

CONFERENCE NEWS

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## COMPUTING CONFERENCE, CHICAGO, JUNE 1987

The 1987 International Conference on Chinese and Oriental Language Computing was held from June 15-17 in Chicago. The main topics were: input/output, speech recognition and processing, intelligent and knowledge-based systems, Chinese language understanding and processing, and character recognition.

## INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CHINESE INFORMATION PROCESSING

The International Conference on Chinese Information Processing, sponsored by the Chinese Information Processing Society of China, will be held in Beijing from 4-6 August, 1987. For further information, contact Miss Fan Bingrong, Secretary, Chinese Information Processing Society of China, 29 Xueyuan Nanlu, Haidian District, Beijing, China.

## ASAA CONFERENCE AND CALL FOR PAPERS

The 1988 ASAA conference will take place at ANU from 11-15 February, 1988. At the conference, EALRGA plans to hold its AGM and a forum to discuss current issues such as the effects of ILL charges on resource sharing and collection building and of the current financial situation on East Asian collections generally. Please inform the Secretary of EALRGA, Nikki White, if you intend to submit papers for this forum.

## IFLA's 53rd GENERAL CONFERENCE, SYDNEY, 1988

Barrie Mitcheson, Chairman of the 1988 IFLA Conference Committee, officially invited participants at the Tokyo IFLA (1986) conference to attend IFLA in Sydney in 1988. The invitation was issued at the closing ceremony held at the Nippon Seinenkan Hall and drew attention to the many attractions of Australia, both at a professional and a tourist level.

The conference, sponsored by the Chinese Language Computer Society and the Singapore Computer Society among others, was held in the Institute of Systems Science of the National University of Singapore on 20-23 August, 1986.

On the first day there were 'tutorials', i.e. background information on the history of the Chinese language and writing system, printing to modern typesetting, and a survey of the thrust of current research on voice input and output, optical character recognition (OCR), and artificial intelligence (AI) which were covered in greater detail over the next two days.

On Day 2, the conference was officially opened by Dr Tan, Minister for Education, Singapore. After the first few papers, the conference split into concurrent sessions; I concentrated on Chinese input and text handling on Day 2, and on Chinese computers and workstations and information processing on Day 3. A panel discussion on current trends in Chinese computing was followed by 2 general papers and the closing address.

Throughout the conference there was an exhibition in the foyer of Chinese word processors, both local and from overseas. Although the official language of the conference was English, a few papers were presented in Chinese and discussion was frequently in Chinese. IBM was heavily involved in the conference and is committed to developing Chinese-language computing.

Papers reflected research. The most useful were not those announcing yet another input method, but rather the practical experiences of users in testing systems and providing evaluation results. Of 300 or so systems on the market, some 20 to 30 are most popular. If we include those in the development stage, there are over 1,000 input methods. The main problem is that there is no obviously outstanding system on offer. There is no standard radical set and no standard keyboard.

There was a general concern that an inferior system might dominate the market through aggressive marketing and strong financial backing which would then become the standard, just as the QWERTY keyboard had edged out a better keyboard.

Some systems on display looked promising, and included touch screens or pull-down menus with selection and cursor control using a mouse: they are more user-friendly and easier for the non-computer professional to familiarise himself/herself with.

Voice input, OCR and AI are being researched. Artificial intelligence allows the system to anticipate the required characters from context, or to reduce the number of wrong codes which are rejected outright by estimating the most likely character being sought.

Most systems are developed with the native speaker in mind. Westerners are more likely to accept a romanisation input method, and this is sensible when bibliographic data is stored in romanised form along with the vernacular script. There are occasions when a person may know the pronunciation but not the extract strokes of a character, or when the person knows the meaning of the character but not the pronunciation. This indicates a need for both input methods to be available in the one system. The ideal system should provide both methods, but definitely not one mixing both approaches in a single code. While trained operators may build up speed using a character-structure method, they can never be really fast with phonetic input because of the constant need to watch the screen and select.

As the character set increases, the number of identical sounds also increases. Phonetic input becomes correspondingly slower with the need to distinguish the required character from a larger retrieval set. Similarly, to be unique, any character-structure coding is bound to be longer for a larger set of characters and require more training.

Libraries need a large character set and a more sophisticated input system. Finding a suitable system for a library is therefore more problematic than for some other applications.

Since libraries are not a lucrative market and tend to require tailor-made software, there is no stampede to develop library software.

Therefore, I have to report from this conference that, although progress is being made in Chinese automation, Chinese input is still a problem and I saw no system which I would recommend that libraries should rush out and buy.

S MacDougall  
The Australian National University Library

