

21st Century Librarian Seminar Series
at Wuhan University, China, Oct. 23-24, 2008
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More than sixty librarians from 30 libraries in Hubei Province and across China gathered at Wuhan University for this Librarian Seminar Series. I was honored to be one of the 5 librarian speakers from CALA. We joined Chinese librarians and library scholars who presented on topics of interest and concern to academic libraries in China, the U.S., and even globally. I thoroughly enjoyed my time with my fellow CALA members – a wonderful opportunity to become better acquainted. This and every interchange with our Chinese peers, from discussions to casual conversations, expanded my horizons, as did the presentations on collection development, assessment of library services, library reserves, and the special skills and responsibilities of the subject librarian.

My presentation, given on October 24th, was entitled “Assessment of Library Instruction for Generation Y Students.” Afterwards, a group discussion session allowed me to exchange information and insights about library instruction (LI) with other attendees. Mr. Joseph Branin, currently Library Director of Ohio State University, gave the keynote address. In “Sharing Our Space: Envisioning the New Research Library,” he illustrated a trend some academic libraries are following in managing the physical space they have at their disposal. Nowadays, most academic libraries in America are facing space problems as ever-expanding book and journal collections crowd other vital services and collections.

I support Mr. Branin’s idea of giving library space back to users by placing some materials in storage, retrieving and delivering it to users upon request. Branin also said that more needs to be done to preserve local history and unique materials. This can be done by digitizing special collections and making those collections available on the Web.

I was impressed with the presentations of Professor Chuanfu Chen, Dean of the Library School of Wuhan University (“Changing Trends of Libraries”) and Professor Ximing Xiao, also of the Wuhan U. Library School (“Collection Development in the Internet Environment”). I learned that some Chinese libraries are facing problems very familiar to their American counterparts. For one, many people do not use their libraries, and there is a danger that the Library’s functions will be usurped by information service vendors whom the public often perceive as more convenient and very affordable. Both speakers emphasized that it is most important to build user-centered services and fill libraries with current technologies. I cannot agree with them more.

In the group discussion that I participated in after these talks, Chinese instructional librarians shared their experiences and problems. To my surprise, none of the Chinese librarians taught

one-session (“single-shot”) LI to different classes. The trend there is toward credit-bearing courses. All those present taught credited, semester-long courses. One librarian in this group had, I believe, pioneered a constructive teaching method. She permitted students to decide on the content of their lessons and had them teach each other what they knew and learned in class. Both she and her students enjoyed learning something new each semester. This is a good example of student-centered teaching and learning and an exceptional case in either the US or in China.

Most of the Chinese librarians at this event seemed to be in their thirties, with some looking young enough to be members of Generation Y themselves! The VP of the University, and the library leaders we met were mostly in their forties. I later learned that women must retire by age 55 and men by 60 in China, with few exceptions. This may explain why we saw few older people in the workforce. I noticed that not only were the librarians younger, but the workers I saw and people I met in hotels, shops, and airports were mostly of the X and Y generations. During our cruise on the Yangtze River, I learned from a librarian from Wuhan University that the Library takes care of their employees even after their retirement. Some librarians’ duties include taking care of the health and family matters of the retirees. It would appear that mainland China – a country that is modernizing at a rate unprecedented in human history - is trying to accommodate traditional, socialist, and western values all at once.

I deeply appreciate the opportunity that I was given to exchange information, ideas, and opinions on information literacy, library instruction and the future of the academic library with a few of my Chinese contemporaries. Learning about their lives, work, and values has helped me to see mine in a broader context. I am only sorry that our time together was far too short. I look forward to future opportunities to observe and understand more deeply the nature of librarianship in China.

My sincerest thanks go to CALA for organizing this wonderful seminar series and to Wuhan University for its generous hospitality. I commend Wuhan University Library for giving all attendees print-outs of the PowerPoint presentations, thus enabling all of us to review and remember the content long after the Seminar. The kindness of our hosts, the beautiful campus, the delicious local food, and the new friends we formed made this incredible experience one that I will always remember.