

GLIMPSES OF THE LIBRARY SCENE IN BEIJING AND ULAANBAATAR (ULAN BATOR)

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This paper reports on the IFLA Conference in Beijing and a visit to the Republic of Mongolia.

The 62nd IFLA Conference, Beijing, 1996

This year's International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) conference in Beijing was held between 23rd and 31st August, which is late summer going on autumn in the northern hemisphere. The attractions of season and locale for a Melbournian librarian proved to be irresistible, and with Mongolia so close by, how could I fail to go there also?

Two other Monash colleagues (Janice Drooglever and Jung Sim Kim) and I (and many others from around Australia) attended the main sessions for ordinary delegates held between 26th and 30th August. Days prior to and after these dates were for IFLA committee meetings. Others attendees known to me included Beatrice Tam, Susan Prentice and Marie Sexton from Canberra, and Glenys Oxlee from Macquarie University.

The registration fee for the conference was US\$ 350. If one considers that the fee covered the cost of the conference kit, transport to various sites around and outside Beijing as well as more than a few banquets, it was not excessive.

The problems for me were choosing which among the concurrent sessions to attend, and deciding when I would break for a rest.

This was my first visit to China since I was a student at the Beijing Language Institute in 1974, and extensive changes were apparent. I paid a quick visit to the Institute and found the atmosphere to be almost sybaritic in comparison with those Spartan times.

The IFLA conference was held in the Beijing International Conference Centre in Beichen Road. This is in a new area in northern Beijing next to the Asian Games village. Many of the delegates seemed to be staying in one of two hotels close to the Centre. However we did not feel isolated there. For 2 Yuan¹ one could take a special bus to Qianmen in the downtown area.

1 One Australian dollar is about 6 Chinese Yuan.

Distances are something of a problem in touring Beijing, but the main impediment is the heavy traffic. In my student days I used to bicycle to all corners of the city. I recall the fun of impromptu bicycle races down Xueyuan Road where the only obstacles were a few farm carts and infrequent buses. Today, Beijing streets are no longer the sole domain of bicycles. Although there are many new overpasses, the traffic outlook looks bleak. Visiting dignitaries (not librarians) however, normally have a smooth arrival as the police will quickly block streets and stop traffic, allowing their motorcades to speed through from the airport.

If one can communicate in Chinese and read bus stop signs, travelling around Beijing by mass transport is the inexpensive way to go. One need only be armed with a map and a sense of direction (or a compass). Travelling by relatively expensive taxis is an option; but with the traffic congestion, it doesn't get you to the destination much quicker. If the regular buses are too crowded and slow, slightly pricier minibuses (a couple of Yuan rather than several Jiao) follow more nimbly the routes of their lumbering and lurching cousins. Furthermore, one can always count on getting a seat on these vehicles which will stop to pick up passengers at places other than bus stops.

Apart from the increasingly intense traffic, Beijing is becoming a city of nondescript high rise buildings. The area around the Beijing Language Institute used to be semi-rural. Now, it too is hemmed in by newer buildings right up to the campus walls. I thought of the charming descriptions of Beijing in John Blofeld's book *City of lingering splendour*² which recalls his years of cultural and spiritual quests in the prewar city. His was a totally different world. There must be many residents in their seventies and eighties who have witnessed massive changes here.

As time permitted, I visited places which were not open in those more restricted days of 1974, such as the Bai Yun Guan Taoist temple and the Yong He Gong Buddhist temple. Although I was happy to be able stroll around these grand sanctuaries of old China, it was painful to see them becoming just small islands in a grey sea of urban concrete. In the past they must have been among the more imposing buildings of the imperial city.

Before arriving in China I was regaled with disturbing stories (often related by overseas Chinese) of how one can be surrounded and robbed by con-men posing as black market money changers, or how one will have one's travel bag slashed and pillaged on the bus. While not doubting their veracity (anecdotal evidence suggests that violent crime is on the rise), I can say that I never felt myself to be in physical danger. The average Beijinger in the street is pleasant and helpful. The main danger in Beijing,

2 Blofeld, John. *City of lingering splendour : a frank account of old Peking's exotic pleasures*. London : Hutchinson. 1961.

in my opinion, is the merciless traffic. The dangers were exacerbated by my Australian brain which is wired for left hand drive. Even for a pedestrian, in right-hand-drive China such mental programming can be disastrous.

Official Reception

There was an open air repast on the Sunday evening preceded by speeches by the president of IFLA, Robert Wedgeworth, and Beijing city dignitaries. It was an opportunity to meet overseas colleagues, many of whom I knew only electronically. It was also a precursor of more "banquets" to come. As I cast my mind back to those leisurely meals, they seem to have become blurred into one generic memory of eating. Later, thinking of the street beggars I encountered, I put it all into a more sober context.

Sessions

The theme of the IFLA conference this year was "The challenge of change: libraries and economic development". In fact, the papers addressed a broad range of topics and were not confined to this theme. Many of the papers can be found on the Beijing conference page via the IFLA homepage on the Internet:

<http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/ifla/>

One of the more interesting sessions I attended was the Chinese-American Librarians' Group. The papers were all given in Chinese, and were an opportunity for Chinese American librarians to tell their Chinese colleagues about library developments in the USA. It was a cross-cultural exercise of sorts. One paper I found particularly interesting was by Liu Mengxiong, who related her experiences as a student of librarianship and as a librarian in the USA. She thought that a major educational difference was in class participation. Whereas in China a teacher would ask a question in order to elicit the one correct answer, in her American library course the tutor asked questions with the aim of initiating free ranging discussion of a issue and to get all students involved in the intellectual inquiry. She felt that the American students were comfortable with this approach because their education had always been in this style. She also made the point that for Chinese students to fully appreciate discussions in academic classes, they needed not only good English but also a knowledge of American history and culture, because so many allusions or passing references are made to the American heritage.

Another noteworthy paper was presented by Julie Sabaratnam of the Singapore National Computer Board. She spoke about how libraries will be transformed under Singapore's "Library 2000 Vision". Under this plan, all publicly-funded libraries in Singapore are to form a network of "borderless libraries" allowing access by users in libraries and at home and

in offices. A library board will be set up to implement the various "thrusts" of the Vision. She said that the leadership of Singapore places great importance on the use of information technology, and believes the future belongs to those who can use it productively.

Apart from attending regular conference sessions, one could register to attend various workshops. I attended a two day workshop organised by the Council on East Asian Libraries (CEAL) entitled "the Evolving Research Libraries and East Asian Studies", chaired by Kenneth Klein and Chen Weijiang. Many reports were given in Chinese and English on the experiences of individual libraries as well as advances in automation. Susan Prentice of ANU Library spoke about recent developments in library cooperation between East Asian collections in Australia and described the exciting prospect of a National Asian Information Centre in Canberra. Kuei Chiu and Yu-lan Chou spoke about finding news about China on the Internet.

Visits

Several library visits were arranged which consisted of tours of inspections and talks, culminating yet again in sumptuous dinners. A drawback of there being so many conference delegates was that about a dozen bus loads of librarians descended upon the National Library of China, thus precluding much informality and opportunity to ask questions. Colleagues who visited the National Library reported that automation there is in the initial stages of implementation. Fortunately, I chose to visit the China Ethnic Library and the Central Party School library which had much smaller attendances.

The China Ethnic Library (Zhongguo Minzu Tushuguan) is located on Chang An Boulevard near the city centre. It is part of the Palace of the Nationalities (Minzu Wenhua Gong), which in turn consists mainly of exhibition halls. When I was there the stalls in the main exhibition hall were occupied by nationalities' publishing companies displaying materials in Han Chinese and non-Han languages. Another hall featured a video display of the installation ceremony of the Chinese government's choice of the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama. The present and past Panchen Lamas are given much prominence in exhibitions at Buddhist temples and discussions of Tibetan culture. The Dalai Lama's central role is obscured.

The library itself seemed to be more of a storage area, and no users were in evidence. There was a small reading room with an adjacent card catalogue. We were allowed to walk quickly through the stacks but were given no opportunity to examine the materials, which according to the library's brochure are in several minority languages.

The other library I visited was that of the Central Party School (CPS) located near the Summer Palace in northwest Beijing. It is situated in a picturesque campus of buildings in the classical style with surrounding covered walkways and small artificial lakes. We were warmly received and given a methodical tour of the office and storage areas.

The Central Party School is at the apex of a nationwide structure of local and provincial party schools. It is the training institute for senior party and government cadres. It was founded in 1933 in the Jiangxi Soviet area.

The CPS Library has not only a very large collection of material related to the history of the Communist Party in China (including early Chinese translations of such works as the *Communist Manifesto*), but also contains a considerable amount of non-political material including old, and some rare historical, materials, as well as works of art.

Like most other libraries, access to their collections is via card catalogues although we also visited their computer section where an electronic catalogue is being developed. They also have a project for scanning the contents of their rare books and storing them on CD-ROM.

Participants in the workshop "Evolving Research Libraries and East Asian studies" also took part in visits to the China International Book Trading Corporation (CIBTC) and to their competitor, the China National Import and Export Publishing Corporation (CNIEPC). In viewing the latter's computerised trade catalogue, it was interesting to note that all book titles were listed in Wade-Giles romanisation as well as Chinese characters.

Excursions

There was a choice of several excursions outside Beijing for the Saturday after the conference week. I went to Huangyagu which is a newly opened (ie, rebuilt) section of the Great Wall. To get there the bus took an easterly route along the Beijing-Harbin Highway (which heads towards Shanhaiguan where the Wall meets the sea), later taking a northbound turnoff at Jixian. The drive there provided us with scenic views of rural China. I noted that quite a few farm houses now have solar power units which, I'm told, are for heating water.

As the delegates left and the IFLA committee packed up, the Beijing International Conference Centre was no lonely forsaken edifice. Balloons were in place and the new signage was being erected for - the International Archivists Conference!

The Republic of Mongolia



Getting to Beijing's Capitol Airport from downtown (costing 12 Yuan from the China Airlines office in Chang An Boulevard) is an unexpectedly smooth run at 6 am. It didn't look so smooth for those alighting from taxis outside the terminal. With taxis milling and parked several rows deep outside the airport terminal, passengers received their last experience of Beijing traffic as they dodged the vehicles and escaped to the dubious haven of the airport lounge. One must pay 90 Yuan airport tax for the privilege of experiencing the bedlam therein.

Ulaanbaatar (Ulan Bator) is about two hours' flying time from Beijing. I took one of the twice-weekly Mongolian Airlines flights. It takes about twenty minutes before the plane emerges from the smoggy haze surrounding Beijing and enters clearer conditions as it climbs over the mountain ranges to the north. Looking out the window I saw the rugged hills gradually give way to the Inner Mongolian Plateau and then the Gobi Desert, with its greyish brown terrain dissected by dry watercourses and dotted here and there by gleaming ponds and *anabranches*. The skies became deep blue with puffs of cloud. Eventually, the terrain changes to a gentle green, and one can see Ulaanbaatar in the foothills of a partly wooded mountain range. As I left the plane, the autumn air was crisp and mild. Other Australians have remarked, and I would concur, on how reminiscent the skies are of Australia.

Buyant Ukhaa is a small town airport in comparison with Beijing, and mine seemed to be the only flight being processed by customs.

Nevertheless, with a population of 680,000, the city itself is about twice as populous as Canberra.

There are no really old buildings in this city. There are Russian style public buildings (all with double glazed windows and double entrances for the severe winter), concrete apartment blocks and some buildings from the turn of the century such as monasteries, museums and the Bogd Khan's palace. On the city outskirts one sees more of the traditional *ger* (yurts or felt tents). There was something particularly agreeable about the cityscape that only dawns on me now as I write this account: Ulaanbaatar has a distinct lack of advertising billboards and not a single Macdonald's structure disfigures the skyline.

Mongolia is now a multi-party democracy and politics can be discussed quite openly. After this year's elections, a coalition government was formed under Prime Minister Enkhsaikhan on 29 July. The former ruling party, the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP), is now the main opposition party.

Yet signs of the past regime remain here and there. The statue of Marshall Choibalsan has survived a paint spattering and still stands outside the State University. However, Stalin now longer blocks the entrance to the National Library.

On the other hand, Mongolia is going through a rough patch economically. There is severe inflation. When I was there in early September, fuel and transport costs rose 35 percent and the Tugrug dropped to a new low of 560 against the US dollar. The reaction of one librarian there was to walk rather than take the bus. This is actually an option in Ulaanbaatar where distances are not so great. The deregulation leading to these price rises is opposed by the MPRP.

National Library

In Ulaanbaatar I first visited the National Library. The library is an imposing building fronted with heavy fluted columns. It is about five minutes' walk from the central Sukhbaatar Square. I was given a detailed introduction to the library by the Director, Dr Serjee, and by Mr Gansukh of the library's External Relations Section.

The National Library (formally the State Central Library) is 75 years old and was established with a collection inherited from the library of the Bogd Khan (the 8th reincarnation of the Jebtsundamba Khutuktu, the last religio-temporal ruler of Mongolia).

Like many other professionals, senior library staff have often had a Soviet education. There are many professionals who speak Russian and German.

However, English is now becoming more popular as the foreign language to study.

The National Library has 110 staff and is divided into the departments of Preservation/storage, Reader Services, Acquisition/exchange, Research and Teaching (advising other libraries and running courses) and Administration. The library has six repositories: Manuscripts and old Mongolian materials (including Mongolian theses), European languages, Tibetan materials, Asian languages, Newspapers and journals, Stocks of exchange publications, and Archives.

The library has 4 million books and an unspecified number of serials. Of these about one and a half million are in Tibetan (published in Tibet, China and Mongolia). These include many old manuscripts. Tibetan was the ecclesiastical language of Mongolia in the past. As well as numerous books in Mongolian, the library has items in many other languages.

Most of the items inherited from the Bogd Khan's library are unique or rare items and some of them have been included in overseas exhibitions. They include sutras (principally from the *Kanjur* and *Tanjur*) written using crushed shell or powdered precious stones and metals (gold, silver and copper) mixed with glue. Others are produced with embroidery. Sutras are wrapped in brocade and protected by wooden covers. The library also holds the wooden blocks used for printing sutras.³

Apart from religious sutras, there are medieval works on astrology and medicine, sheets with musical notations for the chanting of sutras, and old correspondence written on bark.

Other important holdings include publications from the early years of the Communist government, including the Party paper *Unen*.

Users locate material on the library's catalogue cards and request items from the closed stacks. There is no borrowing.

Like other libraries in Mongolia, they have been using the Soviet BBK (Bibliotekno-bibliograficheskaia klassifikatsiia) classification and subject system⁴. However due to storage problems, since 1983 new books have stored according to their size and format, and physically controlled by their acquisition number. The library obviously wants to resolve this situation and is looking at other control systems including Dewey. Ms Tsogt-Gerelin Yanjintseren is interested in receiving any manuals on other

3 For a recent scholarly account of traditional Mongolian books and other artistic endeavours, see: Berger, Patricia. *Mongolia : the legacy of Chinggis*. London : Thames & Hudson. 1995.

4 The BBK system has the following divisions:

1. Marxism-Leninism, 2. Natural Sciences, 3. Technology, 4. Agriculture, 5. Health/Medical, 6.-8 Social Sciences/Humanities, 9. Bibliographic Tools

classification systems, particularly Dewey. If you have anything suitable, please send it to her.

The library has plans for automation but these will depend on government funding. They do have some computer support at the moment, mainly for financial control and for printing new books reports. I sincerely hope the new government appreciates the tremendous cultural and historical value of the material held in the library. If ever a collection was deserving of computerised access and of having refurbished storage, it is here!

After a short hiatus, the library is again enforcing its role as a deposit collection of Mongolian publications. A difficulty in deposit enforcement was the sudden proliferation of publications after democratisation.

During my visit I gave a short talk on the library at Monash University to the library staff. This was the first visit by a librarian from Australia. Questions afterwards centred on cataloguing practices in Australia.

Library of the National University of Mongolia

The Vice Rector Professor Davaa told me that in the past there was a good supply of Russian materials acquired centrally from the old Soviet Union. In the new economic regime there are considerable difficulties. Much depends on the decisions of the new government on the control of inflation. The European Union has been helping the university with computer networking and with Internet connections. The library's computer software systems mainly utilise the Cyrillic alphabet for processing Mongolian, although they are also working in cooperation with the UN University (Macau Branch) to develop software for the traditional Mongolian vertical script. The University library has 16 staff and 300,000 books with some videos and audio tapes. Their materials are mainly in Russian and Mongolian.

The university has a strong relationship with the University of Hohhot in Chinese Inner Mongolia and many books are exchanged between them.

Metropolitan Central Library

The Metropolitan City Library is housed in a large building in central Ulaanbaatar built in 1980. The library has 500,000 books and five branch libraries. Like other libraries, they have been using the BBK system but have found it inadequate and have had to revise it. They are interested in Western classification systems. They were also keen to get information on automated library systems that can handle Cyrillic and other non-Roman scripts. Without any documentation at hand I tried my best to relate the details of our National CJK system. The director is keen to get any sort of

information on suitable automated library systems (Mr T. Mijiddorj, Metropolitan Central Library, Natsagdorj Street, Ulaanbaatar 28).

The director said that book acquisitions were quite cheap in the past but in recent years the price of printing and of paper have been rising. However, local books are still cheaper than foreign sourced publications which are particularly expensive for them.

Outside Ulaanbaatar

Driving for 10 or 15 minutes will get one out of the capital and amongst the hills and pastures of the countryside. Horses, sheep and yaks graze across the grassy expanses. Here and there white *ger* dot the landscape. Birds I cannot recognise wheel and dive over the fields. Wooded hilltops add a darker shade of green.

As he has responsibility for regional libraries, Dr Serjee took me on a visit to the provincial library at Zuunmod (the name means "a hundred trees") which is a town about 50 kilometres south of Ulaanbaatar. The library not only caters for the province's library needs but also houses a classroom for English classes given by US Peace Corps volunteers.

Driving on from Zuunmod we visited the site of the Manzshir Monastery about 60 kilometres south of Ulaanbaatar. This has been a protected area for some centuries. Previously this was because the surrounding area was sacred ground. Now it is a national park. Wild deer and other animals roam the area. Cheeky marmots spring and skip amongst the clumps of grass. Later, recumbent and at peace on a rocky peak overlooking the area, I reflected on what a perfect campers' destination this place (and indeed the whole country) is.

The Manzshir Monastery complex was destroyed in the anti-religious persecutions of the 1930s in which many lamas were defrocked or killed. Only the remains of one building remain. Next to it a religious museum has been built. The museum contains early photos showing that once this was a large and thriving centre of Buddhism.

Museums

Ulaanbaatar has several excellent museums. Some of these are among the oldest buildings in the capital, such as the former palace of the Bogd Khan. I was astounded at the value of the precious artefacts on display with little protection at the palace. It was not surprising to learn that some artefacts were taken by thieves who had broken in at night recently.

The city's art museum contains many works by the classical Mongolian artist Zanabazar (the first Jebtsundamba Khutuktu) and his disciples. At the art museum it seemed that I was the only visitor that afternoon and I

was given a tour by two staff with a detailed knowledge of the items on display. The strong Tibetan influence is evident in classical Mongolian art, but the scenes in paintings of daily life are unmistakably Mongolian. Elsewhere I have read that Zanabazar's style is actually Nepalese.

After six days of experiencing Mongolia's unique charm I headed for Buyant Ukhaa Airport to take the first lap of the homeward journey - Beijing.

Further Current Information

Not a great deal of information is available about Mongolia on international news services. There are some monographs on current conditions. Two interesting English language weekly newspapers published in Ulaanbaatar are worth mentioning:

The Mongol Messenger

P.O. Box 1514, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. USD 78 per annum.

The UB Post

20 Ikh Toiruu, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. USD 78 per annum.

A recent issue of the Mongol Messenger featured an article on a new English language Email Daily News. For further details contact Mr Ch. Ganbold on: ganbold@magicnet.mn

