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Bridges to China: Developing Partnerships between Serials Librarians in the United States and China

Keywords: Librarian exchange programs; Educational exchanges; Academic libraries; Serials librarians; Intellectual cooperation; China; United States

Abstract

University librarians in China face many of the same challenges related to serials management that confront librarians in the United States. The authors discuss the importance for librarians in the United States, especially those working with serials, to establish and build ties with librarians in other countries, such as China. Benefits of an exchange could include sharing information about best practices, exchange of serial materials, and working together on mutually advantageous projects. Acknowledging the growing interest in international library exchange programs, the authors relate their own institution's efforts to build international ties with Fudan University in Shanghai, China, and Shaanxi Normal University in Xi'an, China. In establishing these ties, the authors have traveled to China and interviewed librarians about serials acquisition, processing, and management.

Introduction

This “The Balance Point” column discusses the importance for librarians in the United States, particularly those working with serials, to build bridges of communication and information exchange with librarians in China. As China expands tourism and economic investment, the time is ripe for Chinese and US academic libraries to establish and develop mutually beneficial relationships. In the commercial sector these bridges have been established and continued to develop between publishers, vendors, and libraries. Internationalization means much more than facilitated access to materials; it involves sharing information, exploring cultures, and working together. Personal interactions between librarians from different countries, especially two global participants, such as the United States and China, offer numerous benefits.

At the commercial level with regard to serials, many periodical databases are delivering Western serial publications to Chinese universities. At Fudan University in Shanghai, for example, students and faculty have ready access to major library databases, such as the Thomson Reuters Scientific ISI Web of Knowledge suite, Wiley InterScience, SpringerLink, ProQuest databases, and Elsevier's ScienceDirect, to name a few from their exhaustive list.¹ They also, of course, have ready access to the growing collection of open access scholarship available worldwide through mechanisms such as Google Scholar and institutional repositories.

While Chinese scholars are gaining access to journals from outside China, Chinese publications are progressively finding their way to readers in the West, as exemplified by Chinese journal titles available through the Directory of Open Access Journals² and through initiatives such as that begun in 1996 by Elsevier, which provides access to over thirty English-language journals from China through its online database Science Direct.³ But access to the body of serials in China is still poor in relation to publications from other countries. According to a 2005 study by the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the country of China ranks 124th in the number of times papers are cited by other researchers.⁴

As publishers and database vendors continue to internationalize access to serials, the authors advocate that academic librarians globalize their profession by seeking liaisons with libraries and librarians abroad. The first challenge would be to identify a partner institution which matches enthusiasm and goals for the project. Many libraries foresee the potential benefits of international partnerships and are ready to engage with appropriate collaborators. Benefits include sharing our best practices in order to improve procedures for the acquisition, processing, managing, and archiving of serials. Partner institutions can discuss concerns about particular issues, such as staffing, the cost of serials, and selection procedures. Such discussion can present alternative solutions or prompt needed reform of long-standing procedures or beliefs. As the librarians from the two regions learn more about the success and challenges of the other, more ambitious projects can ensue, such as joint, comparative research. Parties may discuss sharing library resources, especially local publications. Certainly a key challenge down the road is for Chinese and Western librarians to mutually seek ways to open the access to journal literature both within and between the regions.

Traveling internationally to work in the partner library can help to assure success in cooperative projects, dissolving the immense distance that divides two nations. Professional exchanges that physically position librarians in partner libraries can improve everyone's understanding of the shared and divergent issues facing their libraries. Librarians can share professional expertise, language skills, or specialized subject knowledge. Through living abroad or hosting an international colleague, librarians gain an understanding of each other's cultures and support their institution's internationalization efforts. User services for international students, particularly students from China or the United States, can only benefit from such relationships.

An increasing number of academic libraries in the United States, China, and elsewhere are engaging in international partnerships. Librarians have shared their concerns for the need for international cooperation, their own experiences in global exchanges, and the important steps and considerations which ensure success in such ventures. The authors share their personal experiences of a cooperative effort to forge ties with serial librarians at Fudan University Library in Shanghai and at Shaanxi Normal University Library in Xi'an, China, from initial interviews with librarians and administrators involved with serials at Chinese institutions as Appalachian State University (Boone, NC) formally commit to an international exchange agreement with the library at Fudan.

Growing International Awareness among Librarians and the Establishment of Exchange and Cooperative Programs

Academic librarians around the world are realizing the importance of developing a broader awareness of other cultures. Globalization in the form of international media, education, and business, as well as expanding world travel and student exchanges, is all too evident to librarians who are seeking ways to engage this emerging international environment. Librarians also see they can play an important role as information agents to assist their library constituencies in better accessing global culture and information.

Librarians in China also see the need to become members of the global community and have taken major steps over recent years to bring in Western journal literature, engage in scholarly communication with library organizations outside China, and to develop exchange agreements with institutions abroad.⁵ As early as 1996 at an IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations) conference, He Qin and Ma Jin from Peking University in Beijing argued that Chinese librarian education should be reformed to include international cooperation.⁶ In 1996 Peking University started a joint venture with OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) and opened the OCLC Chinese Service Center in the Library.⁷

Interest in librarian and library student exchange programs between institutions in China and the United States has been steadily growing. A number of university libraries in the United States have long-standing exchange programs with institutions in China that go back to the 1980s. For example, Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan has exchange and cooperative programs with the State Archives Administration of China going back to 1989.⁸ McGill University developed an exchange program in library education with China Medical Library in 1986.⁹ And Ohio University has offered internships for librarians from Asia through a program begun in 1979.¹⁰

Since 2005 the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) has had Chinese librarians enrolled in graduate library school courses.¹¹ In 2008, the federally funded Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) has approved a partnership program between the UIUC Libraries and the Chinese American Librarians Association (CALA) with Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program Grant totaling nearly a half-million dollars. The funding will allow UIUC to provide training institutes for library

administrators from China to be held in the US, as well as training seminars for Chinese librarians by CALA members in China.¹²

Despite these and other international developments between libraries in our two nations, higher education in the United States has traditionally done little to encourage international understanding and scholarly exchange for librarians and other professional staff.¹³ Likewise, librarian education has not generally included training to work in an expanding global environment. In recent years, however, an increasing number of librarians have recognized the need to develop their own knowledge and sensitivity to international issues.

Advancements in technology over the last fifteen years have helped librarians gain international perspective and enabled libraries to enter a new era of partnership, serving users anywhere in the world and sharing resources globally. A greater flow of information and materials is now possible with the widespread use of new technologies, including Web-based educational systems, online teaching, virtual reality classrooms, and electronic resource sharing. The development of technologies has also allowed libraries to become part of a global community with a more virtual approach in providing information and a more proactive and comprehensive model in offering their services.¹⁴

A review of library literature has revealed a number of suggestions and recommendations regarding planning and implementing a library international program. Though such recommendations may need to be revised as the international library community evolves, they can still be helpful guides in considering plans for developing an international exchange program or international cooperative project. For example, in 1994 Tony Kidd and Karen Roughton recommended that to launch a successful international exchange, senior people at both the receiving and the dispatching libraries must be imbued with the true spirit of internationalism.¹⁵ They argued, furthermore, that administrators must perceive themselves as world citizens and possess a strong faith that they are supporting a worthwhile endeavor with both long-term and short-term benefits.

According to Kidd and Roughton, the need for communication, institutional support, and advance preparation is critical to a successful exchange. Preparation for an exchange, they argued, should include a clear statement of participants' duties and the duration of the visit necessary to complete tasks and/or training.¹⁶ Kidd and Roughton also observed that few exchanges up to the time of their study took place under the auspices of official university programs. Most originated from personal contact and some through various organizations in the field. They determined that library exchanges and collaborations had, at that time, been seen by many North American librarians involved in international exchanges as a path for general career development and as a means to enhance their library's image both nationally and internationally.¹⁷ Kidd and Roughton were writing prior to the Internet explosion and the broadening of international awareness among librarians in the world. Certainly today the goals and objectives of international exchange activities among librarians involve a wider range of motivations. For example, Carolyn Mann sees a successful international partnership coming from a mutual understanding of each other's culture and library system.¹⁸ In the column "What Works" in *School Library*

Journal, she described how a school library in the United States helped a sister library in Bolivia acquire more English books through a partnership initiated by the library science program at Appalachian State University. Mann attributed the success of the project to mutual understanding of cultures and needs.

The phenomenon of librarians in the US seeking to make connections with libraries across the globe is a natural outgrowth of general internationalization efforts within libraries. Libraries of all kinds in the US have steadily become more globally aware and worked correspondingly to provide international resources. Examples of the outcome of this awareness include Web site development in different languages, international culture centers within the library, membership in international organizations both within campus and beyond, collection development for international education, and university strategic planning for library international effort.¹⁹

Internationalization Efforts at Appalachian State University

Appalachian State University (ASU) has shown that international programs and international cooperative efforts are not the sole domain of large research institutions. Since 1976 when its international office was established, Appalachian State has, like many medium- and smaller-sized universities, been vigorously pursuing international programs. In 1980, ASU established the first formal institutional exchange relationship with the North East University in China. Since then the number of formal exchange agreements and associations has grown to forty-one institutional partnerships in more than seventeen countries.²⁰

Numerous opportunities for study abroad and scholarly travel now exist for ASU's 15,000 students. In 2006, nearly 400 students participated in short-term study abroad programs, while nearly 100 students took advantage of the semester-long or year-long international student exchange. In 2007–2008 ASU offered over forty short-term, faculty-led study abroad programs to such locations as Vietnam, India, South Africa, and China. In addition, Appalachian hosted thirty international scholars from twenty different countries in the 2006–2007 academic year.²¹ The number of courses with international components and themes at ASU has also increased. More than 100 courses at Appalachian State University have an international focus.²² An ongoing general education initiative calls for the integration of global issues and international topics into courses. Faculty and students seek opportunities to expand their international experiences and competencies within and beyond the campus.

New university leadership has articulated the need for increased efforts for further internationalization of Appalachian State University. In his opening remarks at the Appalachian State University International Education Council meeting, Dr. Jesse Lutabingwa, associate vice chancellor for international education and development, shared his vision of the future for international education at ASU. The vision focuses on six primary goals: develop students' global competencies; develop faculty and staff's global competencies; increase the number of international students on campus; expand

the K-12 outreach program; create an international environment on campus; and restructure the Office of International Education and Development.²³
Appalachian State University Library's Commitment to Internationalization and Building Ties with Libraries in China

The Appalachian State University Library has demonstrated its support for the university's internationalization efforts through increased involvement in professional international activities abroad and at home, as well as successful recruitment of international librarians. ASU librarians have traveled to Mexico, Cuba, and South Africa to participate in conferences, book fairs, and cultural exchanges. The ASU Library has also worked with the ASU Library Science Program to promote the creation and advancement of Bolivia's first public children's library, Biblioteca Th'uruchapitas. In June 2007, a group of patrons and educators from Bolivia, associated with the children's library, visited Appalachian State University to discuss a partnership that would expand educational opportunities for children in Bolivia.²⁴ This visit was the context for Appalachian State librarians building new international ties with libraries in China.

Developing Bridges to China

Appalachian State and Fudan University in Shanghai, China, signed an institutional agreement for partnership in 1997 and initially focused on the exchange between business schools. During a visit to ASU in April 2007, the vice president of Fudan University expressed interest in developing a library exchange program with Appalachian State. The two libraries began discussing various exchange possibilities and decided to pursue discussions in person about a staff exchange program which could later evolve into other areas of cooperation.

Librarians for Appalachian State University Library traveled to China in May 2008 to meet with librarians and administrators at Fudan University in Shanghai. They also scheduled meetings with two other university libraries: Beijing Normal in Beijing and Shaanxi Normal in Xi'an. Since an international exchange agreement had already existed between Appalachian State University and Fudan University for a number of years, the hope was for ASU Library to build upon those previous ties and formalize an exchange agreement with the librarians from Fudan. The visits to the other universities were introductory visits to explore the possibilities of faculty exchanges and other cooperative projects.

During the ASU librarian visit to Fudan, a formal agreement was signed between Fudan and Appalachian State. They agreed that one librarian from each institution would visit the other institution each year for at least three years. Among other provisions of the agreement the two libraries agreed to incorporate the visiting librarian into the host library suitable to the interests of the visiting librarian, as well as provide visits to other academic libraries and regional professional meetings that may coincide with the visit. The exchange between libraries at Fudan and Appalachian State is targeted to all areas of library services and materials including serials.

Appalachian State librarians next visited with librarians of Shaanxi Normal University. This visit resulted in promising expressions of interest in further discussions on establishing a formal exchange, as well as developing collaborative projects.

Discussions with Serials Librarians at Fudan and Shaanxi Normal Universities

The Appalachian State University librarians discovered that the librarians at both Fudan and Shaanxi Normal expressed strong interest in initiating cooperative and comparative research projects; therefore, a discussion meeting was arranged with serials librarians at each of the libraries. The object of the meetings was to begin what would hopefully be continued discussions in person and later through email. ASU librarians sought to learn firsthand about how these Chinese academic libraries function in general, as well as to suggest the potential for developing cooperative projects and studies, especially in the area of serials management.

The topics discussed included the importance of librarians playing a role in building bridges of communication to better understand one another's approach to serials librarianship. It was hoped that a continued dialogue would serve to improve mutual understanding of each other's best practices in technical and public service and the challenges facing each other's library profession and culture. Since the meetings during the visit in China were only meant to be introductory—a beginning of an ongoing dialogue—the discussions focused mostly on basic staffing, procedures for selection and management of serials and on how serials, especially foreign journals, fit into the library budget. The following are samples of findings from those introductory discussions. They are ongoing and intentionally presented in their incomplete form in order to share with Serials Review readers the process of gathering information that can immediately emerge when we reach out to librarians abroad.

Background on Fudan and Shaanxi University Libraries

Before presenting the results of the discussions with librarians at Fudan and Shaanxi Normal Universities, it is useful to first give an overview of the two institutions. Fudan University in Shanghai and Shaanxi Normal University in Xi'an contrast in a number of ways and are similar in others.

Fudan, as one of the most prestigious universities in China, is best known for its programs and research in humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, engineering and medical science. Fudan serves approximately 26,800 full-time students, 20,680 distance learners, and 2,900 foreign students. Fudan consists of twenty-nine colleges and schools. The University confers bachelor's degrees in seventy academic disciplines, master's degrees in 225 disciplines, and doctoral degrees in seventy-seven disciplines. Fudan also has twenty-five research stations that offer postdoctoral fellowships.²⁵

Shaanxi, on the other hand, serves 23,000 full-time students, 40,000 distance learners, and 350 foreign students. Shaanxi Normal contains sixteen colleges and two general education schools. Shaanxi Normal offers sixty-one undergraduate degree programs, 170 master programs, and sixty-seven doctoral programs. Shaanxi Normal, one of the top six teacher-training and education universities in China, offers teacher education programs for all levels of education from kindergarten to higher education. During the last three decades, Shaanxi Normal University has been developed into a comprehensive university with disciplines in education, history, psychology, economics, law, literature, management, agriculture, medicine, humanities, engineering and natural science.²⁶

• Discussion topic 1—the benefits of establishing an international exchange and collaboration with an academic library in the United States

Librarians at Fudan University remarked that one benefit of developing an international exchange and collaboration with Appalachian State Library is the possibility of obtaining valuable regional and other materials through the cooperative partner that might not otherwise be readily available.²⁷ The librarians at Fudan noted that they would be interested in obtaining books, periodicals and even grey matter from the US that they cannot find through their usual vendors. Even if the kinds of resources provided by the partner may be considered by some in China to be specialized and potentially low-circulating, making such regional materials from the US available will be appreciated by those researchers who will use the materials to contribute to China's knowledge of the US in the future.

Librarians at Shaanxi Normal commented that library work is an internationally-based business.²⁸ Yet, libraries in each country adopt different operational strategies and development models within the limits of its own human and financial capital, as well as cultural and educational policies. If we have opportunities to learn from and exchange with each other, they noted, all parties involved would benefit from this experience and be able to improve their systems. Some of the specific areas of the library that the Shaanxi Normal librarians felt could most benefit from an international exchange are collection development; new technologies for materials preservation; information systems development; automation and digitization; and staff training and development.

• Discussion topic 2—assisting one another in the area of periodicals

Librarians at Fudan were not sure yet where cooperation on serials would lead. They said they look forward to ongoing discussions over the coming years of the international exchange to discover which projects in serials can be developed. The librarians at Shaanxi see a need to focus cooperative projects that can most effectively fulfill the information needs of academic programs and research, especially for key programs and disciplines. The Shaanxi librarians also hope international discussions can help them better diversify their sources of electronic resources and expand their sources for serials.

• Discussion topic 3—serials staffing

At Fudan University, the main library has twenty-one staff members in charge of periodicals, while their medical science library has eleven who work with serials. Of these thirty-two people, four hold a master's degree, eight a bachelor's degree, and fourteen an associate's degree.

Shaanxi Normal University Library has no serials department. Serials subscriptions are handled by the materials acquisitions department (one person) which is in charge of check-in, recording, and binding. Cataloging of past issues is dealt with by the catalog department (one person). The borrowing and reading department handles access, patron inquiry, and service for all serials including current and past issues. There are seven staff in the new campus library and three in the old library in charge of patron access and inquiry.

• Discussion topic 4—serials selection

At Fudan University Library, librarians select periodicals by checking lists of Chinese journals, but they basically purchase all Chinese journal titles they can get. Committees consisting of professors, researchers, and librarians select foreign journals (eight members for the medical science library and twenty for the main library). An increasing number of electronic journals, they noted, are becoming available online through China Serials Net, and, consequently, the print counterparts are less used. No attempt is made to select or evaluate open access journals at Fudan.

At Shaanxi Normal, suggestions for procurement of new electronic journals are usually solicited from university faculty members who are specialists in the areas, then discussed among and approved by librarians. The list is forwarded to the university authority for final approval. Finally, the purchase is handled by the materials acquisition department.

The librarians at Shaanxi noted that they have tried to expand their serials selection to include more subject areas such as general education, social and behavior sciences, life sciences, environmental science, food science, computers, and technology, but priorities have been given to the information needs of key programs and disciplines.

• Discussion topic 5—foreign language journals and library budgets

At Fudan, the librarians remarked that most foreign language journals are used by graduate students. The librarians usually buy two copies of each journal, one for circulation and one for archiving. Librarians expressed concern for the high cost of subscription for foreign journals. Approximately 50 percent (about ten million Yuan) of the budget allocated for periodicals goes to foreign journals. This past year (2008) they had to discontinue their online subscription to Science to alleviate budget pressure.

The librarians at Shaanxi Normal also found that the pressure serials placed on their budget is a major challenge, especially as the price of foreign language journals continues to increase dramatically. The librarians noted that price increases worsen their situation since their budget allocation for materials has been kept the same over the years, and, in fact, has gone down some years. But with the increased efforts toward international education at Shaanxi Normal, the demand for foreign language materials continues to grow.

In contrast to the inflating cost of foreign journals, the Shaanxi Normal librarians found that the costs for Chinese language journals remained relatively stable. But it has become more difficult to purchase all the journals they want even though they do subscribe to a huge number of Chinese journals. Their budget problems are compounded because they have traditionally had to buy two copies of each journal for both their old and their new campuses.

Reflections on the Interviews

The introductory discussions with librarians from the two institutions in China immediately provided a number of useful starting points for further discussion through email and during annual exchange visits. Staffing issues, approaches to the selection of serials, and challenges associated with the high cost of foreign language journals are all provocative areas to pursue further. Libraries in China and the US share similar serials-related problems. It is also encouraging to discover that the librarians of both Fudan and Shaanxi Normal Universities are enthusiastic not only about developing personnel exchange agreements but also about working together to do comparative studies of our serials acquisitions and management.

Conclusion

Much has been written and discussed regarding the international expansion of scholarly communication regarding online journals, commercially available databases, open access, and improved search tools. What may be lacking in library literature of the West, however, is more discussion on building informal and formal communication between serials librarians across the globe to better coordinate serials exchange and integration.

While the larger players (database providers and publishers) continue their work in bringing resources to parts of the world that were previous under-served, librarians working directly with serials in the libraries on both sides of the globe can begin cooperative projects to bridge the gaps, learn best practices, exchange materials, resolve information resource issues of mutual concern, and advocate for access to one another's previously unavailable scholarly literature.

Acknowledgement

Editor's Note: This is Allan Scherlen's final column as co-editor. I would like to thank him for his astute and diverse contributions to "The Balance Point" for the past five

years. I wish him well in new endeavors and value the insight and ideas he has brought to the readers.

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