November 2008

Back Talk -- Academic Libraries in China

Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson
University of Hong Kong, ferguson@hkcc.hku.hk

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg
Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5189

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
In the popular media or on the Internet. Perhaps that is impossible in a single-volume but these are topics are worthy of further exploration and in a sense this represents a lost opportunity. Another drawback is the index which lacks comprehensiveness. As you would expect the Puritans Salem witch trials are covered in separate entry oversights like this seriously erode the value of the index.

In spite of these problems, the Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft and Wicca offers a great deal of useful and compelling information. It is a serious source with articles that are factual and straightforward with references provided at the end of each entry. The fact that it is reasonably priced and that there is also a paperback version make it a candidate for either reference or circulation depending on need. While it will have appeal in certain academic and even high school libraries, it is public libraries, in particular, that will find it worth considering.
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 curriculum 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 of books added but also 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, cataloging and patron access functions; library consortia with shared cataloging 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 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 Sichuan 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 their 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 Abba, near Chengdu, was completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed. 6,000 Alba school students were completely destroyed.