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Back Talk - I Am An Inculte!

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Back Talk — I Am An Inculte!

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In October I spent a week at the **Frankfurt Book Fair**. It was interesting, but an unintended consequence of attending and walking through the dozen or so huge halls of publishers' booths was the realization that I am such an *inculte* (French), *analphabetic* (German), *analfabeto* (Spanish), *illetterato* (Italian), *herpamoteh* (Russian), that is, I am such an illiterate in these and a hundred or so other languages represented in the **Frankfurter Buch Messe** displays. I wondered if this is how adults who cannot read books published in their mother tongue feel when they go to their local public libraries.

While, this experience was a bit unsettling, there was no shortage of talks by authors, publishers and vendors to which to listen in more familiar languages — although the **Book Fair** is not the usual librarian conference with thematic panels and speakers. My reason for going was to be one of the many speakers and to talk about my library's experience hosting a mirror site and using **China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI)** resources. **CNKI** is one of the leading electronic publishers in China and they are launching a new platform which will ultimately handle both western and Chinese language materials including journal articles, full text eBooks, etc.

Because China was the "Guest of Honor" at the fair, there was even a large amount of China content to enjoy. I got to see and listen to **Ma Jian** one of the most important dissident writers who recently published *Beijing Coma*, a novel about life in the years leading up to, during, and after the Tian An Men Incident. I also got to view the

Chinese documentary film, *Even If I Am No Longer*, which is a story about a Beijing high school principal who died because of the severity of the beatings administered by members of the Red Guard. However, most of the China related programs focused on the bright side of China's history and culture including scores of other events where attendees could learn about the history of Chinese printing, see beautiful examples of color printing, and become acquainted with the explosion in publishing that characterizes modern China.

Given my library's interest in eBooks, some of the most interesting events for me dealt with eBook reading devices. The founders of **Blackbetty** (related article: <http://publishing-perspectives.com/?p=2312>), an Austrian company which specializes in formatting eBooks for mobile phone devices, talked about how their product is being used in countries like Egypt to promote literacy and to provide ready access to books and journals. While libraries may be in short supply in the developing world, cell phones are not, and electronic materials formatted for these small devices seem to be a brilliant idea. While it is popular to think and say "I wouldn't read a book on a mobile phone," if it is the only way you can find books to read I imagine your attitude might be quite different. And of course nearly everyone with a 3G enabled mobile

phone is already reading all sorts of things on the mini screen. See the **Blackbetty** Website (in German) for more information <http://www.blackbetty.at/>.

Another step up in size is the dedicated eBook reading device. Since **Kindle** has finally gone global, today (October 19, 2009) is the first day

that we in Hong Kong can legally download books and other electronic forms of information to our **Kindles**. Since China has been out ahead of the west when it comes to eBooks, there are many more such readers on this side of the globe. At the Book Fair I listened to a presentation by **Simon Hsieh**, president of **Hanwang Technology Co., Ltd.** This is a company which markets all sorts of tablet PC's as well as eBook reading devices. Its eBook reader has a touch screen so that readers can scribble on their eBooks just like they do on their printed books. He convincingly argued that given that there are millions of people who already read eBooks in China, the market for reading devices in his country, like the ones he has developed (See <http://usa.hanvon.com/>), is growing dramatically. See a recent article in *eBook 88: Ebook Resources* for information on a fairly wide range of competing devices <http://www.ebook88.com/devices.html>.

Another interesting talk I listened to was given by **Nizer Jamal** from **Impelsys**. They have a product called **iPublishCentral** which they indicate enables "publishers to market, distribute and deliver their content online in a simple, self-serving and cost effective manner." (<http://www.impelsys.com/ipublish>) Many of his remarks dealt with convincing publishers that unlike printed books, eBooks enable the publisher to better understand how readers use their books and give them an opportunity to build a relationship with these readers.

The **Book Fair** also gave me an opportunity to talk to some librarians, publishers and vendors about cataloguing. For those who know me, and the miniscule amount that I know about cataloguing, this may come as a shock. But because **HKU** has purchased so many eBooks, closing in on 2 million eBook titles in Chinese and western languages plus the usual tens of thousands of ejournals, and because we feel strongly that readers need to be able to click directly from our ILS to each title without being required to go via the publisher/vendor's platform, our library catalogs a lot of eBooks and ejournals. While some libraries maintain all is needed is a quick author and title entry, it is heartening to see that there are other librarians who want to obtain copies of our records in a batch mode for the electronic titles they are acquiring. We are of course a member of **OCLC** and libraries the world over can get copies of our records in that way. Yet we continue to help libraries get records for Chinese eBooks when they want us to match our records with their holdings.

I would encourage any librarian with a passion for collection development to go to the **Frankfurt Book Fair**. Even with my frustration with my own linguistic limitations, it proved to be a very interesting experience. It also motivated me to want to learn more languages although next year when I retire I think I will first work on my Cantonese in addition to my Mandarin skills. 🌿

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