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Cultural Revolution: reflections on an exchange

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Martin and Cathal with Liu Lidong on the rooftop garden, Hangzhou Municipal Library

Abstract

This paper considers an on-going exchange programme between the Boole Library, University College Cork (UCC) and Hangzhou Municipal Library, South East China. The authors describe the exchange and their impressions of working in a different library setting.

Keywords: Libraries, Exchange Programme, Ireland, China, Boole Library, Hangzhou Library

Introduction

The day to day experience of the exchange is chronicled by the authors: what they did, different aspects of the library, how they found it, what they took from it and how, if at all, it has changed them as library professionals and people. This is a descriptive exercise: describing a Chinese library for a Western audience.

A selective approach has been taken as the exchange was for four weeks: a very packed four weeks with many varied experiences. The theory of work exchange programmes *per se* is not covered. Much has been written on the topic of work exchange programmes and much specific to library exchanges. A cursory database search will show the vast array of literature on the topic.

The programme is about the exchange of resources – staff and otherwise. So far, two Chinese staff members, Ann Yan and Liu Lidong, have spent four weeks in the Boole Library and the present writers have spent four weeks in Hangzhou.

This paper is one of two papers by the exchange participants and focuses primarily on the Irish experience of a Chinese library whilst the Chinese paper will focus on the Chinese experience of an Irish Library. The other paper, currently being worked on, is to be published in a Chinese library trade paper. This approach was taken as an extension of the programme – it would promote the programme whilst, at the same time, promote the libraries in the other country. It is part of the fostering of relations between the two institutions and their staff.

Background to the programme

In 2010 John Fitzgerald, Librarian and Head of Information Services UCC met Director Chu Shuqing at Hangzhou Municipal Library during the *Shanghai International Library Forum*.[1] When talking they realised that each liked what the other institution was doing and they informally discussed the idea of an exchange programme between the two institutions. John Fitzgerald had been actively looking for a Chinese library to twin with whilst Hangzhou Library has a strong ongoing programme of linking with Western libraries. For Director Fitzgerald any such programme was "to foster an appreciation of both cultures and specifically, from UCC's perspective, to equip Library staff at UCC to enhance library services both to Chinese students studying at UCC and for UCC students travelling to China" (Fitzgerald. 2012).[2] Director Chu liked the fact that Ireland has an "attractive and unique culture and the Boole Library has an outstanding performance in its digital library" and wanted to learn about and learn from both. He also wanted to have "a general idea of how Irish libraries work and the cultural institutions condition in Ireland" [personal email].

Also John Fitzgerald felt, wisely as our experience showed, that Hangzhou would be a good fit size wise for UCC staff. Hangzhou, in Chinese terms, is a relatively small city of 8 million people. Despite its size it is an easy city to navigate as much of the city centres around its famous West Lake – once christened Heaven on Earth and the most beautiful place on Earth by Marco Polo. It is now a main tourist attraction for Chinese tourists and swiftly becoming so for Westerners.

It still feels very foreign to Westerners – more so than Shanghai which seems quite Western. What adds to the foreignness is the lack of Westerners in the city. We did not see another Westerner till well into our second week. This could easily have led to a sense of alienation but instead, for both authors, it added to the sense of an exciting adventure.

Both directors decided that the exchange programme would take the form of staff and other resources. In addition to staff, Boole Library would forward Cork University Press publications and Hangzhou library would send on material pertinent to Hangzhou.

1 http://www.libnet.sh.cn/silf2010/english/registration.htm

2 http://booleweb.ucc.ie/documents/ucclibrarynews_winter2012.pdf



Martin & Cathal with Liu's team



Archive staff repair old documents

The process of staff selection was done differently by each library. Director Chu personally chose Ann Yan and Liu Lidong and John Fitzgerald put out a call to professionally qualified library staff who would be interested in travelling to Hangzhou. Interested people sent their CV and a Personal Statement stating why they felt they should be chosen. Of the staff who submitted an application Cathal Kerrigan [Medical Librarian] and Martin O Connor [Senior Library Assistant, Business & Social Sciences Section] were chosen to go. Each institution covered the costs of their staff members' flights whilst the living arrangements and costs were met by the host library.

Hangzhou Municipal Library – Overview

Hangzhou Municipal Library comprises a main branch and a large number of satellite / branch and specialist libraries. Hangzhou library main branch (opened 2008) where the authors reported each day is situated in the new Municipal Government Centre. During a presentation given by Ann and Liu when they were in Cork, we had seen images, heard of and talked about the library. But we were not prepared for the actual impact that seeing the building had on us when we first arrived. The first thing that strikes one is the sheer scale of the place. Physically, it covers an area of 20,210 m² with a building area of 43,680 m² in total. It consists of five floors and provides 2300 reading seats. This gives a wonderful sense of space to the library. It never, even at the busiest times, felt crowded. This we enjoyed. We came from what we considered a big library – the Boole library is 16,000 m² and seats 2,920 users but it feels small and crowded in comparison. The size, scale, pristine finish and condition of the library are what initially strikes and make a lasting impression.

The front entrance is guarded by uniformed staff. These staff members, who are both security and library attendants, are positioned all over the building at entrances to floors and collections. Almost 90% of the building is open to library users.

What also strikes are the numbers of people using the library which is probably to be expected in a city of 8 million people but they record 6000 visitors

on an average day, climbing to 15,000 over the summer. The increase could be attributed to the high temperature outside and because the library has state of the art air conditioning.

The library has free Wi-Fi throughout the building which works without any login or registration – the moment you enter the front door you are on the network: a godsend for those away from home wishing to keep in touch with family using Skype. The library also boasts the country's first automatic book borrowing and returns kiosks using RFID technology. In 2009, it became the first Chinese library to be a member of OCLC. Because of this, our Chinese colleagues pointed out, that is very likely that the Chinese texts ending up in our libraries have been catalogued in their Library.

Subject librarians spend most of their day on the floor in their subject speciality area shelving or preparing monthly inventories by scanning the shelves. Each subject librarian has their photo on the shelves so users with a query can find them in amongst the stacks and if they have a more involved query the librarian will take them to their desk and work with the query. In this they are the epitome of the roving librarian as they spend their full working day among their shelves.

In 2003, it was decided to abolish all fees and make the library free for all users. The abolition of all membership fees caused some controversy, as certain more affluent or educated users did not wish to have to share 'their space with beggars'. This made national, and international, headlines. Director Chu famously said, of the homeless or poor, "I have no right to refuse them to the school, but you have the right to leave." Their policy is to let every citizen enjoy equal information rights and have equal access to all the material. The staff very much see the library, and actively encourage users, to see the library, as The Third Space – the first space being home, the second being work [or school/college]. Overdue fines are kept to a minimum and loan periods are, relative to Ireland, very long, thereby keeping down overdue fees. Also users can return items to any of the branch libraries.

There is a maximum one month turnaround from the order of new material and the receipt of books on the floors. Cathal ordered a Chinese copy of an Irish book one Friday and it was in his hand on the Monday afternoon. The library uses both professionally qualified Library staff and outsourced staff in the cataloguing and processing section.

There are 158 full-time library staff working in the library, 22 with master degrees and 2 PhD degrees – professionalization is a big goal in Chinese libraries as is the pressure to publish. We had an interesting conversation with two younger librarians who wondered if there was the same pressure towards professionalization and publishing in Irish, and other Western libraries.

The age demographic is interesting – librarians in China tend to be younger with most of the staff being under 35. In addition to full-time library staff there is much use made of volunteer staff, particularly on weekends and evenings when most of the staff would be off. These volunteers are primarily a presence in the building and spend much of their time in the stacks shelving and tidying. There are also a number of full-time drivers who are employed by the library. They spend their working days transporting material between branch libraries, delivering material to and from the municipal government and driving visiting librarians and other visitors around during their stay.

The library holds over 4 million volumes across all formats. When users search the OPAC they get a call number and location – but they also get a map image of where exactly the item is held on the shelf.

Classification system

The classification system used by Hangzhou Library is the Chinese Library Classification or Classification for Chinese Libraries. This system is used in most public, educational and academic libraries in China. It would be somewhat familiar to those using the Library of Congress Classification System. There are 22 main categories and a number of sub categories – just like Dewey or LCC. What we, as Westerners, found particularly interesting was that the first section **A** covered *Marxism, Leninism, Maoism and Den Xiaoping Theory* – this is then further broken down into further sections: **A1** – the works of Karl Marx



Reading Digital paper, Dianzi University



The Children's Library

and Friedrich Engels, **A2** – the works of Vladimir Lenin. Further sub sections are allocated to Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Deng Xiaoping – the Chinese leader who came after Mao and who opened China up to Economic Reform. We felt it appropriate that a library Classification System for a nation espousing a Communist Ideology would place primacy on the leading thinkers of that ideology.

The rest of the classification system would be recognisable to Western library staff and sections would cover Politics & Law, Philosophy & Religions, Social Sciences, Military Science, Education etc.

Branches / Library Departments/ Specialist Services

As with most city libraries, there are numerous branch libraries and specialist services around the city. These are described below.

1. **Information Production and Distribution Centre**

The Information Production and Distribution Centre (IPDC) is similar to the Official Publications Centre in Boole Library. The staff in the IPDC, one of whom is Ann Yan, spend their working day reading print and web resources searching for relevant material relating to Hangzhou. From this material a monthly publication is created and sent to the Hangzhou Municipal Government headquarters. They also keep copies of these publications in the library.

"It is the memory of the people, the memory of the staff that lingers. It is the memory of their strong work ethic, their friendly nature, their openness, their curiosity, their dynamism and their joy and happiness that remains when we think of the Exchange"

2. **Special Collections Department**

This department contains the largest collection of rare texts in the country. The oldest texts are held in big wooden boxes, temperature controlled, but they also use herbs to preserve the pieces. These herbs are placed within the boxes surrounding the documents. What we were most struck by was the strong smell of sandalwood in the area. The department also keeps rubbings of old stones and metal materials. The library employs a staff member whose job it is to create these rubbings of rare old material.

3. **Social & Cultural Activity Department**

The brief of this department is cultural promotion, education and user training, recreation and hosting various cultural activities. During our stay there was an exhibition in the Children's Library of the famous Japanese Children's book illustrator Chihiro Iwasaki – best known in the West for her illustrations of a number of Hans Christian Andersen's works. Another event we attended was one of the Saturday morning English language classes. Run by library staff, there were about 30 participants in the class we attended. These are very informal sessions and open to all. The conversation the day we attended ranged from Valentine's Day to Ireland to zombies to terrorism and lots of weird and wonderful topics in between!

The present writers also hosted one of the Salons – a lecture on a specific topic. We tried to do our bit to promote Ireland in China and gave a presentation on Ireland, Irish culture, history and landscape. This too was very well attended, with about fifty people attending even though it was a beautiful sunny Saturday afternoon.

4. **The Buddhism Library**

One special library we were very much looking forward to seeing was the Buddhist Library. We had read about this before travelling to Hangzhou. It is part of the Special Collections Department of the library and it contains 300,000 volumes relating to Buddhism. Unfortunately for us this library was closed for renovations when we visited.

5. **The Braille Library**

This Library is located in the School of the Blind in Fuyang. It serves visually impaired people all across the Zhejiang Province. With a collection of 23,000 volumes, it has a footfall of over 1,000 visitors a month and circulation rates of 2,400 volumes a month. Users can order items over the phone and have them posted to them.

6. **Chinese Chess Library**

This dedicated library is based in a separate building and houses over 2,000 volumes relating to the game of Chess. It has research space for students of chess and researchers from all over the world visit this branch.

7. **The Music Library**

Situated on the second floor of the main building, the Music Library is one of the parts of the library of which the staff are most proud. It holds over 2000 CDs, 1200 DVDS and over 2000 print items of Chinese and Western music. There is seating for 170 people. It contains a self-help area where users can listen to music, three specially designed hi-fi music rooms and a theatre area where music listening and appreciation events are held.

The staff is particularly proud of the equipment which was specially sourced in Germany and America. The equipment includes German Avantgarde Horn loudspeakers, six pairs of active Bass Speakers, American Rockport speakers, German Fortissimo acoustic speakers and one set of British Tannoy Imperial handmade speakers. These speakers are particularly suited to Chinese, European, Symphony, Opera and Chamber music. We were treated to a DVD showing of Andrea Bocelli and the sound was the purest we have heard anywhere.

8. **The Children's Library**

The Children's Library has one branch in the main building and is busiest on Saturday and after school. Another branch is located at West Lake and has a Toy Library and what is called an Apple Tree English Library. This West Lake



Tianyi Pavilion Library, the oldest private library in Asia and third oldest in the world

Branch has more than 500,000 volumes. Each day when we finished work, we would literally see streams of families flowing into the Main Children's Library. This is where most of the children would do their homework and would spend the evening there until closing time at 21.00.

Hangzhou Library Foundation

In 2003, Hangzhou Public Library established the Hangzhou Library Foundation. This is a non-profit organization which has independent legal and lawful registration that has as its mission the promotion and development of the public library cause and system. It is based on the principle "from the people, for the people". They work to raise funds to develop and assist libraries in the more remote areas of the country. The Foundation is based in the main library building.

Other Libraries

As part of our exchange we also visited libraries outside the Hangzhou Municipal Library System. We took the opportunity to visit one of the world's oldest private libraries and also, the world's tallest library:

Tianyi Pavilion Library

This library, located in Ningbo City (another major city in the Zhejiang Province about an hour from Hangzhou), is the oldest private library in Asia and third oldest in the world. Built in 1561 it has a collection of nearly 300,000 volumes, 80,000 of which are rare books. Visiting this library is literally stepping back in time and space – outside is modernity and noise – inside is Ming dynasty China, peace, quiet and Zen. It is amongst the most peaceful places either of us has even been.

Shanghai Public Library

We travelled to Shanghai for a weekend and visited the Shanghai Public Library which is the tallest library in the world. One very interesting feature we noted in Shanghai library is the way that you request a book. You do not go to the stacks which are not accessible to the public. Instead you insert your reader' s card into the OPAC, search the catalogue for your item, click request which then goes to staff working with the stacks. The book is then mechanically sent to the circulation desk where you collect it. It is just like ordering an item in Argos!



Model of Shanghai Public Library

The library also has a Technology Demo Centre which is basically like a museum for the mobile devices we use daily such as smart phones, tablets, MP3 players.

Conclusion

Our strongest abiding memory of the exchange, in one word, would be the people. We would also say this for all our time in China – it is the memory

of the people that lingers. Though the physical library space – which is very well supported both financially and politically – impresses and shows what a well funded library system can achieve – it is the memory of the people, the memory of the staff that lingers. It is the memory of their strong work ethic, their friendly nature, their openness, their curiosity, their dynamism and their joy and happiness that remains when we think of the Exchange.

They organised a most interesting exchange – work, social, cultural – for us and did everything they could to ensure that the exchange ran smoothly and was memorable. They were most hospitable and nothing was too much effort for any of their staff.

What will also stay with us is the fact that communication is so much more than the words we speak. Very few people spoke English in Hangzhou and we did not have any more than the most basic Mandarin. We managed to communicate with people through the use of our minimal Mandarin, sign language, judicious pointing, the use of language Apps on our mobiles and much enthusiasm. The nature of the work enabled the exchange to work. We did not spend our days working in the libraries. We spent our time meeting various librarians. We would discuss how they did things and how we did things. We would share ideas, suggestions and comments – it was very much a dialogical Exchange Programme. We always had one of our Hangzhou Library guides/translators with us. Elaine, Ann and Norman all had impeccable English and they worked so hard to ensure all ideas were exchanged and discussed to the fullest.

We also remember the relationship between Director Chu and his staff – one built on mutual respect and their shared focus was on what they saw as most important – the library and its place in the community. We also remember the number of young library directors running big branch libraries. Talent and skill are rewarded and this can be seen in the work ethic of the staff – they believe if they put the work in they too will climb the hierarchy – positions are awarded on merit.

Also, there is the comforting realisation that even though our libraries are at opposite ends of the world, that we are countries with different political, cultural and social ideologies and systems, a library is still a library no matter where it is. Even though we are an academic and they are a public library, even though they are very well financed and supported and valued through government policy we are both concerned with information, the organisation of it, and the provision of access to our respective communities.

To conclude, we would like to thank Director Chu and his staff for the warm welcome and we hope that this exchange will continue so that other staff, from both libraries can experience and learn as we have done from such an exchange.

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Suggested reading

- *Chinese Librarianship: An International Electronic Journal* http://www.white-clouds.com/iclc/cliej/ (For anybody interested in reading about the issues exercising the Chinese LIS community.)
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- Hangzhou Municipal Library Website: http://www.hzlib.net/
- Shanghai Public Library http://www.library.sh.cn/
- Adolphus, Margaret. Focus on Libraries in China http://www.emeraldinsight.com/librarians/management/viewpoints/china.htm
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- Chinese Journal of Library & Information Science http://159.226.100.150:8084/info/EN/volumn/current.shtml
- Fang, Conghu & Zhu, Xiaochun. (2006) 'The Open Access movement in China" in *Interlending and Document Supply*, 34(6): 186-193 has a section on Tianyi Pavilion Library