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The CUNY-Shanghai Library Faculty Exchange Program: Participants Remember, Reflect, and Reshape

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This chapter recounts the outcomes and experiences of six American librarians who participated in an international librarian exchange program that ran from spring 2010 through fall 2011. The exchange brought together the City University of New York (CUNY) and two universities in Shanghai, China: Shanghai University (SU) and Shanghai Normal University (SNU). The program was inspired, in part, by recognition of the diversity of CUNY's student body and growing awareness of the increasing globalization of information and education. For the Chinese librarians, the exchange offered an opportunity to learn from the West and showcase their own innovations. The traveling participants – eight librarians from six of the CUNY colleges and six librarians from SU and SNU – benefited from individual opportunities for learning and the collective development of new visions for academic library services.

Higher Education and Exchanges in China: A Brief Review

From the time Mao Zedong and the Communists assumed power in 1949 through the late 1990s, sociopolitical status constituted the primary criteria for admission to college in China. The reinstitution of the college entrance examination (*gaokao*) in 1997 expanded access to higher

education (Liu, 2012). Enrollment quotas were removed and the student population exploded. The number of young people attending college in China jumped from 1.08 million students in 1998 to 20 million in 2004 (Zha, 2011), and reached 23 million students in 2011 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2012). As more students gained access to higher education, the structure of the institutions and nature of support began to change. Colleges and universities were no longer centrally controlled by the state, many institutions of higher learning were consolidated, specific universities were chosen for additional funding with the aim of achieving and maintaining world class status, institutions now had the freedom to borrow money from commercial lenders, and colleges and universities began to charge tuition (Li, Y., Whalley, J., Zhang, S., & Zhao, X., 2011; Hewitt, 2008).

Because of the strong desire of so many Chinese to attend college and opening up of seats in institutions of higher education, China is now faced with high levels of unemployment among college graduates (Wang, 2011; Wangshu, 2012). In addition, "[t]he Chinese authorities recognize the need for curricular and pedagogical reform in [higher] education, to ensure that graduates have the knowledge and skills that the modernizing economy requires. In particular, there is recognition of the need for [higher] education generically to develop skills of critical inquiry, creativity, problem solving, communication and team work" (OECD, 2009, p. 11).

As higher education has grown in China, so has the number of students and faculty participating in international exchanges. Many Western universities send students on short study abroad or semester/year long programs at Chinese universities. And many thousands of Chinese students travel abroad for education each year. Close to 700 transnational partnerships, where students

study in one country but receive their degrees from another, had been approved by the Chinese government in 2004, but unapproved programs also exist (Yang, 2008). An increasing number of Western universities have established campuses in China (Hewitt, 2008), and librarian exchanges involving Western public and academic libraries have been occurring for quite some time (Scherlen, A., Shao, X., & Cramer, E., 2009; Johnson, Shi, & Shao, 2010; Stueart, 1987; Williams, 2000).

CUNY-Shanghai Exchange Experiences: Participants and Settings

All three universities involved in the CUNY-Shanghai Exchange – CUNY, SU, and SNU – are public institutions situated in dense, urban settings. CUNY was established to educate New Yorkers and others as an integrated system dedicated to affording access to academic excellence. CUNY has 28 libraries spread across 24 distinct colleges, with its librarians regularly working together to achieve common goals. Their collaboration has resulted in a shared union catalog, consortial licensing of electronic databases, and professional development across campuses, among other combined efforts. The Chinese host institutions both have multiple campuses situated in the downtown areas of the city and also in the distant suburbs. The newer suburban campuses were built to provide more space for students, faculty and staff, as well as to house facilities and resources.

Shanghai itself is an incredibly fast-growing city, expanding outwardly and upwardly. Its population far exceeds that of New York City, and its many monumental new buildings are designed to impress. With a continually growing public transportation system and more people arriving each day to seek opportunities, the growth of this metropolis is so fast-paced that even online maps quickly prove to be out-of-date. A sense of the overwhelming size and pace of the

city of Shanghai offered a valuable perspective to seasoned New York City librarians as they returned home to assist CUNY library patrons.

CUNY librarians each spent four weeks in Shanghai comparing and contrasting library services. Each focused on a service area, such as reference, interlibrary loan, instruction, or cataloging. The goal was to learn as much as time would allow. The following reflections document how their experiences allowed them to evolve in their work and contribute to the goals of their individual colleges and libraries, as well as to the general mission of CUNY.

By touring and observing the daily functions of Chinese academic libraries, none of the CUNY librarians were attempting to "fix" or "change" either their system or that of their partners. Nor did they assume the role of Alexis de Tocqueville, who visited North America and reported to France, or as United Nations observers sent to a warring region to assess the propriety of foreign operations. Instead, they endeavored to consider how libraries in one of the fastest growing countries on earth conduct library services. There was no prior belief that Chinese or American librarians are more successful in their respective approaches. Rather, CUNY librarians set out with the mindset of explorers, knowing little about what to expect, but seeking to learn and build a foundation for moving forward individually and collectively within CUNY and the world.

Library and Department Tours

In Shanghai, participants enjoyed extensive tours of the host libraries, focusing on overall library operations, functions of individual library departments, course offerings, budgets, personnel,

circulation, access services, acquisitions, collection management, technical services, and cataloging. Although language barriers and schedules did impose limits, working within one institution with several campus libraries allowed for extended discussion and queries. Time spent in specific library units and departments of the host libraries fostered a more in-depth understanding of daily operations of academic libraries.

CUNY participants also visited many other university libraries – including those at Tongji, Fudan, Jiao Tong, and East China Normal – to meet with even more librarians, library administrators, and staff. The value of these tours lay in developing a more generalized understanding of Chinese libraries. All the libraries visited were large, even magnificent. The belief held by many Western librarians – that a library is the heart of a university – is evident in the shape of the SU main campus library – an open book – and its location at the center of the campus. Public libraries in China proved to be equally impressive. The main Shanghai Public Library, which holds the largest genealogical collection and family history records in China, and the recently built Pudong District Library are two stellar examples. Some participants toured libraries beyond Shanghai, visiting those at Beijing and Nanjing Universities.

In Chinese libraries a great deal of thought, energy, and resources are dedicated to the scale and size of library buildings, staff, numbers of books purchased, and funds dedicated to electronic resources. The numbers in aggregate are used to illustrate the effectiveness of library operations. Libraries in the U.S. also concentrate on metrics of quantity through ACRL reference statistics or return on investment figures that, in turn, demonstrate effectiveness. Yet the value that librarians contribute to the mission of universities and their patrons cannot solely be captured by these

measurements. In essence, all that librarians do to address patron needs contributes to learning and research. One outcome of this exchange, and all others like it, lies in the ongoing professional development of librarians.

In general – due to cultural differences, lack of familiarity with host viewpoints, and language barriers that made for awkward communication – specific recommendations were avoided and criticism moderated to cultivate an open and collegial atmosphere. However, Janey Chao, the only CUNY librarian fluent in Mandarin, and thus in the best position to make confident assessments, did draw up recommandations. These included: allocating more space for study room areas at SU Library; giving more attention to student concerns and responses; increasing hours the circulation desk is open; promoting services to teaching departments; reviewing the administrative structure of library departments; and providing better subject access to the library online catalog.

Professional Presentations

Each of the six visiting librarians was responsible for some formal student instruction and professional development presentations to library staff on topics such as digital collections, subject librarianship, the liaison librarian model, business information in the U.S., electronic resources, Serials Solutions, SFX, institutional repositories, and digital media collections.

Those hosted at SU planned and presented eight lectures each to new library professionals and students majoring in library science. Each class lasted several hours, allowing time for presentations and general discussion. Topics were chosen in light of each librarian's expertise,

as well as interests of library school faculty and class attendees, who explained that much of their education focuses more on technology than service. They were interested in digital information, as well as user needs and services. The visiting librarians shared PowerPoint slides so the class could refer to them, and while interactions were mostly in class, at least some students also emailed and met with participants outside of class.

All lectured on CUNY and their home colleges. Chao taught about cooperative cataloging and outsourcing, e-reserves, SFX, FRBR and RDA, information literacy, acquisitions, subject specialists, outreach, archives, rare books, and digital collections. Beth Posner was assigned topics reflecting her work as a library resource sharing specialist, as well as on patron driven acquisitions, the impact of interlibrary loan services on periodical acquisitions and licensing, the state of ILL and cooperative collection development and purchasing, cloud storage and procurement of print and digital materials, embedded librarianship, and the popularity of academic libraries.

Mark Aaron Polger taught classes about marketing, public relations and outreach, as well as faculty status for librarians and his role as an instruction and reference librarian. Drawing on his previous work as a medical librarian in Canada, he lectured on health sciences librarianship in hospital and library settings. Ellen Sexton presented on issues in U.S. academic libraries, technical and public services, serials librarianship and scholarly communication, information literacy, libraries as physical spaces, digital libraries, and library assessment.

After the official lectures, fruitful discussions often continued. Chinese students were interested in library school education in the U.S., and the creativity and user-centricity of American library service. The liveliest participation sparked in Posner's class occurred while looking at a map of China, where everyone pointed out and spoke about their hometowns. This activity allowed everyone to get to know each other, learn about China, and share memories, personal stories, and hometown pride while practicing English. The most amusing conversations concerned stereotyping, whether unfair, such as that no American can do even the simplest math, or arguably true, such as that Chinese is a much more difficult language to learn than English.

Comparative Librarianship

As the program evolved, participants experienced a nuanced understanding of the role of academic libraries and librarians in China and the U.S. Learning from Shanghai colleagues about their responsibilities, work, goals, and aspirations informed the professional acumen of the CUNY librarians and solidified their understanding of the value of librarians. The word for librarian, in Mandarin, is 图书馆员, pronounced *tú shū guǎn yuán*. The meaning directly refers to any library employee who manages the work of a library, whether their tasks are clerical or professional in scope.

Many Chinese librarians who perform work similar to that of U.S. librarians do not hold an MLS degree. Their subject background is often considered to be more important than a library science degree. This emphasis could be of interest to smaller libraries in the West, which, conversely,

are often not in a position to hire subject bibliographers or selectors with a background in the disciplines they cover, but which will insist that the librarian have an MLS degree.

Librarians often discuss their professional identity and how perceptions of librarians affect the work they perform with patrons. They even question what to call themselves within the context of a rapidly changing information environment – librarian, information scientist, etc. By observing the different roles librarians play in the U.S. and China, it became evident that the term "librarian" is only as limiting as each library and librarian allows. While titles help professionals align themselves and reach consensus with regard to professional responsibilities, it was clear from observing Chinese librarians that it is more important how librarians translate their skills and knowledge to build processes and services to effectively meet patron needs.

As for specific library functions in China, several differences were observable. SNU supports an active in-house software development unit, reminiscent of the merging of information technology and traditional library functions seen in many U.S. libraries. However, SNU also supports a novelty research department, which scouts out topics of interest for faculty to ensure that this research has not been done before. While this level of service is not typical for an American academic library, it is a hallmark of a Chinese research library.

Reference and reader services in Chinese libraries seemed similar, but upon closer examination, the service models differ. Although Chinese librarians are concerned foremost with keeping order in their reading rooms where many students take advantage of a quiet space to work, U.S.

librarians focus more on working with students to teach or identify the best resources for research. In another example, Posner introduced tools, such as the Rethinking Resource Sharing Initiative's *Manifesto for Resource Sharing* and the *STAR Checklist for Best Practices in Resource Sharing*, to Shanghai librarians in hope of sparking discussion about their applicability to information resource sharing needs and practices in China.

Challenges of Communication: Language and Censorship

CUNY participants were chosen specifically because of their specializations and personal characteristics, such as flexibility and respectfulness, believed to be more important than their actual Chinese language skills. Nevertheless, all of the Shanghai librarians who came to CUNY could speak English, while only one CUNY librarian could speak Mandarin fluently. Many librarians in Shanghai did not speak, or were uncomfortable speaking, English. While overcoming language obstacles can be a challenging and even enjoyable aspect of a foreign visit, it is deeply humbling and frustrating when lack of language skills prevents potentially rewarding in-depth conversations with foreign colleagues.

Chao, CUNY's only native Chinese speaker, notes disadvantages as well as advantages of knowing a host country's language. Born and raised in Taiwan, her instruction and presentations were presented in bilingual format. Although her library school lectures were offered in English, she encouraged students to ask questions in either English or Chinese. Bilingual handouts were distributed, which contained ready references for future use. Responses from students were strong and positive about these new learning experiences. One drawback of being a native

Chinese speaker, however, was that most of her travels and library visits were conducted without a guide since the host institution most likely assumed she didn't need additional assistance.

Other participants' library school lectures were delivered in English, without translators. It was unclear how much was understood, especially since many students were shy or unaccustomed to speaking in English. Thus, communication was challenging, and second-guessing what should and should not be said was a constant issue. It was also interesting to observe different ways of information sharing in the libraries, such as at SU where there were regular announcements on campus loudspeakers, ongoing activities held among library staff such as participating in the campus' Chrysanthemum Festival, or at SNU where there was a scrolling suggestion area on the library's homepage.

Even more challenging was the issue of access to information in China, a core value for U.S. librarians. The American Library Association Bill of Rights states, "Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment." And, although participants sought technological fixes to break through the "Great Firewall of China" through VPNs and proxy software, it did not seem appropriate to directly challenge censorship in public arenas. Despite interest in attitudes towards censorship and information sharing in China, there was a reluctance to engage colleagues in sensitive topics because of a (possibly unjustified) fear of unknown future social-political ramifications. When broached, however, such as during an impromptu group discussion about Google's move to using Hong Kong servers, diverging opinions were revealed. An older Chinese librarian insisted that

students could access all they needed from library databases, but a more recent graduate invoked Orwell's 1984.

For example, Polger found himself self-censoring during his classes and while interacting with students and fellow librarians. Although students were curious about social and political life in North America, he was hesitant to discuss topics like rallies, protests, and First Amendment rights. When discussing access to news, he avoided mentioning Facebook or Twitter as sources because they are not available in China. Some students, sensing his hesitation, emphasized that China has its own Facebook (*Renren*) and Twitter (*Sina Weibo*).

Polger was deeply concerned that censorship might oppress students. In his classes, he demonstrated that academic libraries in China and the U.S. both subscribe to EBSCO databases, but he did not discuss with students whether citations were flagged and omitted based on controversial content. He quickly bypassed topics that might bring up questions and debate. Polger believed he was doing an injustice by censoring his teaching. However, he was reassured by his supervisor at SU that Chinese citizens are happy living in a Communist country. Outside the classroom, Polger realized he could not be completely open with colleagues. Unaware that he should not have brought up any of the 3 T's – Tibet, Taiwan, and Tiananmen Square – he did, and found most of the group either silent or quickly changing topics.

Challenges of Program Design

This particular exchange program was designed to last just two years, with back-to-back exchanges meant to strengthen bonds and build upon each other. However, by the time one of the last two CUNY participants arrived in China, she sensed that her hosts had possibly become accustomed to American visitors. Posner, the fourth CUNY librarian to visit SU in only two years, believed she was seen as just another CUNY representative, rather than someone with unique perspectives to share. The Chinese had already heard all about CUNY, and although she was from another campus with a focus on serving graduate students, she was not asked much about either this or her interlibrary loan work. This was probably because most librarians are not directly involved with ILL, and those that enjoy use of an established service within China have less need for the extended services provided by many U.S. academic libraries.

Another interesting aspect of designing an international exchange program is the logistics of housing, meals, etc. Finding vegetarian food in China was necessary for several participants, but difficult to locate. And, while SNU participants stayed in an on-campus hotel, SU visitors were housed in the International Student Dormitory, which allowed them to meet more students and have an enriched daily experience.

Many details of program design must be left to another venue, but it should be stated that beyond the basic challenges of financially supporting an international exchange program, a myriad of institutional, technological, physical, legal, political, administrative, human-related, and knowledge-based impediments to future international collaborations exist and must be acknowledged. While the goal of exposing fourteen CUNY, SNU, and SU librarians to services at libraries in major urban centers across the world was met, additional outcomes must be

realized to ensure ongoing financial support. Program support also requires time, design, and planning, with input from those involved on both sides of the exchange. Further, contact with developers and participants of other international librarian exchange programs should be undertaken to share lessons learned and improve future experiences for all.

Program Successes

From the point of view of CUNY participants and administrators, outcomes and accomplishments included learning about library practices in Chinese educational institutions, and exploring how and why policies, procedures, and services in U.S. and Chinese academic libraries work and how they might be improved. Opportunities for ongoing professional discussions about resource sharing and other library practices and philosophies, as well as collaboration on research and writing projects, have also been identified.

For many CUNY library faculty, interest in participating in this exchange was prompted by their work with the University's ethnically diverse student body. Eighteen percent of CUNY students identify as Asian or Pacific Islanders, according to the CUNY Office of Institutional Research. At Baruch College, where Ryan Phillips and Chao work, 38.6% identify as Asian. Following the exchange, Phillips sought ways to connect with this constituency, including becoming a track leader in a program, the Global Finance and Economics Baruch Leadership Academy, designed to attract high school students from around the world to his college.

Posner's experience as a newcomer to a university in another country gave her a profound sense of the challenges all international students navigate. She now consciously seeks them out to assist them at the reference desk and beyond, suggesting that librarians join their networks. She offers individual and group meetings, as well as basic instructional handouts in popular languages. Now that Posner has direct contacts in China, they can help her access Chinese language material needed by CUNY patrons. Despite improvements in the discovery, availability, and delivery of information, challenges remain in accessing information from around the world, including copyright and licensing terms, and limitations in staffing, procedures, and policy. However, the need for global information to address shared problems, as well as for individual education and development, is more important than ever.

After identifying the need for more marketing and promotion of library services in the Chinese libraries he visited, as well as intelligent purposing of library space, Polger has been inspired to focus on space and promotion in his home library. Ellen Sexton's residency prompted her to compile a bibliography of English language sources on the criminal justice system in China. This supplements her work with specialized criminal justice collections, and should be of particular interest to her colleagues, as her campus is currently exploring partnership opportunities with criminal justice educational institutions in China.

Beth Evans recommends use of an online forum to merge student book discussion groups in Shanghai and New York. By linking the freshman Common Reading program at Brooklyn College to Shanghai Normal University Library Readers Association, Chinese students eager to

improve their English would be given opportunities to discuss their reading in English with American students. Both groups could broaden their conversations to include a more diverse set of interpretations. Similarly, international student clubs such as Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE), which already operates at both SNU and Brooklyn, could collaborate on effective proposals to create economic development in their respective surrounding communities.

Chao brought back an assignment requested by the Director of Shanghai University Library to revise the English version of the library's homepage and Handbook on Library Services.

Baruch's library has communicated with SNU about the prospect of cross-training professional development, shared user and reference services, library education, staff training, and technical assistance via electronic conference or webinars. Chao also continues to participate in the International Conference of Institutes and Libraries for Chinese Overseas Studies, which focuses on international resource sharing and library cooperation among Chinese overseas studies programs.

Moreover, Evans proposes a joint research project with an SNU librarian to determine whether there is any relationship across the two cultures between career choice, pre-professional education, and the desire and practice to continue one's education in the library field after job placement. Simultaneously, they will investigate possibilities for shared continuing education, professional development, and conference attendance and presentations. Posner has also been in contact with Chinese colleagues about developing presentation proposals.

Evans, working with the International Relations Round Table of the Library Association of CUNY, in conjunction with the Chinese American Library Association (CALA), organized an open discussion and panel focusing on the education of Chinese librarians. The program featured Teng (Tony) Cheng, a librarian who had acted as a guide and translator for CUNY librarians hosted at SNU, who visited the State University of New York, Stony Brook Health Sciences Library in the summer of 2013.

Therefore, many useful starting points for discussion have been identified: from staffing, library education, training, user services, use of library space, reference, instruction and course-related lectures, to challenges associated with growing interest in library collaboration and resource sharing. As Chao declares, "By building relationships across borders with our fellow librarians, we open dialogue of shared concerns and strategies for future development and promotion of librarianship locally, regionally, and globally."

Conclusions

Whether through take-home lessons or future collaboration, the significance of librarian exchange programs such as this will ultimately be measured by the development of quality library services, awareness of the latest developments in the library profession, and commitment to building and maintaining state-of-the-art academic libraries and library services in the world's largest metropolitan areas.

Although this exchange program concluded after only two exploratory years, there are hopes that it will be reinstated someday. A variety of connections are possible between academic libraries and librarians working thousands of miles apart. It is encouraging that librarians from both Shanghai and New York are enthusiastic not only about developing future faculty exchanges, but also working together on information literacy courses, new technologies for library services, information commons, chat and e-mail reference, and faculty publications. The value of an international library exchange program can extend well beyond the individual and positively shape services for patrons by librarians, globally, now and in the future.

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