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Recommended Citation
Sci-Tech News: Vol. 50 : Iss. 4 , Article 3.
Available at: http://jdc.jefferson.edu/scitechnews/vol50/iss4/3

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"We can learn what we did not know. We are not only good at destroying the old world, we are also good at building the new." Excerpt taken from Quotations from Chairman Mao Tsetung ("The Little Red Book")

Beijing was a fitting, albeit paradoxical, location for the 62nd International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) General Conference. Approximately 2,500 librarians and information professionals representing nearly 100 countries attended this conference, the largest ever for IFLA. The location was fitting because China has such a rich history associated with the printed word. They are widely recognized as having invented paper in 206 B.C. and printing in 960 A.D. It was paradoxical because, while librarians are known as champions of free access to information, China is not known for its openness to dissenting points of view. This was clearly illustrated to me a few days after I returned when I read the following:

CHINA SCREENS OUT "SPIRITUAL POLLUTION" ON THE NET. The Beijing government has begun blocking as many as 100 Internet sites that offer material the government deems unsuitable for its citizens -- including dissent views from Hong Kong and Taiwan, sites sponsored by U.S. major media organizations such as CNN and the Washington Post, and sexually explicit sites such as Playboy and Penthouse. An official described the blocked sites as suspected purveyors of "spiritual pollution." (Wall Street Journal. 5 Sep 96) (1)

Despite these seemingly contradictory points of view, the Chinese did roll out the red carpet for conference attendees and made us all feel very welcome in this most fascinating city. One of the most unforgettable memories of this trip has to be the evening when conference attendees were treated to a military escort as traffic was brought to a standstill throughout Beijing so that our caravan of 72 buses could get us to dinner at the Great Hall of the People on Tianamen Square. Illustrating the importance that the Chinese gave to this conference being held in their country, the Premier of China, Li Peng, personally opened the conference with the following words: "Libraries are the treasure chests of our knowledge and have played an irreplaceable role in promoting civilization. China is a country with an ancient civilization which is now engaging in modern cultural construction. I believe the conference will be of great significance to the development of librarianship and information science in China and to other countries throughout the world. I am confident the conference will promote further cultural exchange and friendly cooperation between the library and information profession in China and the profession in the rest of the world."

Much emphasis was placed on the role of libraries in the economic development of countries. Information technology is recognized as a critical part of stimulating strong economies, and libraries are seen as a very important part
of this process. To make this point, China has made a commitment to put a library in every town by the year 2010. Again, this is all a bit paradoxical, coming from a country that is not known for its liberal policies regarding access to information. But the Chinese recognize that libraries can play a vital role in pushing the development of a global economy, and China is determined to become a major force. For anyone who has visited this bustling city, they would have to agree.

I attended the IFLA conference for several reasons. I am part of the Information Technology Standing Committee, whose mission is to foster, develop, and promote information technologies relevant to modern library service. This includes policies and technologies for the creation, storage, retrieval and transfer of information for all types of libraries and information services. A fundamental aspect of this includes the development and application of a range of international standards. One specific project being developed in this standing committee is a standard for bibliographic icons which would be used in systems which employ graphical user interfaces. Another project is to work with several other IFLA groups to put together a beginner’s Internet kit for developing countries. Finally, this standing committee also held an all-day workshop on Internet basics, which was heavily attended by Chinese librarians.

I also attended the conference because I was appointed last year as the U.S. representative on an ad-hoc committee to look at the issues of access to information and freedom of expression (Committee on the Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (CAIFE)). The committee has been chartered with recommending a policy to IFLA regarding these important issues. There are thirty-five members of this committee representing almost as many countries, including China, Cuba, Russia, Chile, Sierra Leone, France, etc. We held several meetings, including an open forum to solicit feedback from IFLA membership on this sensitive topic. Given that we were holding the meeting in China, which is not known for embracing this type of philosophy, we were a little nervous about how this would work out, but we had over 100 people attend the meeting, and we received a lot of insightful input. We spent a great deal of time debating exactly what the committee should be focusing on, and we decided the following main points: IFLA has expertise in how people need, use and access information. Our expertise is NOT in political issues. Emphasis should be on access to information and freedom of expression as they relate to libraries and not other political areas. The committee should be concerned with the impact on libraries to carry out their responsibilities. The committee also agreed that we should work through the library associations in various countries. We must also respect the cultural background of other countries as well. We will be hashing all of this out via fax and the Internet over the next couple of months and will present our final report at the next IFLA meeting in Denmark next August.

I also organized and moderated an Internet Discussion Group meeting while in Beijing. The purpose of this group is to provide a forum for exchanging ideas and information about the introduction and support for the use of the Internet in libraries and by library users; to further access to the Internet around the world,
especially in developing countries; to find ways for librarians to be more active in the development of the Internet; and to develop ideas for programs and projects related to this topic. This informal discussion group was the brainchild of Ed Valauskas and Nancy John, who held the first meeting at the IFLA meeting in Istanbul in 1995. About 25 people attended the meeting last year. I was expecting about the same number, perhaps a few more, this year. I was a few minutes late for the meeting due to the fact that I couldn’t find the room. I was stunned to find that I could barely squeeze into the room and found more than 100 people perched on window sills, sitting on the floor and standing around the edges of the room. In order to make the two hour session productive for everyone, I broke the larger group into smaller discussion groups around topics of interest to attendees including:

The use of the Internet as a reference tool and user education (led by a U.S. librarian)

Design of web sites, with emphasis on web sites for developing countries (led by a U.K. librarian)

Public libraries and the Internet (led by a Flemish librarian)

Copyright and the Internet (led by a Canadian librarian)

K-12 libraries and the Internet (led by a U.S. librarian)

Libraries as Information Service Providers (led by a Russian librarian)

Librarians’ role in digital data (led by a Swedish librarian)

It was a diverse cross-section of topics and people, and it was very difficult to break up the groups towards the end of the two hours. People wanted to continue to share information. This is a topic of great interest to all librarians and the need to talk to one another is urgent.

I was also asked to make a presentation to the Women’s Issues Roundtable on my impressions about the U.N. Women’s Conference, which I attended in Beijing last year. This was a good opportunity for me to reflect on the issues brought forth last year and the progress to date, which has been fairly significant.

Finally, I also attended the conference to listen to lectures on a variety of topics mostly dealing with electronic technology and its impact on information flow. Some sessions included:

Copyright and Fair Use in the Electronic Information Age,

Library 2000: Its Impact on the National Library Board of Singapore,

Digital Libraries, Technologies and Organizational Impacts.

However, not every topic involved technology, and there were some rather heart wrenching sessions on the destruction of libraries in countries such as the former Yugoslavia and the international work being done to restore these collections.

This conference is always a wonderful combination of the new and the old, reminding me that libraries represent so much more than integrating new technologies and building digital libraries. This was aptly illustrated by the comments from Irina Sadova, Director of Aldan Public Library in Yakutia, Russia:

“...I am very happy to be here. I feel as if I am in an ocean of information sources and new contacts, but I am startled by the advancement of the library world because everyone talks so easily here about the Internet, while many

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libraries in my region do not even have
the tools to meet basic user needs!"
For more information about the
conference, see:
http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/IFLA/

1. Edupage, 3 September 1996.
Edupage, a summary of news about
information technology, is provided three
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Primary mode of transportation in China.

The author on her way to another meeting.