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DIALOG FORUM FOR CHINESE DIGITAL CONTENT AT OCLC

September 27-29, 2005

Zhijia Shen

As recommended by the steering committee on dialog for Chinese digital content, which consists of the president of OCLC and six head librarians of major East Asian libraries in Hong Kong and the United States, OCLC hosted a dialog forum for Chinese digital content in Dublin, Ohio, between September 27 and 29, 2005. With the intent of discussing issues of providing access to e-content in the Chinese language to users outside China and Taiwan, as well as the possibilities of establishing a Chinese Digital Resources Alliance among Chinese e-content providers, OCLC, and East Asian libraries outside China, the forum brought together twenty librarians from sixteen East Asian libraries in North America and Hong Kong and fifteen executive managers of eight major e-content providers from Mainland China and Taiwan. As chair of the Committee on Chinese Materials, I was also invited. The goals for the forum as stated in the welcome speech of Jay Jordan, president and CEO of OCLC, were to “help Chinese content providers understand the potential market for their content as well as the needs and challenges in regard to their products outside of China; to enable Chinese content providers to learn about the OCLC cooperative and the e-content platforms and services that OCLC has developed; enable Chinese content providers to present their plans to their primary potential users outside of China as well as to OCLC; to form a Chinese Digital Resources Alliance at the conclusion of the meeting.”

The forum opened with a welcome speech from Jay Jordan, president and CEO of OCLC. In his speech, Mr. Jordan gave the background of the forum; introduced the members of the steering committee; and described the mission and vision of OCLC and its initiatives in global information services, including such recent developments as group catalog services, open WorldCat program, and netLibrary ebooks. He also stated the goals of the forum.

James Cheng of Harvard Yenching Library presented the case statement and the profile of East Asian Libraries. According to his report, the rapid growth of Chinese e-resources has opened new opportunities for scholars as well as libraries in Chinese studies. For large Chinese collections, electronic resources significantly improve services, while for smaller Chinese collections, electronic resources have become essential to collection development and library services. Consortium efforts must be coordinated to address copyright, pricing, access, and archival issues to make such materials more accessible to users outside China. He also pointed out that in addition to commercial electronic databases, there exists a very important and fast growing collection of non-proprietary digital materials developed by government and other research institutions such as the Academia Sinica in Taiwan and the National Library of China. These materials should be made available to users worldwide.

Peter Zhou of the University of California-Berkeley spoke about the issues and challenges of East Asian libraries. He pointed out that the technical and legal infrastructure, limited library budgets, various pricing models, international standards and user expectations, and language and cultural barriers are the major issues facing e-content providers and libraries in North America. In exploring solutions to address these issues, Peter Zhou suggested three models for Chinese e-content providers in relation to the North American market: the Walmart model, the car dealer model, and the super market model. He reiterated that libraries in North America need databases that are rich in content; easy to use at affordable prices; with perpetual access, and sustainable services, reliable infrastructure, and friendly and service-oriented professionals to provide support.

Philis Spies of OCLC spoke about OCLC’s strategic directions. According to Spies, OCLC is building platforms to mobilize the collective resources of libraries by expanding WorldCat to represent library collections around the world; to improve discovery by integrating library resources with user environments; to improve delivery through global registries, directories, and authentication services; to provide data mining tools to libraries; and to be a premier e-content platform for access and archiving. Its new Open WorldCat initiative is a cooperative approach to making library collections and services visible on the open
Internet. The current partners in Open WorldCat include Google, Yahoo, Ask Jeeves, and Alibris. OCLC will harvest non-proprietary research data from the Internet to include in their Open WorldCat. In the fall of 2005, OCLC plans to provide a platform via Open WorldCat for users to contribute contents using the Wiki model, add Google maps for users to be able to obtain directions and maps to the library, add meta data for article level content, build a global registry, and enhance other services.

Rich Rosy of OCLC netLibrary spoke about OCLC’s e-content platform, partnership, initiatives, and business models. He said that 99% of netLibrary acquisitions are electronic; through netLibrary, OCLC is now also an e-content provider. It is now providing access to Chinese e-journal articles through Dragonsource’s database. The key functionalities include stable and scalable features, continuous upgrading, a proprietary digital rights management system, supporting multi-access models, and site localization with multiple language interfaces.

The rest of the forum consisted of presentations by the eight participating Chinese content-providers regarding their organizations and products. Each provider was given one hour to make a presentation and answer questions. Mr. Zhang Zhenhai of Tsinghua Tongfang Knowledge Network Technology Co., Ltd.; Mr. Longji Dai representing CALIS; Mr. Jason Han representing SuperStar Information Technology Co., Ltd.; Mr. Wei Sun of National Library of China; Mr. Xiaodong Qiao of Wan Fang Data Co., Ltd.; Ms Scarlet He of Beijing Fonder Electronic Co., Ltd.; Mr. Chris Huang of Airtiti Incoperation (Taipei); and Mr. Calvin Tang of Drangonsource.com, Inc. (Toronto) gave presentations on behalf of their institutions.

At the end of the forum, Dr. Y.C. Wan of Fung Ping Shan Library of the University of Hong Kong summarized the two-day dialog forum. Mr. Wan congratulated all present for a fruitful forum and pointed out that all the goals of the forum that Mr. Jordon had enumerated in his welcoming speech had been achieved except the last goal, which was to form a Chinese Digital Resources Alliance. Since the alliance had not yet been fully addressed, he suggested continued discussion. The issues and concerns related to such an alliance include the relationship between OCLC and the Chinese e-content providers as well as the East Asian libraries outside China. Some librarians believe that the alliance will be a “win-win-win” situation for all parties, i.e., Chinese e-providers will reach its overseas market, OCLC will open its e-services to Chinese language users outside China, and East Asian library users will enjoy rich, affordable, and well-serviced Chinese e-resources. Some librarians, however, also cautioned against any precipitous decisions, suggesting that more dialogue be conducted.

All attendees applauded OCLC for its initiative in seeking solutions to providing quality access and services to Chinese-content materials and agreed that this was an extremely productive forum, which for the first time had brought together the major Chinese e-providers and librarians to focus on this extremely important issue.