

TAIPEI'S NEW NATIONAL CENTRAL LIBRARY

Introduction and History

In the November 1988 Newsletter of the East Asian Library Resources Group of Australia, I described several sinological libraries where I have researched during my two periods of residence in Japan. In this issue, I would like to describe another library to which I am indebted for research material. This time my subject is the National Central Library in Taipei, which moved to new premises about two years ago.

The National Central Library (NCL) was first established in 1933 in Nanking, in a modest western-style building. When the Nationalist government of the Republic of China (ROC) withdrew to Chungking following the Japanese invasion of eastern China during the Pacific War, the NCL also moved to the western provincial capital. It was re-established in Nanking following the allied victory, but was soon on the move again to Taipei, where from 1955 it was housed in an attractive ferro-concrete traditional courtyard-style building on Nan-hai Road, next to the National Museum of History. It formed part of the cultural complex in a small park south of what was once the walled city.

It was this Chinese-style NCL which I knew and grew to love during my period of residence in Taipei in the early eighties. It had an atmosphere conducive to study and quiet contemplation, with its offices and reading rooms open to weathered colonnades and gardens and a statue of Confucius gazing benignly at readers entering the main reading room, but I think Confucius himself would have agreed that in this age of mass education and communications, it was no longer adequate to its task. It was always over-full of students -- in summer, very hot students -- and it was not at all suited to the developments in library automation which were already underway. Already in 1978, the ROC Ministry of Education had agreed to build a new NCL and the foundation stone was laid in October 1982 at the new site on Chung-shan South Road, opposite the main entrance to the large park and theatre complex containing the memorial to Chiang Kai-shek, which was also under construction at the time. The new NCL building was completed late in 1985 and was opened on Teachers' Day (Confucius' birthday: 28th September) 1986.

I have visited the new NCL twice since its opening, in December 1986 and again in December 1988, when I happened to be in Taipei attending conferences. On both occasions, I had the good fortune to be shown around by a senior member of the NCL staff, Ms Ku Rui-lan, whom I first met when she headed the Periodicals Section

of the old library. In 1986, Ms Ku showed me all over the new library, including "behind the scenes" in the closed stacks and the administrative offices, while in 1988, she introduced me to a new branch library. Both times she provided me with useful reference material and statistics. I'm extremely grateful to Ms Ku for her information and time, and also to the Director of the NCL, Dr Wang Chen-ku, who has always been most helpful to me in my research work. This paper is a combination of statistical information from written reports by Dr Wang, comments and impressions from my interviews with Ms Ku and her assistants and my own observations. I am indebted to Dr Wang for reading the first draft of this paper and correcting certain factual errors which had crept into it.

The Architecture and Design of the New NCL

The new NCL is one of the first of a new generation of modern buildings dedicated to cultural purposes now being constructed in Taipei which reflect the new mood of the ROC in Taiwan, more settled, more confident and altogether more positive. The first impression, from the outside, is rather disappointing to readers familiar with the old Chinese-style NCL. The new site provides much larger space (approximately 40,000 square metres) in a large, contemporary seven-storey brick and glass building. It is not, however, a simple rectangular block, a high-rise turned on its side, as it were. The new building has been split horizontally and vertically into sections and planes, resulting in pleasing proportions and interesting contrasts of texture. The main entrance is reached by going up a few steps across a "bridge" from which a sunken courtyard and a series of terraced pools of water can be seen below. Beyond them is the separate basement-level entrance to the NCL's conference centre. Incidentally, there are special facilities for readers in wheelchairs who cannot manage the steps.

The outside of the library is not overtly Chinese, although the proportions do suggest East Asian aesthetics. Inside, the architect Ch'en Po-sen and interior designer Wang Ch'iu-hua have done an excellent job combining East and West to produce a mature example of what may be called "Chinese-contemporary" architecture. Their aim was to blend Chinese aesthetics with ergonomic design for the convenience and pleasure of readers and staff alike. The dominant impression is that of natural materials, especially wood, with undertones of the simple, dignified T'ang style of Chinese architecture which contributed so much to Japan. The library is divided into many sections, according to discipline or type of holdings, and each area is defined by pillars and sometimes room-dividers which look like traditional Chinese latticed windows (somewhat like Japanese shoji without the paper covering). The architectural proportions of these areas are based on the same East Asian aesthetics which

can still be seen in Japanese monumental architecture in Nara and Kyoto, contemporaneous with T'ang China. The furniture in the open areas is also of wood, or faced with scratch- and stain-resistant wood-grain surfaces, and seats are upholstered in neutral colours to enhance the aesthetic effect. Windows are large, blurring the distinction between inside and outside as in traditional East Asian architecture, while at the same time preserving the controlled atmosphere necessary for a library in a city where a warm, damp climate and modern industrial pollution present major hazards for books and computer equipment. Recessed lighting is efficient and unobtrusive.

Before leaving the subject of the aesthetics of the new NCL, I should mention its art collection. When Ms Ku took me around in 1986, she made a point of showing me the paintings, mostly modern examples of traditional Chinese brush painting and calligraphy, hung throughout the library. I was particularly impressed by the way they had been chosen to complement and enhance the architecture as well as to display their own merits to the best advantage. Afterwards I discovered that Ms Ku, herself an amateur artist, was responsible for selection and placing of the art works.

Holdings and Facilities of the NCL

The NCL is a copyright library. The Director, Dr Wang, sees it as playing an important role in guiding cultural, educational and information developments in Taiwan, including the task of compiling national union bibliographies. I see it as having a complementary role to the Academia Sinica in Nan-kang. While the library collections of the Academia Sinica cater to the specific needs of advanced scholars, the NCL caters to the needs of mass education and reference in a Newly Industrialised Economy of growing sophistication. The NCL is useful for advanced scholars too, but on my visits there, I have noted the readership appears to consist predominantly of college-age students and young adults.

The new library can accommodate up to 2200 readers, served by a staff of 332, of whom two thirds are trained specialist librarians. Readers can use a large general reading room and reference section or a number of smaller specialised reading rooms with open stacks of reference material. Retrieval of material from closed stacks has been speeded up by a mechanised book delivery system which looks like a mini-monorail. There is storage space for two and a half million volumes of printed materials. At the time the new library building was opened in 1986, Dr Wang reported that their target was to reach one million titles (books, periodicals and non-print materials) within three years. The holdings as of November 1988 were approximately 900,000 titles. Of the holdings in the form of books,

approximately 10% (about 150,000 volumes) are rare books, 20% are books in western languages and 5% are in Japanese or Korean.

Besides the library proper, the NCL contains a well designed conference area, comprising a lecture theatre with a seating capacity of 540, an international conference hall which seats 202 delegates and a 500 square metre exhibition area, as well as smaller classrooms and meeting rooms. The library and conference facility share a cafeteria which I sampled in 1986. My only criticism was that I wonder if it is big enough, considering that food, like printed matter, looms so large in Chinese culture!

Sinology and Rare Books

A major aim of the NCL is to serve as an international focus for Chinese Studies. In 1981, the NCL set up the Resource and Information Center for Chinese Studies to promote Chinese Studies and assist Chinese and foreign scholars. In 1987, the title of this organisation was changed to Center for Chinese Studies. The centre publishes scholarly papers, bibliographies and news of international developments in Chinese Studies, and holds conferences. Under ROC Ministry of Education sponsorship, the Center for Chinese Studies offers a programme to assist foreign sinologists wishing to research in the ROC.

In this context, more should be said about the NCL's rare book collection. In the old Nan-hai Road premises of the NCL, the rare books were housed in metal boxes which looked exactly like cabin trunks and recalled the collection's history of hurried flights and frequent relocations. In the new NCL, they are kept in larger cupboards of cypress wood to protect them against dust and insect damage. The cupboards are on casters and can be moved to a purpose-built strongroom in the upper basement in the event of emergency.

Affiliated Libraries: Computing and Information Services

The NCL has two branch libraries in Taipei. One is the former Taiwan Provincial Taipei Public Library on Hsin-sheng South Road, which was affiliated to the NCL in 1973 and which specialises in serving specific local needs.

The other branch library is very new. The Information and Computing Library (ICL) was set up as a separate branch library only in September 1988. It occupies half of one floor of the new Technology Building on Ho-p'ing East Road. Ms Ku Rui-lan is now Chief Librarian of this branch library and I visited her there in December 1988. I was shown around the new open stack library by one of the research officers, Ms Tseng Ts'ai-o. The popularity and usefulness of the new library were attested by the number of

times during our tour that readers came to her with inquiries. Most readers, she told me, are professionals or students of fields relating to computers.

The ICL thus serves the needs of the computer and information industry on Taiwan. It works in close liaison with the Institute of Information Industry housed in the same building, to avoid duplication of resources. At the time of its foundation, the ICL contained approximately 7000 volumes of Chinese and western language books and 469 dissertations, subscribed to 458 Chinese, Japanese and western language periodicals and had collected numerous specialist reports and lecture notes. Naturally, it has a comprehensive collection of software and microform holdings, including directories of information on hardware and software throughout the world. There is also a collection of relevant newspaper clippings in Chinese and English. The ICL is certainly the first place I would go if I planned to buy a computer or software in Taiwan. There is a direct link with the machine-readable NCL main catalogue and some international online services are available. Ms Tseng helped me to find a couple of my own articles listed in the NCL's machine-readable index of periodical articles published in the ROC! Open shelves and a copying service (within the limits of copyright) encourage appropriately easy access to information, but non-print material can only be used on the premises.

The new affiliate ICL reflects the strong emphasis of the NCL main library on the use and development of library automation to improve reader services, particularly in the area of bibliography and cataloguing. The NCL is at the centre of the ROC's interlibrary loan network. It also has an International Online Information Service, by means of which it can handle inquiries regarding the location of titles held in libraries overseas. The NCL has concluded an agreement to exchange bibliographic information with the OCLC (Online Computer Library Center, Inc.) network, based in the U.S.A. The NCL is also active in exchanges of books with 84 countries and of personnel with overseas institutions including, I am happy to say, the University Library in Cambridge where I did most of my doctoral research. Since 1980, the NCL has taken a leading role in Chinese library automation and standardisation of machine-readable Chinese bibliographic and indexing materials, developing the Chinese MARC system.

The Strengths of the NCL

During my 1988 visit, I asked Ms Ku Rui-lan to comment on the strengths of the new NCL. She emphasised improvements compared to the old premises. The new location is more central, being within walking distance of most ministry buildings and not far from several college campuses. There is now a great deal more space for books and readers and the special interest reading areas are separated and well defined. Specialists can arrange to use the library for a matter of months by booking one of the carrels in the relevant reference section. Audio-visual and network services are well developed and there is plenty of scope for further development. The conference facilities are well designed and put to plenty of use.

In the literature on the NCL which I receive, I noted an emphasis on three areas: (1) library automation, in current use and in process of research and development; (2) growing international awareness and co-operation; and (3) preservation and development of Chinese culture and services for Chinese Studies specialists at home and abroad. It is in this last area that the greatest strengths and attractions of the NCL lie, for me at least.

A final word about the fate of the old Chinese-style building which housed the NCL from 1955 to 1986. I am happy to say that it is being preserved and restored in the current upgrading of the cultural complex on Nan-hai Road and will become a part of the enlarged National Museum of History.

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NB: Please note the following two corrections to my previous article on Japanese sinological libraries, published in the EALRGA Newsletter no. 14, November 1988.

- (1) The Toyo Bunko's official English name is the Oriental Library.
- (2) The Seikado Bunko became independent of the National Diet Library in 1970.

I am grateful to Ms Yoko Hirose of the Toyo Bunko for these corrections.