

LOOKING AT FLOWERS ON HORSEBACK: A GLIMPSE OF THE
NATIONAL LIBRARY OF CHINA*

The information presented here is based on practical experience gained in the National Library of China during the period April to October 1985 when I had the privilege to be the first foreign librarian invited to the People's Republic of China on exchange.¹

The National Library of China (more commonly known in Chinese as the Beijing Tushuguan) was established at the end of the Qing dynasty in 1910 and officially opened in 1912. The high, red-walled compound of seven main buildings and several smaller buildings (ping fang) which currently constitutes the main complex is situated in inner Peking on the western perimeter of Bei Hai Park. At the time of writing, the Library is in a state of transition. The stately red doors were closed to the public at the beginning of May to facilitate the move to an imposing new building which has been under construction since 1983 in the northwestern suburbs of the city.

The present accommodation has long been inadequate to house China's national collection. Consequently, parts of the collection have been scattered throughout the city in remote repositories. The newspaper collection, for example, is housed in an old warehouse about a twenty-minute walk from the main compound, whereas traditional Chinese thread-bound books (guji xianzhuang shu) and restricted materials have their home in Bailinsi, a famous old temple in the north-east of the city. With the completion of the new building, the use of satellite repositories to house parts of the collection will no longer be necessary. Bailinsi will be returned to the Ministry of Culture, presumably to be restored and reopened as a Buddhist temple, and the collection will be transferred to the new building. The newspaper collection will also be transferred although the warehouse will be retained by the Library and will continue to house the binding workshop. The Library is scheduled to re-open on the occasion of its 75th anniversary following the National Day celebrations in October 1987. At that time the compound, which is currently the main complex, will be relegated to the status of a branch library housing the rare book

collection (shan ben) as well as bodies affiliated to the Library such as the China National Microfilming Centre for library resources (Zhonghua Quanguo tushuguan suowei fuzhi zhongxin), the publishing house - Bibliography and Documents Press (Shumu wenxian chubanshe) and the China Library Service Company (Zhongguo tushuguan fuwu gongsi).

The National Library comes under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture. Under the administration of a director, four deputy directors, and an assistant deputy director, the collection is managed, through a complex organisational structure comprising 7 administrative divisions and 11 operations departments, by a staff of approximately 1400 (in 1985). The administrative divisions at that time were Office of the Directors, Business Division, Personnel Division, Administration Division, Security Division, New Library Building Programming Office, and New Library Project Engineering Division. The operations departments included the Book Selection Committee, Chinese acquisitions and cataloguing department, Foreign acquisitions and cataloguing department, Reading and Lending department, 2nd Reading and Lending department, Periodicals, newspapers and other documents department, Automation development department, Rare books and special collections department, Reference and Research department, Library Science research department, and Documentation Reproduction department.

The responsibility system, first introduced into agriculture in the early 1980s, was instituted in the National Library in August 1984, and is implemented through a system of quotas, targets, workloads and time limits. Prior to implementation, standards stipulating the work content, quality requirements, staffing criteria and quotas had been established for all the major operations of the library including selection and acquisition, cataloguing and classification, filing and catalogue maintenance, processing of newspapers and serials, circulation and stack maintenance.

The work-flow is broken down into individual processes which are taken as the basic units for measurement and evaluation. The serials management system, for instance, is comprised of the following individual processes: (a) placing orders and subscriptions; (b) maintenance of serials receipt records; (c) cataloguing and classification; (d) binding preparation; (e) accessioning of bound volumes. The daily quota for staff involved in the maintenance of serial receipt records, for example, is 220 issues. The system is intended to ensure that standards of quality and quantity specified by the library will be maintained, and, by means of incentives in the form of bonus payments, it allows management to reward staff who fulfil their quotas and to penalise those who do not.

Staff work a six-day week, Monday to Saturday, unless rostered for reader services duties on Sunday when the library is open. Saturday is reserved for meetings of various types, political study, self-improvement and activities such as book-moves which can only be carried out when the library is closed. In addition to their normal duties, staff are responsible for cleaning their own offices. Many also attend classes run by the Spare-time Professional College for Staff Members which is affiliated to the library, or attend other educational institutions in Beijing.

As of the end of 1985, China's rich National Library collection comprised some 13 million volumes including ordinary monographs, serials, newspapers, Chinese traditional thread-bound books, rare books, stone rubbings, maps, manuscripts and letters, photos and pictures, rare revolutionary documents and microforms. Chinese books number in excess of 4 million volumes and constitute 31 per cent of the total collection. The Chinese serial collection of 33,000 titles in 1.28 million bound volumes constitutes 10 per cent of the total, and 245 Chinese newspapers in 40,000 bound volumes constitute 0.35 per cent of the total. The average annual intake over the last three years has been approximately 600,000 volumes.²

The library aims to acquire as comprehensively as possible all material published in China irrespective of language, including Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao publications as well as material written, published or edited by overseas Chinese. Foreign government publications and official publications of international organisations are also collected comprehensively, although other foreign publications are acquired more selectively depending on such considerations as their subject, scope, readership level, language or date of publication.

Methods of acquisition vary. Mainland publishers are required to deposit three copies of all their publications with the National Library, although occasionally publishers try to evade this responsibility, particularly in the case of expensive publications. Additional copies are ordered through Xinhua Shudian or directly from the publisher. Chinese rare books are occasionally acquired from private individuals or from bookshops such as the Zhongguo Jiu Shudian in Liulichang which specialises in such material. Staff from this bookshop travel around China in search of valuable material and the National library is usually given the first option to purchase. Mainland serials are acquired through subscription with the Post Office, through legal deposit, and through donation. Acquisition expeditions to other areas of China are conducted annually to collect missing issues to fill in the gaps in the collection. For this purpose, China

is divided up into six areas: southern, northern, eastern, north-west, south-west and the north-east. In 1984 the expedition was to the north-east and in 1985, to eastern China.

Taiwan and Hong Kong publications, both monographs and serials, although regarded by the library as 'domestic publications' are, of course, not available through legal deposit. These are acquired through Hong Kong agents or through exchange with overseas libraries. In a country which has a limited amount of foreign exchange for the purchase of foreign products, relationships with overseas libraries for the exchange of material are important for the acquisition of foreign publications. The National Library is active in this area and through its International Exchange Section currently maintains such relationships with approximately 2,000 overseas institutions. Until recently, orders for the purchase of foreign publications had to be channelled through the China Publications Import and Export Company (Zhongguo Tushu Jinchukou Gongsi). However, this regulation has been relaxed slightly in recent years with the result that the library has some foreign exchange to deal directly with overseas suppliers. Foreign publications are now also acquired through dealers such as Blackwells (UK and North America) and the Academic Book Center in the US. Relationships have also been established with publishers, such as Prentice-Hall and Pergamon, to enable supply directly from the publisher.

Ordinary monograph material is processed by the various sections of two parallel departments. One is responsible for Chinese language monographs and the other for monographs in all other languages with the exception of material in the languages of China's national minorities, which is the responsibility of the Rare Books and Special Collections Department. This department is also responsible for rare books (shan ben), traditional Chinese thread-bound books, maps and stone rubbings as well as the repair and preservation of material. Serials and newspapers, regardless of language, are processed by a single department, the Periodicals, Newspapers and Other Documents Department (Bookan wenxian bu). Social sciences and humanities serials, scientific and technical serials and newspapers are handled by three separate sections within this department.

The description of the bibliographical control process which follows applies specifically to Chinese language publications. Centralised cataloguing and classification of all ordinary monographs published on the mainland is done from sample copies received from publishers. The resulting catalogue copy in the form of 3" x 5" catalogue cards can be ordered by libraries and other interested bodies throughout the country through the services of the China Library Service Company, an independent

company loosely affiliated to the library and located within the library compound. Descriptive cataloguing is according to the rules laid down in the National Standard issued in 1983 and implemented in 1984 (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guojia biao zhun - Wenxian zhulu zongze, GB3792.1-83). The bibliographical description includes a brief summary of the contents of the book. Since subject cataloguing is a very recent introduction to Chinese librarianship, it is, to a large extent, still experimental. Although subject analysis is already in progress according to the Chinese Thesaurus (Hanyu zhuti cibiao) published in 1980, there is as yet no catalogue access via subject. Three classification numbers are assigned according to three different classification schemes. The major one, Zhongguo tushuguan tushu fenlei fa, published in 1981, is currently used by the National Library and increasingly by other libraries throughout China. The second classification scheme is a simplified version of the first and is used by libraries with smaller collections. The third is the Chinese Academy of Science system, Zhongguo kexueyuan tushuguan tushu fenlei fa, published in two volumes in 1979 and 1980 respectively. In anticipation of future automation, work sheets are prepared for entry into the automated system.

There is, at least at present, no centralised cataloguing for mainland serial publications. However, the Bibliographical Description for Serials, GB3792.3-85 has been formally adopted to serve as a National Standard. This standard is, to a great extent, identical with ISBD(s) and is already in use for the Chinese National Bibliography. The ISDS National Centre for China has been established within the National Library and preparations are being undertaken by ISDS-China to establish unified cataloguing. The first batches of Chinese serials data (magnetic tapes) have been submitted to the ISDS International Center.

Rare books, Chinese traditional thread-bound books and other material in the special collections are classified according to other classification schemes. The rare books are classified according to the traditional si bu classification system for Chinese books. As the name implies, material is organised into four categories - classics, history, philosophy and literature. The National Library presently uses its own classification scheme (Zhongwen putong xianzhuang shu fenlei biao), which was published in October 1964 for putong guji shu (standard old books), most of which are late Ming or Qing editions. This scheme classifies material according to fifteen classes including bibliography, classics, biography, religion and literature. There is so far no standardisation of bibliographical description of this type of material, although a Chinese equivalent to the International Standard Bibliographical Description (Antiquarian) (ISBD(A)) was in preparation during 1985.

The National Library's collection is divided and located around separate reading-rooms within the main compound, or further afield in the case of some categories of material. Catalogues are also divided and usually located in the vicinity of the particular collection. For one accustomed to Union catalogues of library collections, this can be disconcerting. The arrangement and type of catalogue also vary depending on the nature and language of the material. The main Chinese monograph collection, for example, is housed in the main complex in number 6 building. The collection is divided into social sciences and humanities material, and scientific and technical material. The catalogues are also divided in the same way, although amalgamation of the two catalogues was in progress and was expected to be completed by the middle of 1986. For both parts of the collection the public has access to three catalogues - classified, author and title catalogues. Both the latter are arranged according to the pinyin romanisation and sub-arranged according to the tone. There are also several specialised catalogues, such as the catalogue of primary and middle-school text-books.

The serials collection is similarly divided and is dispersed throughout various library buildings. Current social sciences and humanities serials are housed in number 4 building, current scientific and technical serials are in the main building, and the bound volumes are at Bailinsi. Catalogue access to the serials collection is via title catalogues and classified catalogues. Unlike the Chinese monograph title catalogues, the catalogue for Chinese serials is arranged by stroke order, as are the author and title catalogues for the thread-bound books at Bailinsi.

Access to the collections of the National Library is a very complex issue. The examples cited above represent just the tip of the iceberg. For some restricted or sensitive materials, such materials classified as neibu faxing (for internal distribution), Taiwan and Hong Kong publications or other works felt to be unsuitable for general consumption, there may not be a public access catalogue record. Depending on changes in the political climate, records may be withdrawn from the public catalogues at any time. However, such material can still be made available for research purposes to users with the right credentials. Whether material is on open access and available for loan also depends on considerations such as how many copies of a work the library has in its collection.

Environmental control of books poses a considerable problem for the library. The collection contains much old, rare or otherwise valuable material which is of cultural and historical significance. Rare material such as the Lei feng ta jing and the Wenjin'ge si ku quan shu, both of which have a fascinating history, need to be well protected from the ravages of

Beijing's capricious climate. The Lei feng ta jing is a small scroll of Buddhist scripture which was hidden in a brick in the Lei Feng pagoda on the shores of West Lake in Hangzhou during the Northern Song dynasty. Local residents used to steal the bricks from the tower and keep them in their home in the belief that the bricks were sacred and would ward off evil spirits. Eventually, so many bricks had been removed from the tower that it collapsed and the scroll was discovered. The Wenjin'ge si ku quan shu, after which the street in which the library is located (Wenjin jie) was named, is the copy of the Si ku quan shu (Four treasures library) which was originally housed at Wenjin'ge in Chengde, an 18th century summer resort for the emperors in the mountains to the north-east of Beijing. The Si ku quan shu was compiled by Ji Yun at the behest of the Emperor Qian Long during the period 1773 to 1782. It comprises material from the imperial collections as well as a wide variety of materials selected throughout the empire. This huge collection of thousands of volumes, together with the bookcases it was shelved in, was brought from Chengde to Beijing by camel train during the period of foreign intervention at the time of the Boxer Rebellion, to protect it from pillage or destruction.

Fortunately, the traditional methods used in China for the care of rare books are particularly good, and those in the National Library are well protected. They are kept in wooden cabinets and camphor-wood boxes in cool, dark basement stores. Beijing's climate is one of extremes, and for about a month during the worst heat and humidity of the summer, use of rare books is banned. This precaution helps to reduce the risk of damage. Other material is more at risk, particularly from dust. Anybody who has been in Beijing during the spring when the 'yellow wind' is blowing in from the deserts of central Asia, covering everything with a fine film of dust, will realize what a problem this poses for the library. Doors and windows in the present library complex do not fit firmly and are not dust-proof.

I have heard many researchers, both Chinese and non-Chinese, both in Australia and in China complain, often quite bitterly, about access to material in the National Library of China. However, while I am aware of the myriad frustrations and irritations which can accompany a library search in China, such criticisms have to be considered in the context of China's recent history and the adverse effect this has had on institutions such as libraries. Libraries in China are confronted with enormous problems. Access to information in China is a privilege rather than a right and, whether it be in a library or a bookshop or anywhere else, is without doubt more difficult than in a Western democracy. Problems such as the acute shortage of space and the resulting dispersal of collections in remote locations are shared by

libraries throughout the world. In addition, however, the National Library of China must respond to other challenges - the pressures of a large population, limited resources and inadequate communications. Moreover, many of the staff have not only received little or no formal education in librarianship, but also had their general education severely disrupted by the Cultural Revolution. These are all problems to be overcome during the process of modernisation.

Much has already been achieved in the ten years since the Cultural Revolution and, although problems remain, these are currently being addressed. One of the most severe problems for the Library has been the acute shortage of space. This problem will be resolved in 1987 when the new building is completed, providing storage accommodation for 20 million volumes and seating accommodation for 3500 users in 36 reading-rooms, most of which will have open-access shelving. Many facilities that librarians in the developed world take for granted are lacking in the present complex. There are no lifts, for instance, with the result that books have to be tied up in bundles and physically carried between floors. The new building will incorporate such modern facilities as well as sophisticated communications equipment to support the national bibliographic data base.

In recent years the National Library has directed a considerable amount of effort into standardisation of cataloguing rules and bibliographical work with the compilation of several major bibliographies such as Zhongwen tushu yinshua kapian lei ji lianhe mulu (Union Catalogue of printed catalogue cards for books in Chinese) (cumulative), and Quanguo Zhongwen qikan lianhe mulu (National Union Catalogue of Chinese periodicals) published in 1979 and 1981 respectively. Other important bibliographies currently in preparation include Quanguo shanben zongmu (General catalogue of national rare books) which is due for completion shortly, and Minguo shiqi tushu zongmu (General catalogue of books published during the period of the Chinese Republic). In addition, the Chinese National Bibliography which will comprise a monthly bulletin and an annual cumulation with author, title and subject indexes is scheduled to begin publication in 1987. Publications of the National Library of China are published by the Shumu Wenxian Chubanshe (Bibliography and Documents Press) which is affiliated to the library and currently located in the main library compound.

The National Library is also playing an active role in promoting education for librarianship not only in relation to its own staff but also to present and prospective library staff throughout the country. The Spare-time Professional College for Staff Members, which was established in 1982,

provides a four-year course of formal training in librarianship for library staff who have had some high-school education. A one-year course is also offered for university graduates whose tertiary background is in a subject other than librarianship. The majority of those enrolled in these courses are members of the National Library's own staff. More recently the library has been responsible for the introduction of a three-year course in librarianship for the Central University of Broadcasting and Television. The course has attracted approximately twenty thousand registered students from all over China. From time to time the library also organises seminars and conferences on specific aspects of librarianship for librarians throughout the country. The visit of the director of the British Library's Preservation Service in the middle of 1985, as a consultant to advise the National Library of China on the preservation and conservation of library collections, provided the occasion for a five-day national seminar attended by approximately forty librarians from various parts of China.

There is an increasing awareness in China of the extreme urgency in regard to the preservation and conservation of its national cultural heritage, and the National Library is currently giving prominence to this issue. Accordingly, the library has established a Book Protection Research Office, and the new building will incorporate a conservation and preservation laboratory. The China National Microfilming Centre for Library Resources (Zhonghua quanguo tushuguan wenxian suowei zhongxin) is an independent but associated body which has also been established in recent years and is currently accommodated in the library compound. Microfilming priority in the provision of substitutes is being given to rare books in order to restrict the amount of usage, and to old newspapers severely damaged by paper embrittlement in order to record the intellectual content. Hundreds of millions of pages need to be copied, but in spite of the fact that several cameras are currently dedicated continuously to this task, completion is not anticipated before the end of the century.

The issues discussed briefly here are just a few of those currently being addressed by the National Library. Nevertheless, they are regarded as among the most important. The recent achievements are impressive, and bearing in mind some of the difficulties, they inspire admiration and respect. The National Library of China also edits and publishes material on library science and provides reference and inter-library loan services for the library community in China as well as selective dissemination of information for national scientific institutions and individuals. A documentation centre for the study of Dunhuang and Turfan has also recently been established. It should be remembered too, that in addition to

performing these and other normal functions of a national library, this library provides other services not usual in the West. For instance, it has twelve thousand registered borrowers, and lends books to individuals. As its name in Chinese implies, residents of Beijing regard it very much as their library, and there are queues every day for seats in the reading rooms.

In summary, the developments are significant and augur well for the future. Researchers, both Chinese and non-Chinese, should be able to look forward to vastly improved library services not only from the National Library of China but from other libraries throughout the country. In the meantime, the frustrations referred to earlier are likely to continue, particularly during the National Library's transition to the new building. The frustrations and irritations can, however, perhaps be minimised by the adoption of certain precautionary measures. It is important to be well prepared before a visit to China and to establish contact officially with the National Library well in advance, notifying them of one's intention to use materials in the collection. In the majority of cases, institution to institution contact is likely to be more effective than a direct approach by the individual. It is also advisable to indicate one's area of interest and preferably, if possible, details of specific titles which are required so that the library has the opportunity to assemble the material if necessary.

Unfortunately, considerations such as the dearth of suitable facilities and equipment mean that most endeavours in China are time-consuming. For visitors to China whose time is usually at a premium, this can be frustrating. However, it is important to accept that this is so and allow ample time to achieve one's aims. Prospective users of China's library collections should also be aware that they are unlikely to be able to obtain photocopies of material which is considered to be rare or fragile or otherwise at risk, and should therefore be prepared either to read the material on the spot and take notes, or to make arrangements for someone to handcopy the material. It should be noted, moreover, that in the National Library and presumably elsewhere, rare book rooms are likely to be closed during the humid heat of the summer to reduce the risk of damage to the material.

It should also be remembered that it is still the custom throughout the country to take a rest after lunch. Although in the case of the National Library the main reading-rooms are staffed during this period, it is nevertheless sensible to avoid arriving at the library when only a skeleton staff is on duty. During the very hot weather, for a brief period of two to three weeks, library staff work a six-hour day, finishing at 3.30pm. As mentioned earlier, the library is closed to the public on Saturdays, and

although it is open to the public on Sundays, only the main reading-rooms are staffed. Awareness of practical details such as these may help to ensure that disappointments are avoided and that use of the collections of the National Library of China is a valuable and rewarding experience.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the National Library of China and The Australian National University Library which made this exchange possible.

² The statistics in relation to the size of the collections are provided by Hu Sha, Deputy Director of the National Library of China in a paper entitled National Library of China in Present State and Prospect presented at the 52nd General Conference of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, Tokyo, in August 1986.

* 'Looking at flowers on horseback' is a translation of a 4-character phrase in Chinese, Zǒu mǎ guān huā 走马观花, which means to gain a superficial understanding through cursory observation. An earlier version of the article was published as 'The National Library of China - a view from within' in The Journal of Chinese Affairs and appears here by kind permission of the editors. It has been revised following a brief return visit to the National Library of China in February 1987.

