

Martha Kruy

The China Mission

Academic librarians embrace the People to People Ambassador Program

This article is dedicated to Marcia Grimes, reference librarian from Wheaton College, who passed away in Xian, China, while participating in the People to People Ambassador Program for academic librarians to China. Her determination to contribute to the mission was representative of all the Chinese and American delegates who contributed to the success of the mission.

In March 2006, People to People Ambassador Program sent 22 academic librarians to China with the purpose of exchanging concerns and ideas for the future of academic librarianship on an international basis, and, in the process, building a better relationship between Chinese and American academic institutions. People to People Ambassador Program was founded by former U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower to promote his philosophy that “ordinary citizens of different nations, if able to communicate directly, would solve their differences and find a way to live in peace . . . that while we are all very different, our values, goals, and day-to-day issues are very much the same.”

So it was with this basic mission to experience our profession under the influences of a foreign culture that we stood on the precipice of the unknown, in a communist country, unsure about our hosting institutions’ desire to interact with us.

Our delegation was led by Camila A. Alire and Polly Thistlethwaite and represented virtually every region of the United States, all sizes and many types of academic institutions and subjects of research, including a community college. Our group included a library director from Quebec, Canada, as

well as an electronic database vendor executive (who is also an academic librarian).

We arrived with many questions about the Chinese academic libraries, which included queries about their experiences with the (then) newly instituted presence of Google in their colleges and universities, their concerns about copyright law with respect to the Million Books Digitization project, and the role of librarians in their higher education institutions.

While these questions were universally applicable—we had compared our own experiences among the group informally during the 17-hour flight to China from Los Angeles—there was certain trepidation towards raising many of these concerns with professionals working under a communist government that had only recently be-

Editor’s note

This article originally ran in the September 2006 issue of *C&RL News*. Unfortunately, the name of the article’s author did not appear at that time, and the article was inadvertently attributed to two other authors. Martha Kruy, a member of the People to People Ambassador Program academic library delegation, is the author of this article. We are rerunning the article here in its entirety with the proper authorship attribution. The editors regret the error.

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People to People delegates to China, and their counterparts, at Northwest University.

gun to re-enter relationships with the “western world.”

History and culture

In order to understand the culture with which we were to interact, we needed a basic understanding of Chinese history and culture. Briefly, throughout China’s long history of dynastic rule, collections of information in scrolls, books, or the minds of the intellectuals (the Mandarins) were generally highly regarded by the emperors; however, each emperor demanded that the country follow his wisdom and understanding of the world. Therefore each new emperor would have the libraries burned or otherwise destroyed in order to make room for new collections of information that his intellectuals published. After the communist government replaced the feudal system, the intellectuals themselves were “reprogrammed” in what could be defined as labor camps during the Cultural Revolution because they were now considered the creators and sustenance of the cultural, social, and economic inequalities.

Throughout its history, China has maintained a social wall between itself and the western world, which it has often perceived as uncivilized and slow to develop culturally. All of this background information explained a good amount of the responses we were about to receive to our questions during each discussion with our Chinese counterparts.

In contrast to Spartan, somewhat dilapidated reading rooms and computer laboratories, our Chinese library hosts were far from the aloof bureaucrats one would think had created such a forbidding environment. The cultural underpinnings of

a strident desire to please and impress their guests in combination with a competitive spirit existed throughout each discussion, leaving the American delegation with subtle understandings of how our Chinese counterparts envisioned the future of their roles in the academic institutions as well as how Google and copyright law might fit into their definition of information literacy.

While many smaller American colleges and universities are just beginning to consider purchasing the equipment to digitize special collections, most of the institutions that we visited in China had already digitized at least a small portion of their regular collection. At the Library of Chinese Academy of Sciences, we were given two presentations on digitized collections, one of which was accessible via the Internet. Presenters had both an air of pride in their technological capabilities and curiosity as to how they measured up to “American standards” of academic excellence.

Common publishing issues

The academic issues caused by students’ misuse of Google and other open Internet sources were agreed upon by both the Chinese and American academic librarians. The fact that information literacy must include proper researching skills of electronic information appears to be a universal priority for the academic library staff. In fact many of the Chinese college and university libraries offered various forms of information literacy

sessions, including formal classes in proper researching skills.

Copyright laws were also in place for research authors whereby ownership of a particular work is granted for 50 years after the document was written or until the author died, whereupon the work transferred to public domain.

An American concern with publishers' ownership of an author's work does not exist in China because of agreements between authors and publishing companies that return ownership of a publication to the author after a period of years after original publication.

Yet another publishing issue that was shared by both countries was the "publish or perish" concern on the part of the academic library faculty. While the Chinese academic librarians would not necessarily lose their jobs if they did not publish research papers, they certainly would never receive job promotions or pay bonuses. Although this standard does not coincide completely with the experiences of many American academic librarians, it is also part of a culture that is experiencing dramatic changes on a regular basis.

During our discussion at the Renmin University, we learned that China has a dearth of experienced academic librarians and is in the process of educating undergraduate students in library and information sciences. This fact coincided with the American academic library concern with future waves of retiring librarians leaving the profession and academic library an uncertain future.

In fact the current role of the academic librarian was agreed upon by both the Chinese and American delegations to be in a constant state of transition in comparison to the traditional job definitions by either culture. Whereas the original role of librarian was to collect, organize, preserve and provide access to the information resources, today one is expected to also teach students and faculty how to access those resources, evaluate, and use the information discovered through the search process.

A satisfying mission

The vast collection of information—both inferred and stated—acquired by the academic librarians of the People to People Ambassador Program to China is too extensive to report word for word in the length of a single article. In fact, the details of each discussion and meeting between the Chinese and American librarians have been published in journal format for future reference (see www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlpubs/whitepapers/chinajournal.htm). The mission of this delegation to open channels of communication between academic librarians from the People's Republic of China and the United States was accomplished with great enthusiasm by both delegations. The opportunity for a true world wide web of information was created by the open discussion of academic library issues and ideas, thereby permanently transfiguring the path of Chinese librarianship (in accepting other perspectives on information) and informing American librarians of worldwide advancements in information technologies. //



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