capacity of receiving readers by 8,000 persons on average per day. The building is scheduled for completion in October 2007. Guided by the concept of “people as the essence,” the project goal is to construct an intelligent library building with a beautiful external view and well-designed floor plans, comprehensive functionalities, integrated technology, and artistic features.

The National Digital Library (NDL) will be made up of eight centers: document digitization, digital resources processing, digital archiving and management, network administration, digital resources supply, system development and maintenance, digital library R&D, and exhibition and training. NDL will also construct a stable, reliable, and extendable network operation environment with a capacity to fulfill the requirements for storing, managing, supplying, and ensuring the security of the vast collections of digital resources. Through developing application systems, NDL intends to realize a complete process of collecting, processing, cataloguing, storing, archiving, organizing, releasing, and utilizing digital resources.

Through its portal and the national backbone network, NDL will be capable of sharing its collections by offering information services to readers nationwide and even worldwide. NDL will design a multi-layer service system and construct a Chinese information resource service platform that, through various collaboration mechanisms and technical means, integrates resources from different information service systems to meet the diverse needs of different user groups for comprehensive access to information. For example, NDL will comprehensively describing its collections of books, periodicals, newspapers, and audio-visual materials by means of metadata.

For the purposes of maintaining compatibility, interoperability, and expandability with other trade-specific or regional digital library and information service systems and promoting a high level of resource sharing, NDL will conduct research in the standards and specifications of a digital library, formulate preliminary standards and specifications for China’s digital libraries, and provide support for the joint construction and sharing of digital library systems nationwide. In addition, NDL will also construct off-site backup and disaster recovery systems to ensure long-term preservation of important academic digital resources.

Upon completion of the Phase II Project, NLC plans to conduct necessary adjustments in the layout of current collections and service models. Phase I buildings will be open to readers conducting research, those of Phase II mainly to the general readers, and buildings located in Wenjin Street will be redesigned as a branch library of ancient books, mainly targeted at readers interested in or doing research using ancient books. This use of these three premises should achieve effective coordination and optimum utilization of the Library's functions, thus improving the overall service capacities of NLC.

The second strategic focus is to enhance and improve services to offices of state legislation and policy-making; to research, educational, and production institutions, and to the general public. The goal is to serve our users wholeheartedly, to satisfy reader's needs for information and knowledge, and contribute to the "construction of a lifelong education system and a study-oriented society."

NLC plans to move from traditional services based on material resources to providing them simultaneously in both material and digital formats, and to advance from offering loan service to providing value-added and customized services. Equal importance will be given to providing manual, labor-based loan services to on-site readers and Internet-based services to off-site readers. From providing single format resources, NLC plans to move to providing integrated resources. NLC will develop virtual reference to strengthen its reference and consultation services and expand the scope and depth of its document delivery service.

The first priority in the multi-layer service system is given to the needs of national legislation and policy-making. NLC intends to build a technically-advanced, content-diversified, fast, and responsive consultation platform for legislation and policy-making bodies to provide customized information services and virtual reference.

NLC also emphasizes serving the needs of educational, research, and production institutions. Based on the changing needs of major national strategic policy-making and key national initiatives, and following the government policies of building a harmonious society, an innovation-oriented country, and a new rural area, the NLC will integrate different types of information resources, explore new service models, and make full use of the document supply center, information service center, and the novelty search center (center for evaluating scientific and technical achievements). Additionally, the reference librarian (subject librarian, liaison librarian) system can also be gradually introduced on a pilot basis for priority readers in certain key areas of NLC's services.

NLC will also make unremitting efforts to provide quality services to general users. Apart from offering quality services to on-site readers, NLC will strengthen services for off-site readers through innovative service models based on modern technical means, thus enabling readers to enjoy digital resources through the Internet. NLC will also continue to improve the organization of such cultural activities as "Wenjin Book Awards," "Wenjin Reading Salon," and "Wenjin Forum," and will endeavor to provide barrier-free services for the disabled.

The third strategic focus is to strengthen the collection and preservation of documents and information, thereby building a high-quality national preservation base of information resources and a distinctive information resource system of rich content, diversified media, and comprehensive language types.

The coming five years will witness more diversified media in information resources. Facing this trend in development, NLC has adopted a policy of “comprehensive acquisition” of Chinese resources and domestic publications with the intention of making NLC the greatest preservation base of Chinese documents and information resources in the world. NLC will take necessary measures to increase the submission of legal deposit copies of publications of various types and media. In addition to acquiring collections through receiving legal deposit copies and purchase, NLC is also attempting to develop a new acquisition model of purchasing and obtaining licenses at the same time. Additionally, the collection of Chinese government publications and Chinese resources published overseas is to be increased, and existing collections are to be supplemented through various means and channels.

In contrast to the policy of comprehensive acquisition of Chinese resources, NLC employs a policy of “selective acquisition” of resources in foreign languages. Endeavoring to become China’s largest collector of resources in foreign languages, NLC will adjust its scope and focus for acquiring resources in foreign languages. The library plans to comprehensively acquire overseas resources in sinology and China Studies and to strengthen acquisition of social science materials in foreign languages, publications of international organizations and foreign governments, and primary sources of online publications in foreign languages. Acquisition of resources in less-commonly used languages and publications of Asian countries and regions are to be moderately increased; moreover, the varieties and scope of licensed databases in foreign languages are also to be expanded. NLC is also to acquire such special collections as unique copies, rare books, and manuscripts of notable authors through taking an active part in auction bidding and business negotiation. Collection of original copies or replicas of Chinese ancient rare books from overseas is also planned.

NLC strongly emphasizes collecting digital resources and plans to expand the collection of new resources, including audiovisual resources, e-publications, and online publications. In response to changes in the production and service of bibliographical records, NLC will update existing cataloguing rules, classified subject thesaurus, MARC format, and different types of metadata standards as well as to adjust the cataloguing policy and operation model of document and information resources. With regard to the preservation and conservation of collections, NLC plans to improve preservation conditions; take measures to save and preserve Chinese newspapers and other publications of the Republican period (1911-1949); and strengthen the reproduction work of core special collections through microfilm and digitization. The NLC will also enhance the strategic preservation of digital and network information resources.

The fourth strategic focus is to establish a comprehensive, multi-dimensional system of exchange and cooperation that is domestically based and internationally oriented according to the principle of being “open and constructive, mutually complementary, collaborative in resource development and sharing, and for mutual benefit and progress.”

“Open policy, cooperation, and resource sharing” have become common goals of libraries worldwide. As a national library, NLC will take a more active role in exchange and cooperation with libraries at home and abroad. Domestically, NLC will promote and expand collaboration with various types of libraries including regional libraries through joint research in national projects and related programs. NLC plans to organize various academic and professional exchange activities through the China Library Association,

the National Center for Documents Micro-reproduction, the National Library Online Catalog Center, and the editorial board of *China Library Classification*. NLC is responsible for fulfilling agreements related to international exchange and cooperation on behalf of the government and for introducing the Chinese library community to the outside world. NLC will become actively involved in the activities and organization work of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and other international organizations, participate in bilateral or multilateral library professional forums and exchanges, and explore opportunities for substantial international cooperation projects. NLC will also actively engage in the exchange of library materials, research, and personnel with foreign libraries, and facilitate overseas exhibitions of NLC's special collections and rare books. Further implementing the "Chinese Resources Cooperation and Development Project," NLC will continue to enhance its exchange and cooperation with libraries in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan and strive for concrete results.

To achieve the above strategic goals, we must have a strong base of human resources and research. In 2004, NLC launched three major development strategies: "rejuvenate our library through human resources development, reinvigorate our library through science and technology, and promote library development through quality service." In human resources development, in the next five years, we must significantly increase the total number of high-quality professionals, optimize our organizational structure, and enhance the overall quality of our staff. NLC must build a team of professional librarians with subject specialties, library expertise, and management talents. NLC intends to conduct inquiries into the developmental patterns of libraries and accelerate the application of modern information technology. In order to promote innovation, NLC will also advocate the integration of research and professional library work.