

Back Talk — Academic Libraries in China

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As an observer from Hong Kong, I recently attended a meeting of an academic library working group sponsored by the **Chinese Ministry of Education**. While I learned all sorts of things including how much my Chinese language skills need to improve to handle the wide range of accents represented at such a meeting, I was struck by how much libraries are the same the world over. Perhaps because of our shared library culture we are one of the earliest examples of globalism. The overall theme/purpose of the meeting was to look back at the last 30 years of library development since China opened to the West following the Cultural Revolution and the following Gang of four periods (Check out **Wikipedia** for both topics if you need some background information). Here is a quick review of some of the issues which were discussed at this meeting of top 50 university library directors in China:

1. Quality, not quantity has to be a high priority. While this is a common theme in western higher education, this is a particularly important theme for these mainly large university libraries. With the support of the Government and its universities, China has scores of new two to four hundred thousand square foot libraries, they have hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of eBooks, and they have increasingly large numbers of databases and journals with which to support their students and faculty. But they recognize that the quality of their western language collections and level of their public services need to be improved.

2. Recognizing that people are one of a nation's most important natural resources, they need to improve the undergraduate learning experience. In addition to things like introducing or improving each university's core curricula experience for China's undergraduates; they talked about the need for more computers, more collaboration among academic libraries to stretch the buying power of their resources more effectively.

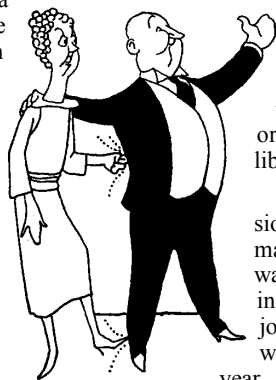
3. The need to improve the information literacy of students.

4. The need to grow not just the numbers and quality of the librarians who work in them. The new library director at **Peking University**, **Zhu Qiang**, provided an excellent review of the progress made in each of the previous three decades and the issues confronting libraries, e.g., simple concepts like open book stacks; major renovation and construction projects; libraries have automated their acquisition, cataloguing and patron access functions; library consortia with shared cataloguing and purchasing have emerged; support for international copyright rules has become the rule not the exception in most academic libraries; e-journals, not printed

journals in both Chinese and English are dominant; preservation based digitization programs are expanding; eBooks abound; and there is a growing understanding that international cooperation is important. He and others noted repeatedly that libraries have to respond to the needs of their academic communities, that these universities are being driven by changes in technology and the rising expectations of everyone that Chinese higher education needs to be internationally competitive.

5. Library cooperation doesn't need to be just national, but local and regional as well. Like in the west, at times these different levels of cooperation are competitive and at times they are all working toward the same end.

6. The need to promote reading and the use of books in the face of competition from the Web. In China the most popular search engine is **Baidu** (<http://www.baidu.com/>) instead of **Google** but the result is the same: students are increasingly going to the Web instead of to libraries. This is one area, however, where trailing the west by a decade or so is reassuring to many librarians.



In addition to the discussion of these issues, the other major theme of the meeting was the situation for libraries in Sichuan¹ following the major 6.2 magnitude earthquakes which began in May of this year. We heard what needs to be done and what lessons can be learned from this monumental tragedy. Fortunately for academic libraries, most of which seem to have been better constructed, the tragedy was limited to fallen stacks, broken windows, and cracked walls. Primary and secondary schools, however, including their libraries experienced human and material tragedy on a much more massive scale. Librarians from the region shared their experiences. We heard, for example, from one of the library directors that on May 12, 2008 at 2:28 p.m. book shelves started to fall — even toppling out of windows. Staff members initiated emergency procedures and evacuated the library within a few minutes. They shut off power and water and locked the doors. Later, after the quakes subsided, just a few librarians returned to the building and retrieved the possessions of students left in their haste to flee. They were careful to record what was found where to make it easier to decide what belonged to which student. Some staff members were stationed in the library buildings overnight to protect their contents. They found that at their campus the medical library was in the best shape so they allowed students who had no place to stay to live there temporarily. On May 14 more of the staff returned to the

library to clean it up. The Library reopened to the public on the next day, on the 15th. The damage was broken windows, shelves, and cracks in the wall.

We were told that while most colleges and universities in Sichuan were still standing, a normal school library in Ahba, near Chengdu, was completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students and 300 staff and 400,000 books had to be moved. The homes of many librarians, however, across the province were damaged. It was noted that the encouragement and help from the outside world was extremely helpful and caused these librarians to know they were not alone. **Cheng Huan-Wen**, the Director of the Library and Dean of the **School of Library Science**, from **Sun Yatsen University**, got 400 volunteers to go there to help. He visited 17 higher education libraries and distributed \$500,000, giving most of it to individual librarians to help them get their lives in order before going back to work in the libraries. Large publishers like **CNKI** and **Fang Zheng** bought tents and sent them to Chengdu and offered free access to needed electronic sources of information.

Among the lessons learned from the earthquakes disaster, the following issues were noted:

- 1.** The need for disaster plans.
- 2.** The need for regular (monthly) fire and evacuation drills.
- 3.** The need to analyze all existing buildings, buildings now being renovated and the plans for new buildings in terms of their ability to withstand the stresses produced by major earthquakes.
- 4.** The need for an emergency classification system similar to that for typhoons/hurricanes so everyone can quickly grasp the severity of the disaster confronting the populace and those involved in relief efforts.
- 5.** The need to quickly gather experts together to share experiences with each other and the librarians affected by the disaster. Librarians in Sichuan found this to be very helpful.

Many other topics were addressed by conference members but these are the major ones which interested me the most. A common aspect of Chinese conferences is for the participants to go touring together. In the case of this group of librarians this involved only 50 or so persons but I have attended events where hundreds of librarians go from place to place enjoying the scenery together and in the process establishing personal relationships. In China, foreigners soon learn, everything is personal. In our case, we had a wonderful time visiting a high tech automobile plant manufacturing Volkswagens, the beautiful Changbai Mountains and an interesting trip

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along the Yalu River dividing North Korea and China. While the river marked the tragic site of so many Korean War deaths, on that day scores of children on the Korean side frolicked in the water while guards in small towers kept their watch. 🌸

Endnotes

1. Sichuan or more traditionally spelled in the west as Szechuan – literally the province where four (si) great rivers (chuan) are present.