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Investigating Exchanges With Chinese Libraries

D. E. Perushek

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As the recipient of a three-year Title II-C grant, Cornell University Libraries (subsequently referred to in this report as CUL) was able to send me on a three-week trip to China to seek out more mutually beneficial exchanges and in some cases rationalize our current exchange policies with various universities and research institutions there. Limited on-the-spot purchases of certain types of materials were also attempted. This was my second trip to the PRC, the first having been made with a group of East Asian librarians in October 1979.

The three weeks in China were inserted between brief stops in Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong during spring 1981. I visited Peking, Tientsin, Nanking, Soochow, Shanghai, and Hankow, these being cities where Cornell already had established formal exchange relationships or where the prospects for such looked likely to be fruitful. Due to time restrictions, Canton, Hsi-an, and Wusih were not visited, although Cornell also has exchanges there. These exchanges had been established in the summer of 1980 when the president of Cornell, Frank Rhodes, visited China with a group of Cornellians for the express purpose of setting up formal academic exchanges. The library had not been represented on that trip, though the Wason Collection has exchanges with National Peking Library, Peking University, Tsing Hua University, East China Normal University, Shanghai Library, Fudan University, and Chung-shan University.

The emphasis of the university's exchanges is largely scientific and technical, a reflection of Cornell's early exchanges with pre-war China in technology and of the fact that many top Cornell administrative positions are held by scholars with specialties in the sciences. Wason's interests are weighted towards the humanities and social sciences. A major purpose of my trip was to explain the science/humanities dichotomy in our library, since a large proportion of the materials we have been offered by Chinese libraries is limited to science and technology.

Letters went out in the late fall of 1980 to librarians or university officials at the institutions I hoped to visit. Most responses were fairly quick in coming and all were positive about a visit from an East Asian librarian in the United States. Many of the letters appeared to be composed by the same correspondent and read something like: "We heartily welcome this opportunity to discuss our exchange relationship and to advance the friendship between our two institutions. If you can bring any materials about American libraries in general or your library specifically, we will be very pleased..."

Accordingly, I gathered together not only Cornell University Press publications to use as gifts at each library I visited, but also the Cornell University
Libraries' annual report, CUL Bulletin, as well as copies of RLG materials, American Libraries, CRL's Focus, etc. Other things which I did not take but which would have been gratefully received were Cornell University catalogs and any information on libraries or the publishing world in Taiwan.

Despite the clear interest on the part of Cornell to encourage scholarly interchange with China, no increase in funds to handle our expanding exchanges has been granted. As an alternative to costly journal subscriptions and Cornell University Press publications (for which we must pay half-price should we use them for exchange purposes), we took a survey of all departments, centers, and programs on campus which put out their own publications. Then we asked these sections if they would be willing to give us free copies to use as exchange items for China. With a few exceptions such as the business school, they agreed to donate limited quantities.

I took lists of these publications with me to China and also lists of duplicate serials which were held by CUL but earmarked for discarding. At each institution I visited, I presented these lists and asked if there were materials on them that these libraries were interested in. Responses so far have been slow in coming; Shanghai Library, with its comprehensive coverage of published matter, has selected a number of titles in a wide range of fields.

The reception I received at every library was either cordial or decidedly warm. Since on the trip two years ago I had already visited many of the libraries, I dispensed in some cases with making the journey to the institution and met with key personnel at my hotel. This saved hours of taxi or bus time, which was especially precious in larger cities such as Peking and Shanghai where I needed to visit a number of institutions. Since I stayed at tourist hotels, there was always sufficient room for a comfortable talk.

The four days in my first stop, Peking, were altogether too short to renew acquaintances at Tsing-hua, Peking National Library, and Peking University as well as make new contacts at the Academy of Minority Studies, the Academy of Social Sciences Literature Research Section, the Number One Archives, etc. Certain places I had hoped to visit, such as the Academy of Science, were canceled for lack of time. The only place to which I was not granted entrance was the Archives; since I had not corresponded with their offices prior to my trip, a visit could not be arranged, although I contacted them as soon after my arrival in Peking as possible. Drop-ins cannot be accommodated easily in China.

1. The Libraries

My visits at libraries were almost always structured in the same way as they had been two years ago, though now I was traveling alone rather than with a group. I was met by anywhere from one person to five people; then we proceeded to a discussion, usually about our exchanges, the library and information science situation in China and the United States; then I was given a brief tour of public and staff areas in the library.
Much was the same as in the fall of 1980. Stacks are still closed, classification schemes proliferate, student reading rooms are overfilled while the smaller faculty rooms are sparsely occupied. Still much in evidence were current foreign publications which are being received; on display were many recently published works from Japan, the United States, Germany, and some from Taiwan.

A new phenomenon is the great amount of building going on to expand libraries and bring them up to date. Two years ago the only library we visited which was impressively new was that at Peking University. In the spring of 1981, however, due to the implementation of the Four Modernizations, many libraries have been authorized by the central government to construct new buildings. Notable examples were the Peking National Library, the Shanghai Library, the Nankai University, and Fudan University, where a large addition to the current building which will provide stack and work space is nearing completion. My question as to how many years' growth the new building will provide was answered with a disheartening and universal response. The buildings are designed to contain comfortably what is now jammed into the original library building; there will be no room for expansion. My comment that we try to look to ten or (if very fortunate) twenty years in the future when planning a new building elicited the response that the government will fund up to present needs only.

Other funding is more far-sighted. For example, the funds for Western-language materials are sometimes of very generous proportions. At Nankai University in Tientsin, for example, the budget for such materials is $100,000 per year, since Nankai has been designated as one of the ten "core" universities. Several notable highlights of my tour were my visit to the Academy of Social Sciences Literature Research Section (Chung-kuo k'o hsüeh yilan Wen hsüeh yen chiu so) in Peking; my visit to the Number Two (Republican Period) Archives in Nanking; and my meeting with the staff of the Nanking University Library.

2. Republican Archives

The Number Two Archives houses government materials from 1911 to 1949 as well as many personal papers from the same period in three separate buildings. In the 10,000 meters of shelf space some 900,000 documents are maintained. All official government papers from 1911 to 1949 must be turned over to the Archives; private ones may be given. Some traveling is done by staff throughout the country to retrieve papers, though this is not extensive. While some of the KMT party archives up to 1949 are stored here, many documents were, of course, taken to Taiwan. Some 2,000 people per year consult the collection, and foreign scholars who wish to use the archives must have prior government approval.

Materials are kept in folders stored in horizontal metal files where room temperature is maintained at 18 to 20 degrees Celsius, i.e., 64.4 to 68 degrees Fahrenheit (no easy feat in the blistering Nanking summers) and the humidity at 70 percent. Access to materials is by name of pertinent department or office only, and no bibliography exists outside of staff memory, though a bibliography is now being compiled. Information recorded on individual folders includes date, organization, title of document, and perhaps
a contents note. Preservation is done in the traditional Chinese manner and nothing such as microfilming or mylar casing is used. However, reproductions of materials are already being published by the Archives, such as documents pertaining to the May 4 Movement. Of the 125 Archives personnel, about one-third are university graduates, including a limited number of certified archivists trained at places such as People's University. This percentage of university graduates seemed high for a library, many of which are largely staffed by high school graduates. The attitude of the Archives staff was both genial and forward-looking, though no consideration is being given to bringing in a Western-trained expert to act as consultant for the bibliography, and such commonplace methods as computerized indexes are barely prospects at this time.

3. Nanking University

At Nanking University there seemed to be a particularly Western-looking attitude in the area of libraries. Though they did not appear to be as advanced in computer technology as Fudan, for example, where the English journals are in their database, Nanking University Library too was vitally interested in the application of computers to cataloging and in general in new library developments.

I went to the Nanking University campus on two successive days. The first day was given over mostly to a description of their situation; the second day I was to talk about Cornell and U.S. libraries. Expecting to see the same half dozen people the second day, I prepared some informal remarks. They proved inadequate for the more than twenty people who were amassed in a small room, having come from institutions all over the area including Nanking City Library, Nanking Technological Institute, Nanking Medical School, etc. They had many specific questions which in themselves perhaps went further to define the conditions of their libraries than any factual account would have.

They wondered how we stopped theft and mutilations with an open stack system, a clear reflection of the still closed stacks of China. The question of how many duplicate copies of titles to purchase was raised; there, it is not a matter of two copies or three, but rather twenty copies or fifty, since university libraries seem to see providing texts for students who cannot afford them as one of their major responsibilities. One librarian even asked who did the cleaning in our libraries. Salaries, benefits, and budgets were also compared; and the Western system of reference services was examined in some detail and with a certain amount of dubiousness regarding the extent to which we may go in helping patrons. (This situation may be changing, however, if the recent article on reference services at the Shanghai Library indicates a trend.*)

I learned something of the other side of the Chinese public service coin in a talk with an American who is teaching at a university in Shanghai and one of her students. It is true that one does not miss active reference service if one has never had the opportunity to use it (as is the case of most Chinese who have not studied abroad). Nevertheless, Americans who are accustomed to the benefits it offers often find traditional Chinese librarians overly bureaucratic, labyrinthine, and sometimes downright unhelpful.

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This American teacher was no different and of course balked at the closed stack system, but she was even more distressed to discover that books she had brought from the States for her students' use were appropriated by faculty members immediately upon receipt by the library. Her counterplan was to arrange for other books she brought to be housed in the American consulate, and she urged me very strongly to stipulate explicitly in all our gift and exchange agreements that the books and journals we send be accessible to students, thus precluding their being squirreled away in faculty offices or limited to use in faculty reading rooms.

Another complaint leveled by the American was against the capabilities of library staff members. She had the impression that many of the staff were high school graduates with little love or respect for books. It is hoped that the recent proliferation of library science departments throughout the country will increase professionalism among some staff so that such an impression will no longer be even alluded to. In Shanghai I met a graduate student in library science who, after his training at home, is hoping to come to the States to observe library operations. I think this sort of overseas training, not only for library science students, but also for practicing librarians, could mean a quantum leap in the modernizing of Chinese libraries and should be encouraged on as wide a scale as possible, perhaps under the CEAL aegis.

4. Materials for Exchange and Purchase

There is already ample evidence of active interchange that promises to grow. In the area of book exchanges, many libraries requested works in library science as well as computer science. The librarian for Western-language materials on Chinese literature at the Academy of Social Sciences Literature Research Section presented me with a highly sophisticated desiderata list of items in Chinese literary criticism and history published in the United States within the last five to six years. There is also a keen desire for materials from Taiwan. We feel many of our Taiwan duplicates might make good exchange materials. Researchers are aware of current scholarship on the other side of the Taiwan Straits though they may not be able to see it.

The purchases I made were largely limited to serials, in particular those from outlying provinces and maiden issues of journals in social sciences and humanities. A few of these titles were 『從北戴河』 (published first in 1980), 『中國通俗文學』 (1981), and 『夜讀』 (1980). The Shanghai Hsin-hua Shu-tien not only had an excellent selection of journal titles, but also a packing and shipping service adjacent to the serials department. Postage charges were almost the same as the price of the materials themselves, but still it was much more reasonable to buy on the spot than through Hong Kong dealers. The fear of purchasing duplicates kept me from buying all but a few monographs. Since this trip was largely geared toward exchange acquisitions rather than purchase acquisition, the titles I bought or accepted as gifts amounted to a small number.

Since selecting titles through exchange lists or the 『選購書目』 is slow and often frustrating because many of the books selected are unavailable by the time our letters reach the PRC, I asked certain of our ex-
change partners if they would experiment with a kind of provincial "blanket"
exchange. We intend to indicate to a library one or two provinces and
subject areas which Cornell faculty members have singled out as important
areas for their research (e.g., sociology and anthropology in Fukien, or
literature and performing arts in Chekiang). The Chinese library would
collect everything possible in that subject and geographical area and send
it to us directly. We thus save the time required to send books lists back
and forth and may draw in a larger number of pertinent publications before
they can be sold out in China. Most of the libraries this plan was suggested
to were willing to give it a trial run. In one case, a librarian suggested
that East Asian collections throughout the United States coordinate this
sort of geographical specialization on a nationwide basis. This is a
recurring idea here presented with a slightly new twist whose time we can
hope will come soon.

Libraries still differed as to their idea in exchange contracts though no
one proposed a dollar to jen-min-pi equivalence; most partners merely assume
exchanges will balance out in the long run. There are still some libraries
for whom it is impossible to export "Internal Use Only" publications; others
seem to manage it. There also seems to be a more apparent willingness to
purchase works from a variety of publishing houses, and I received the dis­
tinct impression that this can be easily done. This is accompanied by a
deep interest in receiving titles from Taiwan—new titles, old titles, and
duplicates we happen to have on hand. The biggest obstacles to flourishing
exchange now seem to be the high price we on our side must pay for American
publications and the small number of copies printed at one time on the
Chinese side.

Next year will be the last year of Cornell's Title II-C grant. A final
grant-sponsored trip to China will be possible next year during which we
shall try again to assess our exchanges and observe again the situations in
a number of Chinese libraries.

*See Nieh Tao-yung 聂道融 "Shang-hai t'u shu kuan ti ts'an k'ao tzu
hsün kung tso 上海图书馆的参考咨询工作 , " T'u shu kuan hsüeh
 t'ung hsün 图书馆学通讯 1 (March 1981), 14-25.