A Glimpse of China

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Introduction

Last August, with great excitement and anticipation, I went to China to attend the 62nd annual conference of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) in Peking. It was the first time I had been in China since 1948, and my first time in any city of China besides Amoy. Mixed with my anticipation was curiosity and some anxiety. What would China be like? Would she be what the media, newspapers and magazines, books, faculty members, Chinese students, and my friends had described to me? The answers to these questions were gradually revealed to me in the three weeks from August 24 to September 12.

My trip to China was jointly funded by the library and the Department of Languages and Literatures at Arizona State University (ASU). In addition to presenting a paper at IFLA’s one-day “Special Conference on the Evolving Research Library and East Asian Studies” as a member of CEAL’s North America East Asian Library Delegation, I was to visit Chinese vendors and major publishing houses to gain a better understanding of the current book trade in China, make contacts and build networks, and explore the possibility of establishing exchange programs with suitable libraries.

Conference of the International Federation of Library Associations

This was also my first time to attend an IFLA conference, and I was overwhelmed by the magnitude and diversity of its programs and activities. It took me several hours to gain a sense of direction where things were and where the events were to take place at or off the conference site, the Beijing International Convention Center, which is situated at the village of hotels, eateries and shops built for the Asian Games in 1990. “The Challenge of Changes: Libraries and Economic Development” was the theme of the conference—to re-examine “the value of information as a component of the engine of economic development” and the library’s new and expanded roles in it. The printed program was issued in English and French, the official languages of IFLA, and simultaneous translation into other languages was provided on cassettes and offered for many of the sessions and workshops. Close to 2,600 delegates representing 94 countries attended the conference, which was made up of 214 activities and sessions of presentations covering more than 79 topics. About 110 exhibitors were at the site; more than half of these came from places within China. American publishers like McGraw Hill, SilverPlatter and the University of Michigan Press were also represented.

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Chinese vendors and publishers

The number of publishers and book dealers at the IFLA exhibit area provided a wonderful opportunity for me to learn about the present state of the publishing industry. Many books are still being published in traditional printed format, but there are also many being created or reproduced in electronic format, either online or on CD-ROM. Visits to the three major Chinese vendors' headquarters and Cathay Bookshop in Beijing opened my eyes to the wealth of information being published in China. The three major vendors are China International Book Trading Corporation (CIBTC), China National Publications Import & Export Corporation (CNPIEC), and China National Publishing Industry Trading Corporation (CNPITC). Cathay Bookshop located on the famous Liulichang Street where old bookstores and art shops like Rongbaozhai are located, is well known as a dealer in antiquarian items and for its collection of early Chinese classics. Exhibits and auctions of rare books and scarce items collected from various parts of China are regularly held by the company and its outlet stores.

CIBTC is the successor of China International Bookstore which was founded in 1949. China National Microforms Import and Export Corporation, established in 1981, is a specialized branch of CIBTC. CNPIEC has been in the business for more than 40 years. Its efforts, which used to center on importing of materials, have been expanded to include exporting since 1981, when the name of the company was changed from China National Publications Import Corporation (CNPIC). CNPITC, the youngest of all three, was established in the 1980's. Both CIBTC and CNPITC have warehouses holding sizeable inventories of monographs and current and back issue serials, which allows them to better fill customer requests, especially for earlier imprints and backfile orders. All three corporations are committed to trading all types of published material (both print and non-print), art and other dimensional works. Their specialties have become blurred and less apparent as they all take on a broader approach to marketing and diversify their services. The prices set by them are also comparable in order to be competitive. The distinct difference then left among them is, perhaps, to which government agencies they belong or report. For example, CIBTC reports to the Ministry of Culture's Foreign Languages Publication Bureau; CNPIEC, to the State Science and Technology Commission; and CNPITC, to the State Press and Publications Administration. A newly formed company called China National Educational Publications Import and Export Corporation targets customers whose primary interest is in textbooks and other classroom teaching materials. At the present time, its scale of operation is smaller than the aforementioned big three.

Besides these book dealers and companies, research institutions like Peking University, People's University, and the Academy of Social Sciences also publish and sell their own publications. Should a librarian attempt to do business with all of these vendors and publishers? I would say, “No.” Unless the librarian has a library budget large enough to acquire materials from and maintain business relationships with all these vendors, it is better to choose and stay with just one or two vendors. The determining factor in selecting a vendor is which one of them can provide the most satisfactory service in terms of turn-around time, provision of information, rate in filling the orders and ability to supply the materials, claims, invoices, and binding options.
Exchanges with Chinese libraries

Through the introduction of Karen Wei, Head of the Asian Library at University of Illinois, I met Zhu Qiang 朱强, Deputy Director of Peking University Library, who in turn led me to Gao Zhuoxian 高竹贤, librarian in charge of acquisitions and exchange at the library. An arrangement made by Zhong Xiaoyen 钟小燕 of Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House 上海古籍出版社 through the introduction of CNPITC, allowed me to visit Fudan University Library, where I met Fan Pei-jin 范佩瑾, head of the Library's International Exchange and Gift Division. Both of these libraries already had exchange programs with several institutions in the U.S. and elsewhere, but they were willing to try one out with Arizona State University Libraries. Although there is great value to be gained from an exchange of personnel, we decided it would be best if we started with an exchange of library material first.

After the initial contacts made onsite in China, I have corresponded with these librarians to follow up on their verbal consents and find out in more precise terms what titles they are interested in exchanging. Since the ASU library cannot afford to purchase any serial or other types of publications on a continuing basis for the purpose of exchange, we can only offer Fudan and Peking University libraries journals that are published by ASU for exchange with their publications. The outcome of my visits with Fudan and Peking University libraries and the exchanges agreed upon is that ASU will receive from Fudan and Peking University several of their own published journals in selected fields of humanities and social sciences as identified by me in accordance with ASU's areas of interest and need, and in return Fudan and Peking University will receive ASU's unique serials entitled Bilingual Review, a linguistic journal, and Phoebus, an art history annual of substantive scholarly value.

ASU, a rising Research Institution (so designated by the Carnegie Foundation), has a comparatively small East Asian Collection. If the size of one's East Asian collection were the deciding factor of one's qualification for establishing an exchange program with libraries in China, ASU would have been out of luck. It is encouraging that Chinese academic libraries have begun to recognize that smaller research institutions too have something special and unique to offer. Therefore, Peking University is no longer limiting itself to exchange relationships with just well-established and prestigious large research institutions like Harvard and the University of California at Berkeley, but it is also reaching out to other younger, less known, and smaller research institutions to reap the benefit of obtaining publications of unique local color.

Conclusion

Onsite visits to vendors and libraries have the obvious advantage of allowing one to observe and understand their situations, as well as providing the chance for them to get to know us better by discussing matters of mutual concern. These help make the business relationship more effective and the next step of negotiation and cooperation easier.

Was China as she had been portrayed in the media and by others? Yes, more or less. Was she what I had expected? Yes, overall, she was better and more open than I had expected.