In Quest of Books across the Pacific

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This past summer, I was able to combine a book-buying trip to China and Japan with a one-week workshop on Chinese rare books in Beijing. The trip included meetings with and visits to vendors, colleagues, bookstores, and libraries in Shanghai, Beijing, Taipei, and Tokyo. I saw, first-hand, how publishers, readers, governments, and libraries in China and Japan have responded, with high interest, to the changing demands and priorities in print and digital publishing. In fact, it is obvious that the publishing industry in both countries has undergone visible transformations. Almost every library, publishing house, and bookstore -- large or small -- are involved in specific digital products or projects, either as developers or as distributors.

Shanghai was my first stop, it has become even more cosmopolitan since the World Expo in 2010. Amid the stylish skyscrapers, the old Shanghai tries to assert its existence in alleys mostly on the west-side of the Huangpu River. East of the Huangpu River, the Pudong New Area, a bustling financial district, is very different. A highlight of my trip to Shanghai was a visit to the newly built Pudong Public Library, opened in 2010. This huge building -- 60,885 square meters in size with two floors above and six floors beneath ground -- includes 2,500 seats in reading areas and welcomes more than 6,000 users daily.

Different from the spacious Pudong Public Library, the Tokyo Metropolitan Central Library is located quietly amid the scenic Arisugawa-no-miya Memorial Park with a playground for children and youth next to it. This Central Branch is well-known for its collection of 40,000 documents pertaining to the history of Tokyo, some of which date back over 400 years.

Jinbōchō (神保町) is known as Tokyo’s center of used-book stores and publishing houses, and as a popular antique and curio shopping area. It is therefore always on the to-do list of every overseas librarian who deals with Japanese materials. I had a specific goal with this visit because I was looking for a book, which was supposedly out-of-stock according to our vendor. Spot-checking at some well-known used-book stores, I was overjoyed to find a copy of the book in Yagi Shoten. The bespectacled manager triumphantly gave to me the book he picked up from one of the shelves near the ceiling of the shop.

Beijing was hot and humid in June as twenty-eight selected Chinese studies librarians from the United States, Canada, Hong Kong, and England came to attend the Eighth National Advanced Workshop on Appraisal and Preservation of Chinese Rare Books, which was hosted by the National Library of China. The Workshop was held in one of the conference rooms in the Administrative Building of the Library from June 25th to July 2nd.

The purpose of the Workshop was to provide training to librarians on preservation and appraisal of Chinese materials (i.e. books, manuscripts, and Buddhist scriptures) published in
Ming, Qing, and earlier dynasties. Unlike previous years, this year’s workshop targeted overseas librarians in Chinese studies. This is the result of two years of planning efforts between the Committee on Chinese Materials of the Council on East Asian Studies and the National Library of China.

Our instructors were three esteemed rare book scholars: Zhizhong Li (李致忠), Xianxing Chen (陈先行), and Jining Li (李际宁). Each of them focused on a special subject aspect of Chinese rare books. Zhizhong Li, author of more than 15 books on appraisal and history of Chinese rare books, started with knowledge criteria for book appraisals and quoted anecdotes freely from Song and Yuan editions that he browsed through. Xianxing Chen, Head of the Rare Book Department of the Shanghai Library and author of the Assessment of Ming Qing Manuscripts 明清稿鈔校本鑒定, shared with us an amazing amount of PowerPoint files of Ming Qing manuscripts. This is because he wanted to show us the unique physical characteristics of the block print style produced in different periods and by different publishers. Jining Li, an expert in the history and editions of Buddhist scriptures, traced incredible historical accounts of Buddhist scriptures, such as 《Zhaocheng jin zang 趙城金藏》. He pointed out to us, using a display of different texts, how to differentiate the carvers of the scriptures because many of the Buddhist scriptures underwent long years of completion and revisions due to disasters and persecutions.

In addition to the in-class lectures, the National Library of China organized visits to several well-known rare book collections and projects related to digitizing rare books near Beijing. Among them are the Rare Book Departments of Peking University and the National Library of China, Digital Document Laboratory of the Capital Normal University 首都师范大学, the Buddhist scripture Long zang 龍藏, and the Rong Bao Zhai 榮寶齋 Bookstore of Arts.

In our visits to the Rare Book Department of Peking University, our colleagues there put on a display of selected titles from the newly acquired (December 2013) Ōkura Bunko 大倉文庫, which contains 931 titles and more than 28,143 volumes of books published between Song and early Qing dynasties, roughly from the 10th to the 18th centuries.

The conference and trip provided an opportunity for me to exchange information with and learn from colleagues, researchers, and practitioners in the areas of Chinese and Japanese book trade, including print and digital publishing. It was also beneficial to receive unadorned and frank feedback by talking to vendors and library colleagues in person.

Reference:
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