

## LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANSHIP IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA\*

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### I. Historical Overview

China is one of the oldest and greatest civilizations in the world. As early as Shang Dynasty (1766 B.C.-1122 B.C.), the tortoise-shell inscriptions were found. During the Chou Dynasty (1122B.C.-255 B.C.), the Chinese written language (Chinese characters) evolved. Over the dynasties, the emperors and their ministers produced a multitude of documents and archival materials. For the upkeep of these imperial archival documents, according to Suma Chien, a well-known historian in the Han Dynasty (206B.C.-221A.D.): Lao Tse, the founder of Taoism, was officially appointed as the first Imperial Librarian of the Chou Dynasty.<sup>1</sup>

The Imperial Library was not created to serve the subjects. It was only available for the emperors, the imperial families, and high-ranking officials.

The Chinese invention of paper in the first century A.D. and printing in the fifth century A.D. were also remarkable contributions

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to the world civilization. These inventions made the production of books easier and cheaper. As a result, the private libraries emerged. In the Ching Dynasty (1644–1911), the last dynasty of Chinese history, a total of 497 private libraries were in existence.<sup>2</sup>

Neither the Imperial Library nor the private libraries were modernized or westernized. Their classification system and management principles were extremely different from the ones of modern librarianship.

In 1905, the first public library was established in Wuhan, Hunan Province. Four years later, a law for creating public libraries was promulgated. In 1910, the National Library in Peking was established. Subsequently, public libraries in each provincial capital were built up.<sup>3</sup>

In 1911, the last emperor in China was ousted, and the Republic of China founded. The Government started to build modern libraries throughout the country. In 1920, Mary Elizabeth Wood, an alumna of Simmons College, founded the Wenhua Library School, the first Library school in China. In 1925, the China Association of Libraries was organized. By 1949, China had a total of 2,935 libraries of various types.<sup>4</sup>

The People's Republic of China was proclaimed in 1949. In the past forty years, the development of libraries in China, based on Prof. Lee-Hsia Hsu Ting: "Chinese Libraries and Library Education, 1949–1980," may be divided into the following four stages:

1. 1949–1959: Under the substantial influence by the Soviet Union, China started the first five year plan. Library was viewed by Lenin as "a means of mass education and indoctrination." China applied such a concept to build various types of libraries, including rural libraries or reading rooms, and labor union libraries to serve workers, peasants, and soldiers. In 1956, there were reportedly 17,486 libraries in the whole country. The libraries acquired a large number of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist works and banned reactionary (pro-Kuomintang), obscene and absurd publications.

2. 1958–1965 : In the second five year plan, the Government started a program of library coordination and cooperation. Library centers and coordination committees were set up in major cities and several provinces. The public libraries were under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture. In 1957, the Great Leap Forward Campaign failed. Subsequently, Chiang Ching, Mao's wife, launched the "Anti-revisionist", "Anti-rightist", and "Anti-capitalist" movements, which led to the Cultural Revolution.

3. 1966–1976 : The library collections and services suffered substantially during the Cultural Revolution. Mao and the "Gang of Four" advocated the class struggle and a dictatorship of the people. They launched into a violent attack on bourgeois ideology, capitalism, revisionism, and professionalism. Libraries were labeled as centers of feudalism and capitalism ; and librarians were called the "watch dogs" of imperialism. All levels of schools and libraries were closed. Teachers and librarians were sent to work in the farms or in factories.

4. 1976–1980 : After the Cultural Revolution, the Government implemented a program known as the Four Modernization (Defense, Agriculture, Industry, Science and Technology). Libraries went back to the normal function. During this period, the preservation of books, dissemination of information to the general public, schools, and scientific and technological communities were listed as top priorities.<sup>5</sup>

## II. The Current Status

### 1. National Library and Public Libraries :

The Ministry of Culture supervises the National Library and 300,000 public libraries.

With more than 13 million volumes and a staff of 1,100, the National Library of China is the largest library in China. Its collection contains more than 600,000 rare books, 11,000 periodicals, 24

minority languages and 115 foreign languages. One third of the foreign materials were acquired through an exchange with approximately 2,000 foreign institutions in 119 countries.<sup>6</sup>

Using the Chinese Classification System, the National Library provides catalog card services for all the libraries in China, and publishes the monthly bibliography.

Shanghai Municipal Public Library is the largest public library in China with a collection of more than six million volumes, of which 1.5 million are classical Chinese books (rare books).

The children literature department or children library is separated from the main library. In the mid-1980s, Shanghai had 45 city or regional children's libraries.<sup>7</sup>

Elliott Shore, Reference Librarian at Temple University, visited libraries in China in the early 1980s. She noticed that any one who wanted to use the library must obtain a letter from their work place. Not every one who worked could get such a letter. Those who retired had no way to get the permission. Ms. Shore also observed that closed-stack libraries in China posed some problems. If a stack worker is not willing to make a trip to the stacks, he/she can simply say to the user that the book is not available.<sup>8</sup>

In the mid-1980s, a group of 24 professional librarians led by Maureen Pastine, University Librarian, Washington State University, visited China. They were surprised that the library reading rooms they visited were very crowded all day long from opening until closing time. The persons who occupied seats were using library as study halls to prepare for their examinations.

The group also surprisingly discovered that the library users usually asked reference questions in written form; and the reference librarians answered questions to them in written form, too. It took from hours to a week to respond their questions.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Academic Libraries :

There are no private colleges and universities in China. Several of the major university libraries have been allocated larger

amount of funds. However, most academic library budgets were rather small. In 1980, each academic library only received about U.S.\$40,000.<sup>10</sup>

Chinese academic libraries spent approximately 20% to 40% of their budget on salaries and operating costs, and 60% to 80% on books. Due to their limited income, the faculty members depend heavily on libraries to support their instruction. Students could not afford to buy textbooks. As a result, libraries purchase a large number of duplicate copies of books for them to use.<sup>11</sup>

Materials on political campaigns and socialization appeared abundantly in each library.

Much the same as public libraries, most academic libraries have closed stacks. Some libraries have open stacks for the faculty and graduate students. Few libraries maintain the reference departments. Reference questions must be written and answered in a form. The expertise system has not been established yet. The primary function of the library is custodial.

The academic libraries are very crowded. Most students come to libraries for study or preparing examinations. Few are actually using libraries.

Visiting academic libraries in the Sichuan Province in 1986, Mary M. Nofsinger, Public Service Librarian, Washington State University, discovered that the facilities and equipment in Chinese libraries were inadequate. Insufficient lighting existed even in the newer buildings. Lack of temperature and humidity control had affected the preservation of books, particularly the rare and archival materials.<sup>12</sup> There were very few copy machines and the cost of xeroxing was terribly expensive.

The professionalism has not been instituted yet. College graduates who majored in the areas of low job markets were assigned to work in libraries. Professors who could not teach any more were transferred to libraries. Of the 1,085 academic library directors and assistant/associate directors, only 8% had received pro-

fessional training.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Special Libraries :

Special libraries in China include : (1) Trade union and factory libraries ; and (2) Research libraries and information centers. In 1958, China had 35,000 trade union and factory libraries.<sup>14</sup>

Research libraries and information centers are considered key institutions in China. They receive adequate funding ; and their facilities and equipment are better than public and academic libraries.<sup>15</sup>

Influenced by the Russian librarianship, China has two parallel systems : library services and information services. Information scientists have better training. Some of them received the M.L.S. degree from the United States. They earned higher salary than librarians. They were viewed as contributors to the growth of the national economy.<sup>16</sup>

The Chinese Academy of Sciences Library was established in 1951. Its name was changed to the Institute of Scientific and Technological Information of China (ISTIC) in 1978. Under the direct supervision of the State Commission of Science and Technology, the ISTIC employed more than 50,000 information professionals.<sup>17</sup>

### 4. Library Automation :

Automation of key research centers and national networking was listed as one of the top priority goals in Chinese modernization. The highest ranking leaders in China have supported such a plan since 1978.

However, to achieve the library automation, China has faced some hurdles, such as how to design an efficient input keyboard for Chinese characters, three different Chinese library classification systems, poor networking telecommunications, and lack of updated hardware facilities and a knowledge of software development.<sup>18</sup>

The National Library in Peking has made great efforts in promoting library automation. Among its achievements are the creation of an online national data base, the production of Chinese

MARC tapes, and catalog cards for both national and international distribution.<sup>19</sup>

### 5. Library Education and Professional Associations :

There has been a very shortage of qualified professional librarians in China. Among 140,000 library and information workers in China, only two percents have had professional training.<sup>20</sup>

Wenhua Library school, the first library school in China, was established in 1920. In 1952, it was merged into Wuhan University as an academic department. Until 1983, the department was changed to the School of Library and Information Science.

Another department of library science was founded in 1947 at Peking University. Between 1949 and 1979, there were only two library science departments in China. It was estimated that during these past 30 years, China produced only 1,800 library science graduates. After 1979, thirty additional library science departments were established.<sup>21</sup> In the late 1980s, some 50 universities or colleges had library science departments or programs.<sup>22</sup> However, due to a shortage of well-trained librarians, some deans/chairmen and faculty members of library schools/departments were appointed by their professional experience rather than by their academic training and background.

In addition to the formal education, China started various channels of continuing education to train library and information science workers, such as correspondence and spare-time schools, short training classes, workshops and seminars, and on-the-job training. For instance, in 1980, Jilin Provincial Correspondence School enrolled 1,200 students.<sup>23</sup>

The curricula of library schools or departments have been separated into two portions : (1) library science, and (2) information science. The graduates of library science major were assigned to academic, public and school libraries as librarians ; while the ones of information science major mostly were sent to the information centers of the Institute of Scientific and Technological Information of

China as information scientists.

The information centers have received greater support than libraries ; and the information scientists have higher salary and social status than librarians.

There are parallel professional associations : (1) the Library Society of China established in 1979 ; and (2) the Chinese Society of Information Science.

### III. Conclusion

The Chinese Imperial Library came into existence in the Chou Dynasty (1122 B.C.—225 B.C.). Unfortunately, the Imperial Libraries had never been open to the general public. In the Ching Dynasty (1644—1911), there were many private libraries, but the classification system and management of the libraries were not modernized and Westernized.

In the past forty years, the libraries of the People's Republic of China have been substantially developed. By the influence of Soviet Union, China considered library service is an effective means of mass education and indoctrination. Books and other materials relating to Leninism, Stalinism, and Maoism were heavily collected.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966—1976), the library collections and services suffered tremendously. The collection and acquisition of books and other materials relating to bourgeois ideology, capitalism, revisionism, and feudalism was prohibited. Librarians were labelled as the "watch dogs" of imperialism.

After the Cultural Revolution, the collections and services of libraries returned to the traditional practice. The National Library of China with more than 13 million books is one of the largest libraries in the world, and Shanghai Municipal Public Library with a collection of more than six million volumes is the largest public library in China.

Although there are some problems of library services facing in China such as lack of qualified professional librarians, poor facilities,



limited budgets, and two parallel systems of academic training and professional associations, the leaders of China do understand the importance and contributions of library and information services to the project of Four Modernization. The services of libraries and information centers to the needs of whole country are improving and the future of library and information science in China is promising.

#### Notes

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