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300 Cups of Tea

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China trip by the numbers

- 3 weeks
- 10 hotels
- 7 cities
- 22 libraries
- 1 annual conference
- 3 train rides
- 1 bamboo raft trip
- 1 hydrofoil boat ride
- 5 presentations
- 1 interview by the local press
- lots of sightseeing
- over 300 cups of tea

China trip blog

<http://tinyurl.com/5ue3wvp>

During the 2010 Horner Exchange trip to China, I visited big libraries, small libraries, main libraries, branch libraries, children's libraries, new libraries, old libraries, libraries located in industrial complexes, libraries located in major urban public parks, libraries on islands, libraries on the mainland, under resourced libraries and well resourced libraries. Whew! What an experience!

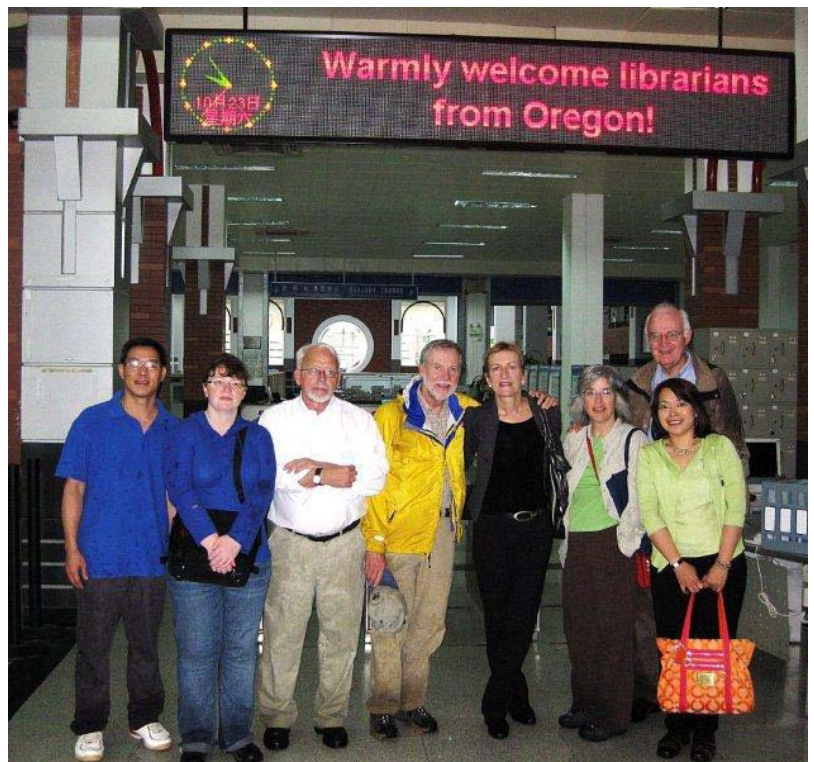
The Horner Exchange began in 1986 with librarians traveling back and forth every few years. The Oregon State Library is now signing the MOU that will continue the exchange for many years to come. The delegates that went on this trip to Fujian Province in southeast China were Amy Lee from Fort Vancouver Regional Library District, Brandon Barnett from Multnomah County Library and me, Nancy Hoover, from Marylhurst University. Also, for part of our trip we were joined by Deb Carver and Bob Felsing from the University of Oregon Libraries and Jim Scheppke from the Oregon State Library.

When I returned from China, I was often asked if the experience was what I expected. I actually did not know what to expect. The days of us going to China thinking we knew what is best may be over. If the libraries in China were behind us, they have caught up and surpassed us in many ways. They have benefited greatly from the Horner Exchange and we witnessed firsthand the things they had learned and implemented in their libraries. Some of the newer libraries were as nice, or nicer, than any libraries I have seen in the United States. We even visited a public library in the city of Xiamen that was designed by an American architect! And this library, they were proud to say, ranks #3 in the nation for numbers of visitors, while their population is only one third of that for the libraries ranked #1 and #2.

Are libraries the same the world over? Basically yes with some puzzling local variations.

Academic Libraries

China is big, really big. Everything they do is big. Each of the universities we visited had enrollments of 20,000 undergraduate students. And they struggle with the same issues we have: creating a culture of reading, improving lighting and atmosphere, improving acoustics, creating learning commons, being a destination for students and patrons, and need-



Welcome at Xiamen University Library.



ing more stack space. Sound familiar? The brand new library at the Xhangzhou campus of Xiamen University is an energy-efficient green building with built-in sun shading, a retractable curtain system covering the glass ceiling in the summer, and motion sensitive lights in the stacks. These are admirable improvements for a country with very low standards for pollution and air quality.

Academic librarianship pays more in China than public librarianship. If you need a job, China needs you! There is a shortage of MLS graduates in China and graduates can easily land a job. (One caveat though: you need to speak and read fluent Mandarin!) We visited two universities with library science programs, both in Fuzhou, the capital of the Fujian Province. Graduate school was free of charge, but students were required to work in the library while going to school, which makes sense and gives students real life experience.

Overall student employment in academic libraries is very restricted. In one library, students could only work one hour per day with a weekly maximum of 7 hours. In another library students were limited to 4 hours per day and 50 hours per month maximum.

Public Libraries

One of the most impressive things about the public library districts we visited is their outreach to their millions of constituents. We saw many hard working people, who were often volunteering time on their days off, using creative partnerships with local governments and industries to bring libraries to the people.



Xiamen University – Zhangzhou Campus Library.



Most people in China do not have cars. Traveling to a downtown library can take citizens as much as two hours each way on the bus. The Guangkuo community library “station” was created as a partnership with the Xiamen Public Library. It is a small library in a residential complex of 16,000 people, situated in a spare room of the local government / social service agency office. When the agency is open during work hours, patrons enter through the agency and a social service employee can help them check out a book. The “librarian” is a social service employee who runs the library on the side; staff takes turns volunteering to open the library room on weekends. This is quite an investment for the community workers and extra work for them to meet the information needs of their community. Xiamen Public Library supplies them with books, DVDs, and periodicals, but does not contribute money for staffing or capital expenses like furniture and computers; these are paid for with donations from the community. However, the government is now seeing the benefit of these stations and will be adding financial support to the public library’s budget next year.



Librarian’s visit from the U.S. make news in Dongshan.

Another station we visited, located in a township community center, offers free Internet access and is staffed by two full time employees that cover for each other if one is sick or on vacation. If one goes on maternity leave (six months off work, plus the new mom can come into work one hour late for a year), the town finds a substitute for them. This particular township has its own tax base and a cooperative agreement between the town and the public library where the town pays the salaries, but the public library maintains the budget.

One station was in a temporary building in an industrial complex for migrant workers and their families. This fills an important need because there is not much to do in the area and the workers are lonely and homesick.

We were the first international visitors to the brand new Tong’an Public Library, located in a park by the sea in a newly constructed Cultural and Sports Activity Center that was set



to open in December 2010. The process of hiring and examination of new employees was happening while we were there. Since the government pays the salaries, the government does the hiring. Libraries are assigned staff; they do not have a voice in the decision of who gets hired. This library had a creative arrangement with a nearby military base; the library provides information and collections to the military, and in exchange, the military helps them move things or provides other needed manpower in return.

There were many public libraries and children's libraries that had very few patrons in them. One reason is because everyone is working and the children are in day care or school. This is supposedly different on weekends, late afternoons, and in the summers when school is out. Libraries are partnering with day care centers to bring services to the children, but we did not see this firsthand. Also, Readers Service is a number one priority for all libraries.

All over the province, the library staff work hard and are very serious about their profession. I would say this matches our standards of customer service and outreach.

Differences

The biggest difference is charges for services. Patrons at the Xiamen Public Library must put down a deposit of 400 Yuen (\$60.00) before borrowing books, a minimum of 50 Yuen is good for checking out two books, and you cannot check out books that exceed the value of your deposit. The reasoning is that there are no collection agencies in China. We were vocal in explaining that this is an unnecessary barrier for patrons and that losing a few books is



Group picture in hard hats on site of the Fuzhou Children's Library.



the price of doing business. They said there are contingencies for poor people, but having to ask for assistance like this is not in the spirit of free access to information for all.

Public libraries that have implemented RFID also have self-check in. Yes, when patrons return their books, they check them back in themselves. No, they don't have to shelve them. Perhaps, since they have to put down a deposit to check the books out, they want to make sure they get checked back in. Book drops are located inside the building and are available 24/7 for all book returns.

Another charge that we saw in academic and public libraries was for accessing the Internet. One academic library actually removed the Internet from the computers in their lab because the computers were getting too much use! Students had to leave the library and go to another building where 1000 computers are maintained by IT and pay to access the Internet. Computers are all located in labs; they are not interspersed throughout libraries like they are in the United States. Also they can only access the databases and in-house resources like Photoshop with a two hour per day limit. This arrangement is easier for staff to maintain and control and not necessarily in the best interests of the students. Wireless, which is ubiquitous here, is rare in Fujian Province. When we asked why there was no wireless, the answer was, "If the government does not fund it, you cannot have it."

At one university we visited, only faculty have off campus access to the library databases because of licensing restrictions. Students have to be on campus to use them. Public library patrons must pay either a small fee for remote access to each database or 200 Yuen per year, per database for unlimited access. Libraries have to negotiate with vendors for remote access; it is not always an option or else it is very expensive. Some libraries are refusing to buy online resources if there is no remote access.



Conceptual drawing of the Fuzhou Children's Library.

Another big difference is the reporting structure; public libraries and the Provincial Library fall under the Department of Culture. Because of this, libraries are tasked with documenting and preserving local culture. The Provincial Library is the anchor for local libraries and they provide services ranging from preservation and digitization of damaged and bug infested ancient manuscripts to the videotaping of local cultural customs and festivals and streaming them on the web. Each local area is responsible for adding information to a national database: Fujian Province alone has over 200 dialects and villages. Since 2007, the entire country has made it a priority to recover and collocate documentation and history that was lost, destroyed, stolen or hidden during the Cultural Revolution.

The Future

What will the next round of Horner librarians find when they venture to China in 2013? They will certainly see all the completed libraries that were construction sites when we visited (with hard hats on) or the new buildings and expansions that are in the planning phases right now. Clearly the government is seeing the value of libraries in society and they are funding them. China wants and needs an educated population. The hard working Chinese librarians can take credit for this support because of the positive impact they are making in their communities. 🌿



Dongshan Public Library staff and guests.

