2012 Book-Buying Trip to China

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I attended the 22nd National Books Expo of China (全国图书交易博览会) held at the Yinchuan International Convention Center (银川国际会议展览中心) from June 1-4. The city of Yinchuan, with the Yellow River circling the east side, is now capital of the Ningxia Hui (Muslims) Autonomous Region in the Northwest of China. Historically, it can be traced back to the 11th century as the capital of the Xi Xia Kingdom. The theme of the 2012 Book Fair was to promote the publishing industry in the area along with the cultural and economic reforms, all following the flagship principle of developing the Big West. The primary goal was closely related to the government policy of strengthening ethnic unity in the Northwest region using cultural influences.

The Convention Center is located in the center of Yinchuan near large government buildings and landmarks such as People’s Park, Ningxia City Government Building, and Ningxia Traffic Bureau, etc., which are all reminiscent of the Soviet formalist architectural style.

The four-day Fair, with exhibits from around 600 publishers and 680 private book traders, displayed more than 300,000 kinds of new or core publications and attracted more than half a million visitors. Since the 2007 Book Fair in Chongqing, the name of the Fair was modified to “National Books Expo,” which added a significant trade element. As a result, it was no wonder that more than $33,800,000 worth of book contracts were signed during the period.

It is worth mentioning that most, if not all, privately-owned bookstores did not appear at the first day of the Book Fair. However, they mushroomed from the second day on, all gathering on the second floor, each in a small-space division. Most of these bookstores are subsidizing their businesses from the state-owned publishers. This kind of union between state-owned enterprises and open-market economy is representative of the government reform policy of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

In addition to attending the book fair, I attended a forum on the future development of publishing in China and visited two local libraries: Ningxia University Library and the Library of the Beifang (North Region) University of Nationalities. The discussion of the forum was extended to become a debate between print books versus electronic resources. The two-sides were represented by two stars in the forum: Wang Meng 王蒙, a widely-respected writer in his seventies, and Zhang Xianliang 张贤亮, an entrepreneur (founder of the West China Film Studio in Zhenbeibao 镇北堡, Ningxia) who was once a critically-acclaimed writer on the Cultural Revolution.

Two of my colleagues from the Library of Congress and Emory University Library joined me in visiting the Ningxia University Library and the Library of the Beifang University of Nationalities. Both libraries gave guided tours and held seminars to welcome their colleagues from overseas.

We enjoyed sharing our different perspectives toward the challenges of collection development and management strategies in the wave of digitization. As the proverb goes, monks from afar know better in reciting the cannons. Our hosts were eager to know the academic library policy and environment of North America. They thought that we in U.S. are more advanced in facilities, preservation, and planning to the development of future libraries. We, on the other hand, are grateful to have the opportunity to see the special collections up close and exchange ideas of common concerns with them.