

Su Chen and Jing Liu

Using libraries in China

Know before you go¹

As more scholars and students go to mainland China to do research or fieldwork, many of them, especially students, are surprised by and disappointed with, what they discover in the Chinese library system. It is drastically different from what they are familiar with in North America.

The authors of this article are both Chinese studies subject librarians working in North American universities. In the past few years, we have visited the National Library of China and dozens of academic and public libraries in Beijing, Shanghai, and Wuhan—the biggest and most populated cities in China.

Through our work, we have talked with many scholars, researchers, and students who have used libraries in China and whose research interests are mainly in the humanities and social sciences. We conducted informal user interviews with them over a one-year period.

The purpose of this article is to address their concerns and offer some practical advice to those who plan to use libraries in China.

Two common mistakes

We found that there are two common mistakes shared by those who were disappointed with their library research experience in China. First, before taking the trip, they did not do their preliminary research well: they did not find out which Chinese libraries had what materials and whether they were accessible to foreign visitors. Second, they expected the same level of professional services that they enjoyed at home and they could not, or would not, adjust and adapt. As they have acknowledged, if you do not

prepare well, it will be costly in terms of time and money, and it will cause you a lot of headache and frustration.

The current status of libraries in China

In the past ten years, Chinese libraries as a whole have made tremendous progress in some areas. There are many new and well-equipped library buildings in many cities, especially in big universities. Integrated library systems, such as INNOPAC, UNICORN, and ALEPH, have been adopted by some of the libraries that we have visited. Through retrospective conversion (RECON) projects, millions and millions of bibliographical records have been put online, thus making remote access to these records possible. Library infrastructure also uses broadband connections that enable fast and easy access.

In addition, a vast quantity of publications and archival materials have been digitized and access has been provided via the Web. All these developments have greatly improved the usability of Chinese libraries and made them more accessible to foreign users.

However, despite the fact that the National Library of China and some major public and academic libraries have migrated to online catalogs, their OPACs are incomplete, so users still have to use card catalogs for older records.

It is a common consensus that library services in China are somewhat backward com-

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pared to their counterparts in North America. It remains true for archives and bookstores, as well. The concept of subject librarian was only introduced in the late 1980s, and libraries started to have subject librarians in the late 1990s. Reference service is also a relatively new concept and practice.

The majority of Chinese librarians, though classified as librarians, have never had formal professional training. This has seriously reduced their ability to provide quality reference services. In some libraries, there are no subject specialists, so it is very difficult to get in-depth research help. Justifiably, many foreign users feel lost, confused, and very frustrated in Chinese libraries.

Some practical tips

Based on user feedback and our personal experience, we would like to offer some advice to those who plan to use libraries in China.

Things to know and do before you leave for China:

1. Some materials may exist in North America. Before planning your trip to China, it is best to consult your local East Asian librarians. A great amount of Chinese materials have been collected and preserved in some North America libraries, and some major East Asian libraries in North America offer travel grants to those who need to make the trip to use their rare collections.

2. Prepare and bring an official letter of introduction. In most cases, you need a temporary library card to enter and use libraries in China. In order to obtain the card, along with a photo ID, you will need an official letter of introduction from your institute or home library stating the purpose or the interest of your visit.

With the assistance of Chinese studies librarians, users can make sure that the materials they are hoping to find in China are not available in any North American libraries. Assistance is not limited to the OPAC or union catalog searching. We know what materials exist in which libraries or databases and what is available in the public domain. For

instance, you can access 800,000 electronic Chinese books and most academic journal articles over the Internet at reasonable cost. The Harvard-Yenching Library has digitized some Chinese classics and provides access through the Web. Usually, it is difficult for a novice user to retrieve such information from the Internet, but we have the training and experience to help you.

3. Find out which Chinese libraries have the materials you need. Most of the students can identify the specific or targeted libraries they plan to visit with help from their professors or librarians. In case you do not have a Chinese studies librarian at your institution to help with pre-trip research, you can send all your questions to AskEASL, the virtual reference desk for East Asian studies at askeasl.askvrd.org/index.asp. This service is specially designed for faculty and librarians who live or work in isolated locations. AskEASL often receives questions from users who are preparing for a research trip to China, and users are always pleasantly surprised with the service.

4. Confirm whether the materials are accessible to foreign visitors. Like many library collections, some materials in China are not available to foreigners, especially some governmental or politically sensitive materials. Most Chinese academic libraries have a restricted access policy towards external users. Some policies are quite vague and not posted publicly, therefore, it is necessary to clarify access possibilities before the visit.

5. Build up your local connections. *Guanxi*, or local connections, has become a mainstream term in Western languages. As with other things in China, a little *guanxi* is always helpful for your fieldwork or any research mission in China. The librarians in the East Asian libraries can help you get started. We would be happy to contact our counterparts in China and seek special assistance for you. From the survey we conducted, we concluded that a little bit of extra work in advance would save our users a lot of time later in libraries in China.

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Vision and principles

The goal put forth in ACRL's Strategic Plan is grand and audacious—ACRL is responsible and universally recognized for positioning academic and research librarians and libraries as indispensable in advancing learning and scholarship. I am excited by an envisioned future for ACRL members in which they are flexible, dynamic, and progressive leaders in their institutions, essential partners in learning and scholarship with faculty, and reflect the diversity of their communities. In this same future, ACRL can be essential to the professional networking, development, and success of academic librarians. I would use my presidency to move ACRL closer to this desired vision through my programs and priorities.

If elected president, I would be guided by two principles: ACRL must reflect its members and ACRL leaders must lead. ACRL programs and services are best when they meet the needs of members as they enter their profession, as they become seasoned professionals, and as they aspire to leadership. At the same time, ACRL leaders must creatively initiate progress for the association and boldly position ACRL to be a recognized voice in higher education. These two complementary principles would be at the core of my presidency and color my vision of a 21st-century ACRL. I would welcome your support to enable me to turn these principles of attention and action into practice. *~*

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While in China, you should:

1. Plan extra time for library usage.

As you have learned from this article so far, using libraries in China is neither quick nor easy. You need to spend a lot more time in libraries in China than in North America. Many libraries still have closed stacks, so you need to fill out a request form first, and then have a front desk clerk page the stack clerks who will retrieve materials for you. Some people are allowed into the stacks with the proper authorization. You may also have to leave in the middle of photocopying if the library closes for noon breaks.

2. Bring enough cash and change with you to the libraries. In addition to the photocopying charges that we are used to in North America, libraries in China often charge for all kinds of other services. The common fees include temporary library card, Internet access, database searching, printing, and the like. Depending on what materials you are photocopying, some charges are quite high in local currency. For example, Shanghai Library charges 2.5 Chinese Yuan (about 30 cents) per page for copying the pre-1949 materials. There are not many places that honor Interact payment options in China, nor are there many automatic banking machines. So while

in China, whether in the libraries or not, it is a good idea to bring enough cash for the day.

Summary

As one of the ancient civilizations of the world, China has a splendid history of books and libraries. Many libraries, including most of the ones that we visited, have excellent collections and good services that make them an essential part of the research process for Chinese studies scholars and students around the world. The practical tips we give in this article are not meant to be comprehensive or exhaustive. Chinese libraries are changing everyday, and they are changing for the better. We are pleasantly surprised ourselves every time we visit.

To all people who plan to use libraries in China, remember: know before you go and enjoy the adventure!

Notes

1. This paper is based on the 2004 program of Committee for Public Services, Council on East Asian Libraries, chaired by Sharon Domier. Visit www.library.umass.edu/subject/easian/CPS/. The authors wish to thank Sharon for the program idea and proofreading. *~*