

BEIJING DOES IFLA PROUD An Australian's view of IFLA

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I attended the IFLA Conference in Beijing in August to form a better idea of Chinese libraries and to gain greater awareness of issues affecting Asian librarianship. As it was a busy ten days with many meetings and contacts, my report here is limited to aspects relating to East Asian librarianship.

PRE-CONFERENCE ACTIVITIES

Australian Embassy, Beijing

I arrived before the IFLA conference and went to the Australian Embassy to discuss acquisitions of Australiana published in China, of which there is a growing number.

Weekend committee meetings

IFLA operates through committees and on the Saturday and Sunday, 24 to 25 August, I attended a number of committee meetings organised by the various interest groups, sections and divisions, some of them being:

National Libraries

At the meeting, which was chaired for the last time by Peter Scott of New Zealand, various projects and activities were discussed.

Peter Scott tabled a new publication, *Strategic management in eleven national libraries: summary of findings from the research study* / National Library of New Zealand Research Unit. [Wellington, 1996]. Although still a draft, it was very well produced. A copy is now in the collection of the National Library of Australia (NLA). It examines various management styles in these national libraries. The group was delighted that this research was completed. Discussion focused on the apparent discrepancy between the commitment to strategic management and the actual resources allocated to this activity within the various institutions. Peter said that this indicated to him that, although national libraries stated that they used a strategic management approach, it was not actually carried through in their planning. Publication of the results in a library journal such as *Alexandria* was urged.

The remainder of the meeting was spent discussing a document which Peter Lor (State Library, Pretoria) had produced for the Section called *Guidelines for legislation for national libraries*.

University Libraries and other General Research Libraries

This was chaired by John Willesme (University of South Africa, Pretoria); most attendees were from Northern Europe, with a few from the United Kingdom. They meet regularly within Europe at various conferences and activities and know one another well. The growing number of associations and groups in Europe was discussed and the role of their Section. There now appeared to be a number of competing groups, imposing pressure upon resources. It was felt that it would be more productive to concentrate on particular projects or publications, rather than having more conferences or meetings.

There was debate of the need to have more joint discussions with other groups within IFLA and to plan more common activities. The role of the IFLA Co-ordinating Board in encouraging this was seen as important.

Alex Byrne (Northern Territory University) suggested regional meetings on particular themes, such as performance measures. The Section has recently produced *Measuring quality: international guidelines for performance measurement in academic libraries* (IFLA publication, no. 76, 1996), which they hope to use as a basis for future workshops, possibly in co-ordination with other IFLA groups.

Asia and Oceania Standing Committee

Amelia McKenzie, National Library of Australia Regional Officer, Asia, was secretary and Dr A. P. Gakhar (Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts, New Delhi) was chair.

A video was to be produced on libraries of the region. It should assist western libraries in gaining an appreciation of the Asia-Pacific region which covers about half the world.

The Core Program, Advancement of Librarianship in the Third World (ALP) group, proposed a regional seminar in New Delhi in late March 1997. It would be on the topic "Networking of libraries in Asia and Oceania". It would be by invitation and limited to 25 persons.

Internet Discussion Group

I found this to be a most interesting meeting. The group was set up at the 1996 meeting in Istanbul and has set itself three tasks:

- Preparation of an Internet kit to assist those with little background knowledge to use public domain software to set up an Internet connection
- Case studies of Internet use would be prepared to aid others
- Directory of Internet experts would be prepared.

Monica Ertel (ertel@apple.com), the acting chair of the meeting called for expressions of interest in any of these projects.

I was in the discussion group with Mark Perkins, Librarian, Rural Resources Management Group, Overseas Development Group, London (library@odi.org.uk) who has been a contact of Craig Boaden's in Sydney.

A major issue was the need to provide information in both a lower level textual form as well as graphical. The expansion of the Internet into countries with limited band-width and the problem of ever-expanding heights of technology, with the implication that many countries and libraries would only be able to access simpler, text documents. Examples came up of the adoption of higher level technology within countries leading to loss of access to existing systems. Standardization of icons was also an issue. It was suggested that a possible topic for Copenhagen could be the design of web sites to accommodate various needs.

Third World Caucus

The question of how smaller and non-English speaking countries could participate in IFLA was discussed. A number of smaller countries could not afford the IFLA fee or had no single library association which could seek representation. It is a complex issue for IFLA as it seeks to balance the membership of its various boards and groupings between people with expertise, funding support and English language competence and those who might represent other groups. It is clearly a highly political area, very reminiscent of the United Nations.

THE CONFERENCE

Monday 26 August

The conference was opened late afternoon, attended by China State Council Premier, Li Peng. A presentation, "The challenge of change: libraries and economic development" by Fei Xiaotong (Vice-Chair, Standing Committee of the National People's Congress), followed. The departure of Premier Li with his large party caused a rustle.

We then attended an outdoor reception on a lovely summer afternoon. Luckily, the temperatures had dropped from the mid-30s of the previous week to a lovely balmy warmth. I meet Beatrice Tam from NLA who is living in Beijing with her family for a few months.

Tuesday 27 August

I attended several panel sessions, including one entitled: "How are national libraries using information technology to forward their overall strategy?"

This was a panel session chaired by Peter Scott (New Zealand) with five speakers. Ms Sun Beixin (National Library of China) spoke on their progress towards the 21st century. Important tasks for them would be the production of China MARC records; improving information sources in China; setting up gateways to information and staff development in information technology. They have a plan for the production of MARC records from 1911 imprints onwards and for their ancient books. They are also preparing authority files for names and subjects. Full text databases are proposed for doctoral dissertations and ancient books.

Mr Masaki Chiyo (National Diet Library) spoke of the Kansai-kan project which was to set up a second site for the Diet Library in the Kansai region. The winning design for the new building, with five floors below ground and two above, was shown. The objectives of the project were greater storage facilities than were possible in Tokyo; enhanced preservation by having a separate facility away from a major metropolis; library co-operation would be enhanced through various projects and training will be provided in the latest techniques. An Asian Resources Centre was planned to acquire materials in the region. Construction would take six years; if there were no delays it would open in the year 2002.

Mr Ngian Lek Choh (National Library Board, Singapore) spoke about the impact of their Library 2000 project. A National Reference and Information Service would be set up and they proposed doubling their reference collection. A single reference hotline for Singapore was planned.

As Mrs Carmen Temata (Cook Islands National Library) unfortunately could not be present, Peter Scott read her paper which revealed the fundamental lack of infrastructure in the Cook Islands as the largest problem in development.

Warren Horton (Director-General, National Library of Australia) spoke on the National Document and Information Service, now called World 1. This paper created much interest, outlining for the international audience the development of a completely new bibliographical utility which would provide catalogue support, bibliographic information and copies of documents within Australia, New Zealand and the region.

Acquisitions and Collection Development Session

At this session, based on the theme of "The changing economics of acquisitions" some interesting papers were given. The most notable was by Min-Min Chang, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology on "Electronic information versus print information: a case study". Very high standards of performance in supplying copies of articles have been set, resorting even to sending staff to other libraries to make copies, if needed. Problems with electronic information include a delay in the provision of the digital form compared to hard copy, time delays of up to four weeks being quoted. Regardless, Ms Chang said that the saving in time in handling hard copies (check-in, claiming, binding, shelving, etc) offset the costs of obtaining electronic copies and freed the staff from much routine work.

Ann Shumelda Okerson (Yale University Library) gave a presentation on "Economic issues for building digital libraries : an overview". Overall, the transition was neither cheap nor easy. New models for charging and costing were needed. Current assessments were premature as the total picture was not yet known. She gave a strong affirmation that the institution must bear these costs, not pass them on to users. These costs must be part of the publicly-based educational institutions. Libraries should position themselves for a long-term future in the provision of information. US libraries had been successful in forming consortia to acquire electronic materials within networks and to deal with suppliers.

Staff training and the need to acquire new skills and an ability to deal with technology was a problem. There were excellent opportunities outside libraries for those with skills, so retaining staff was a problem. There were computer infrastructure problems with bandwidth, and so on, even in the United States. Although many users had computers at home and in their office they were still coming into the library to use the IT equipment as they often did not have the advanced technology required for more complex interfaces. More reader education was needed here. Electronic alternatives were not markedly slowing the increase of new print titles in learned areas.

Since licencing presented difficulties, the Council of Research Libraries had funded Yale University to prepare model licences. Generally, the speaker had found that costs for electronic alternatives were more than 30 percent higher than the print equivalent. In the licensing agreements which librarians and publishers were drawing up, the role of libraries in preserving materials and providing wider access should be reflected in the costing structure.

Wednesday 28 August

I was happy to attend an all-day session organised by Mr He Yang, who will be well-known to Australians from the time he spent in Canberra and acting as interpreter to library delegations.

The theme was "The evolving research libraries and East Asian studies". I was delighted to see a printed copy of available papers was distributed and I have passed this onto the NLA collection.

The day was sponsored by the Council on East Asian Libraries (US) and a number of well known identities such as Ken Klein (University of California San Diego) and Maureen Donovan were present. I will not attempt to summarise all 21 papers and presentations. Themes included publishing, electronic developments and co-operation. It was an excellent day that enabled Chinese librarians and their colleagues from other East Asian countries and the west to meet.

Friday 30 August

I visited the National Library of China in the company of John McGregor of the Australian Embassy. I also met Mrs Yang Ren-juan, Deputy Director, Acquisition Department. We saw the electronic reading room and viewed the installed server, funded by the Australia China Council. Susan Prentice and Rob Hurle (both from the Australian National University) were involved in setting this up over the past year. Mr Ben Gu, who spent six months at NLA, helped demonstrate the system. We then visited the International Book Fair where Australia had a stand.

IFLA closing session

Sally McCallum said that the Professional Board has identified a need to concentrate on the development of digitalisation and on access to information and copyright issues.

Tony Evans reported on CAIFE (Committee on Access to Information and Freedom of Expression) which had been meeting in closed sessions during IFLA due to the contentious issues it raises.

Leo Voogt, Secretary-General of IFLA, praised the organisation of the Beijing IFLA and commented that it is the largest IFLA ever held anywhere.

Liu Zhongde, Minister of Culture and Executive Chairman of the IFLA General Conference China Organising Committee also spoke about the good organisation of the conference.

Robert Wedgeworth (US) gave a special conference organisation award to Mr Du Ke, for his work on the China Organising Committee. This was greeted with hearty applause.

The flag was passed to Copenhagen August 31 to September 5, 1997 and then to Amsterdam in 1998, Bangkok in 1999 and then Jerusalem in 2000!! The session ended with a Guest Lecture by the author Alain Peyrefitte.

Hospitality

I have not mentioned the very warm hospitality I received from China International Book Trading Company, from various people who have come to Canberra from China and from the IFLA organisers. A memorable highlight was the official conference dinner in the huge banquetting room of the Great Hall of the People. A truly amazing show with almost 2 000 people (including attendees and the large staff helping run IFLA) sat down at vast series of tables.

It was a truly memorable conference. I feel that Australian librarians have made a niche in China through many different contacts and contexts and I trust that this will continue on for many years.

