

1. b) REMINISCENCES ON THE EVE OF THE SPRING FESTIVAL

Su Shan

As I commit these thoughts to writing, it is almost 4 months since I left the National Library of China but the memories of my experiences as the first foreign Librarian to be invited to the People's Republic of China on exchange continue to haunt my mind.

It was Spring when I arrived in Peking. The 'yellow wind' was blowing in from the deserts of central Asia filling everything with a fine layer of dust so I was very grateful for the red nylon headscarf which one of my colleagues in the International Exchange Section gave me and I took to wearing it veil fashion over my head and face to protect my eyes from the pervasive dust. One of my earliest recollections, and also one of the earliest additions to my vocabulary is the swirls of willow seeds spiralling in the gusts of wind and floating to rest on the flagstone floor of the room on the ground floor of number 5 building where I started my 6-month programme of training and work experience.

Stone lions guard the gates of the main complex of the National Library of China which is a high red-walled compound of 7 major buildings and several smaller buildings (ping fang) situated in inner-city Peking on the western edge of what is reputed to be one of the most beautiful classical gardens in China, Bei Hai Park. The balcony of the first floor of number 6 building, which houses the main Chinese monograph collection, looks out over the Park and it is very pleasant, after consulting the catalogue or filing cards into it, to watch people boating on the lake or strolling along the paths where China's emperors and their consorts once strolled. In the winter, the lake is frozen and skating is very popular - but I left in the autumn before the cold weather set in.

The main library compound is a complete world in itself and in addition to the major buildings includes kitchens and a staff canteen which serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day, and dormitories for a few of the younger members of staff, garages to house the library's small fleet of cars, a clinic, communal bathrooms (rostered alternate days for men and women), greenhouses, the printery, and classrooms for the Spare-time Professional College for staff members.

The working day starts at 8am when members of staff, who have been rostered for cleaning duties, sweep out the offices and mop the floors with rag mops while others take the big metal thermos flasks to the boiler house to fill them with boiling water for the daily tea requirement. Mid-morning and mid-afternoon, staff have a break during which some play games such as volley-ball, badminton, and basket ball, while others prefer to play less physical but no less exciting board-games, such as Chinese chess or Fives, or card games, such as poker. Others like to sit and chat, eat guazi (melon seeds), and do their knitting or go for a walk. My own preference was for a more contemplative and relaxing activity so, under the patient tutelage of another colleague from the International Exchange Section, I started with Da Yan Gong (Imitate the Wild Goose) and later graduated to Tai Ji Quan. After lunch at mid-day, a hush descends on the

library compound and most members of staff put their feet up and have a rest for about an hour until work resumes at 1.30pm. During the oppressive heat of the summer when the air was heavy and still and the only movement was the dragonflies darting around the courtyards and the only sound the chirping of the cicadas, I too succumbed to the inevitable and slept for a while. Usually, however, I preferred to chat to my students, or other colleagues, or go for a walk to Bei Hai Park or simply read a book or write letters. The working day finishes at 5.30pm and after the Bei-jing wan bao has been delivered at around 5.00pm, staff start preparing to go home - sometimes earlier if it looks like rain.

To very many people in the National Library of China, I owe a great debt of gratitude. My hosts spared no effort to ensure that the time I spent in China should be as comfortable and successful as possible. The programme of training and work experience scheduled for me had been designed to give me maximum exposure to the treatment and handling of a wide variety of Chinese library materials.

It included approximately 3 months spent in the Chinese Monograph Acquisitions and Cataloguing Department; 7 weeks in the Periodicals and Official Documents Department and 2 weeks in the Rare Books Department. In addition to the official programme of training and experience I taught approximately 80 students - all members of staff of the National Library of China conversational English for 8 hours a week. This was followed by 10 days of visits to libraries and other cultural activities in Nanjing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Suzhou and Wuxi. I also had the opportunity during the week before I left China to combine business with pleasure and visit libraries in Chengdu, Chongqing and Wuhan sailing the Yangzi river between Chongqing and Wuhan and thus realizing a life-time ambition. The whole experience was one which I found totally absorbing and one which I shall always recall with considerable pleasure.

