

Back Talk — Library Heroes, Patience, Stories with Happy Endings, and Problems Yet Unsolved

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These words pretty well summarize my impressions of the ten or so libraries that I visited over a long weekend as part of the **Hong Kong Library Association** group's delegation to the **Ninth Academic Conference of the Zhejiang Provincial Society for Library Science**. **Hong Kong's Library Association** has a long tradition of taking trips together. The **Association** itself has four main objectives:

- promote library and information services
- communicate with the outside world about these services
- unite and promote the interests of our librarians
- promote professional education and training

These trips serve to accomplish at least the first two objectives and they also serve to facilitate good communication and the development of good personal relationships — in China particularly, and perhaps the world over, personal relationships make everything possible.

But back to heroes. Heroes are usually thought of brave individuals who risk their lives in the face of danger in behalf of others or a noble cause. In numerous conversations with librarians at some of the historically important but obscure libraries we visited, I didn't really hear stories of bravery in the face of real physical danger so much as examples of the perseverance and patience exhibited by generations of librarians working in these libraries to provide readers with access to information.

Apparently, just about one hundred years ago government leaders/educators in many Chinese cities decided that their people deserved "public" libraries and scores were established across Zhejiang province at least. China with its several thousand years of history is not a stranger to private libraries established by individuals for their own use, or shared with a restricted circle of others, but libraries open to the public were largely a 20th century phenomena. In the past 100 years these libraries have endured the

world's wars, China's own wars including the fall of the Qing dynasty, many battles between rival warlords, the civil war between the Nationalist and the Com-

munist parties, and a string of political campaigns ever since Liberation designed to protect the people from anti-revolutionary points of view.

The survival and success of libraries, for all of their complexities, are inextricably linked to money: with money you buy reading/viewing material, space to house these materials, and the services of people who for a whole host of reasons like to, or have to, work there selecting, purchasing, arranging, circulating, servicing, or managing books and other reading materials. China's many wars and upheavals at times starved its libraries. We visited one library that had begun as the private library of one man who was obsessed with collecting. His library included a nearly unique palace edition of a set of "collectanea." The Chinese for centuries have had a penchant for reprinting the best books within large collections or collectanea. Some of the same books have been reprinted many times but each time the wooden blocks, with the characters carved in relief (and backwards so they print frontwards), can be changed here and there. While there is some overlap, there are also many unique books in each collection. Passionate collectors want to get as many editions as possible. The library we were visiting had a particularly distinguished collection that had been owned by an emperor and so was the collector's great prize. In the years leading up to World War II, however, the collector's descendants sold the collection off a section at a time to put food on the table and pay for other needs. The Japanese occupation led to looting and by the time the war had ended; only the inexpensive materials remained on the shelves. Yet, other descendants went all around China in search of what had been lost and repurchased a significant portion of it.

Most of the libraries we visited had been turned into museums — you could see the grandeur of the rooms and gardens that their rich owners had enjoyed. But upstairs from the empty rooms, through which tourists ventured, was what remained of the original library. With no air conditioning whatsoever, you can imagine the conditions. Yet, need does produce innovation and the camphor shelving used in these sorts of libraries repelled bugs. Moreover, the books on the shelving we saw didn't actually rest on the shelves themselves.

Rather on each shelf were small square dowels with a thin piece of wood resting on them. The books were then laid on their sides on the thin piece of wood. Thus air could circulate through the shelving and under the books to retard mildew. It wasn't totally successful but these were books that had survived hundreds of years and would probably survive many more. I once visited a university library with wonderful air conditioning installed but the

power costs were such that it was only turned on when visitors came to call.

The anti-rightist campaigns, under many different names, of the 1950's through 1976 when Mao's wife and three other accomplices, known as the Gang of Four were arrested, were particularly hard on libraries. I once visited a library which had been protected during the anti-rightist campaigns by the librarians pasting long strips of paper tape crisscrossing down each row of books with words identifying them as corrupt, counter revolutionary, and poisonous. While this tactic might not agree with the **American Library Association's Freedom to Read** philosophy — once the members of the Gang were themselves arrested, the paper tape was removed and these books were returned to service. The librarians who endured all of this travail were and are heroes in the truest sense.

But we didn't just visit old quaint libraries. China is experiencing a library building boom. Cities, counties, and provinces seem to be in competition to build beautiful marble or terrazzo floored libraries with miles of book stacks, computer rooms, and everything else one might want in a 21st century library. While academic libraries were once filled with pirated academic journals, since WIPO academic libraries like those we visited are trying very hard to stay within the bounds of copyright. While some of these libraries had older western language books that appeared to be a bit worse for the wear, others had row after row of nice shiny new books in both English and Chinese. They also seemed to be fairly well managed. I visited China with a delegation of East Asian librarians in 1979 and asked each director what were their three major problems to overcome. The most frequent response was the lack of qualified staff. While the libraries we visited this time still had many relatively uneducated staff members, they also had many young, eager well trained librarians who were well trained and interested in how to become more effective.

I am optimistic about the future of China's libraries. Annually the **University of Hong Kong** sponsors with the help of others a library leadership institute. To each institute will come scores of very bright, animated, and enthusiastic librarians. It is inspirational to see them attack the management problems that their small teams are asked to resolve. There are, of course, all sorts of problems for Libraries in China — especially the lack of freedom to select and read all points of view; yet, compared to the past, the stories being played out in most libraries, seem to be much happier than during the previous 60 or 70 years. 🌸

See <http://www.hklib.org.hk/about-us.htm> for more information.

<<http://www.against-the-grain.com>>

