

Links with foreign libraries- Why and how?

I am going to talk to you today about the link which we have established between the McGill University Health Sciences Library and the Library of the China Medical University, which is in the city of Shenyang in Northeast China - near the border with North Korea. I will describe how we established this link, what the linkage has accomplished and what our plans are for the future but must stress that this is not a quick course on "how to form a link with a foreign library". As you will see, this linkage depended on both luck and timing - what worked for us may not work for you.

While I am talking I will show some slides of China, the first couple (SLIDES) show the position of Shenyang so that you can see where the library is. The rest of the slide-show is like "visual musak", the photos are of various parts of China and none are of libraries!

Though it would, in many ways, be more normal to start by discussing WHY it is a good idea to try to form links with foreign libraries I will start with the "how". I do this because, frankly, we established the link and then thought about the "why". I will explain.

One of my aunts is a pathologist and she had taught in a medical school in Shenyang (then called Moukden) in 1945-50. This school, which was run by the presbyterian church, was later amalgamated with two other medical schools and the combined university is called the China Medical University. It is common in China for universities to specialise in one subject and the universities often are controlled by a Federal or Provincial (or sometimes a municipal) government department. The China Medical University is one of 13 medical universities controlled by the Federal Ministry of Public Health - as I will describe, this turned out to be a considerable advantage. Anyway, after many years of little or no contact between the university and their former foreign teachers, it became easier for Chinese to have foreign friends and my aunt and several of her old colleagues started to hear from their former colleagues and students. In time, some were invited to return to the university to give seminars or to teach medical English.

In 1985 I was visiting my aunt and met one of her old colleagues, a pediatrician, who had visited the university a few years earlier and had just been invited back for a year to teach English. I asked her about the library and she told me that there was one but that she had not had much contact with it. I told her that if she was in the library she could introduce herself to the Director and ask him or her if our library at McGill could send them the occasional photocopy or help them filling in the gaps in the collection caused by the disruptions of the Cultural Revolution. I followed up this verbal offer with a letter in case she wanted to show it to the people in the library. Frankly, I thought that this would be all that would happen and had almost forgotten about the offer when, in late 1985, I received a letter from the Vice President of the University.

This letter was an invitation to visit the China Medical University for two or three weeks and advise them on how to improve their library. Though the Vice President thought that my offer of a few photocopies would be useful he wanted me to visit so that I could see both the strengths and weaknesses of the library, meet the Director and assess the collection and services. As you can imagine, this was an exciting prospect - particularly so since he told me that they would pay all my expenses while I was in China, if I could get to Beijing. I was fortunate to be working at McGill as we have a very active international program and the office in charge of this, McGill International, had just been given a grant by CIDA (the Canadian International Development Agency) to provide "seed money" for international projects. The airfare to Beijing at that time cost just over \$2000 and McGill International paid half of this, with the other half coming from a grant I received from the Quebec Ministry of International Trade. Though I did not admit it at the time, I would have gladly paid the whole fare myself!

Once the initial euphoria had worn off a bit I started to get a little concerned about the whole thing. Though my aunt's colleague was still there and the Vice President seemed to speak English what was the Director like, could he or she speak English? Was the library like a "real" (that is a North American) library? Could I really do a consultancy without knowing about the other libraries in the country? What was China going to be like? Though I tried to read up on Chinese medical libraries and Chinese medical education there was very little published - really only a 1983 article by CK Huang from SUNY Buffalo in the Bulletin of the Medical Library Association.

Though I felt quite unprepared, I arrived in Beijing in April 1986 to be met by a young librarian who had been sent the 600 or 700 miles to meet me. I was impressed that he could speak much better French than I could and that his English was more than adequate. It turned out that he was the University's French interpreter but that he had very little call on his French language skills. He was, I'm afraid, disappointed that my French was not much better! After a 12 hour overnight train journey (in a very smart "soft class" compartment), we reached Shenyang the next morning.

I was met by a deputation from the library consisting of the Assistant Directors, several librarians and a couple of strong young men to carry my case. Shenyang has weather patterns very like those of Montreal so I was not surprised to see a few traces of snow in courtyards and to find most trees still bare. At that time the University did not have its own accommodation for foreign visitors and I was given a room in the nearest hotel. This had been built by the Japanese in the 1930s and was, as far as I could see, almost unchanged since that time. So far so good, I thought but where is the Director of the Library?

This proved to be the first of many lessons which I learned on this visit. As is very common in China, the Director of the Library was a Professor - and was out of town for the first few days of my visit. He was quite interested in the library (many are not) and was fortunate in having a very able Assistant Director. This man, Dr Xiong, had worked in the library for over 20 years and had received his initial training as a doctor.

Though he had (and has) excellent library skills he had not taken a "library degree" - though he had taken a number of library courses. Of greater interest to me was that he could communicate well in English and seemed to be pleased that I was there to advise on the library. Only while I was en route did it occur to me that perhaps my consultancy was being imposed on the library by the Vice President and that they might therefore not be very happy to see me. This turned out to be quite false, Dr Xiong, though called the Assistant Director, was obviously firmly in control of the Library, he had a good working relationship with both the Director (who seemed to act more as the Chairman of a library committee would act in Canada) and the Vice President of the university. In fact they were classmates and thus, in the Chinese way of things, like family.

My three weeks in Shenyang passed very quickly, I soon discovered that the library had much more which was familiar than strange. To my surprise, the problems in Shenyang and Montreal were similar. We both had problems with money and, to my surprise, my Chinese colleagues, had a great interest in the performance evaluation scheme we had devised at McGill. During my stay it became clearer to me what we could do for them and, again to my surprise, I realised that they could do things for us. Before the end of my visit we wrote out a formal Agreement which was written in both English and Chinese and was signed by me and the Vice President before I left Shenyang. This document covered the following points:-

1. That we would exchange library and relevant university publications.
2. That we would provide free photocopies to each other as long as national resources had been tried first.
3. That we would cooperate in answering difficult reference questions.
4. That we would cooperate in collection development and in filling in collections in both libraries.
5. That we would exchange information and statistics and work on mutually interesting library research projects.
6. That McGill would try to raise money to help provide up-to-date training for staff from the China Medical University.
7. That further McGill staff would visit Shenyang.

The first five of these activities were seen as being quite low cost and, we thought, fairly evenly balanced. The last two (the training and the visits) were more costly and would need outside funding. Between 1986 and 1988 we did exchange a few photocopies, did send each other publications and tried to keep in touch. If nothing else had happened this would have been worthwhile and would, I imagine, still continue.

However the whole project received a great boost in early 1988 when the Canadian Commission for Unesco gave us a grant of about

\$14,000 to help with the training. The grant was to allow us to bring Dr Xiong to Montreal for a month and to allow a young librarian to visit for 6 months. By begging free and cheap air tickets from Canadian Airlines and arranging for the visitors to stay with library staff we managed to stretch the grant to cover visits by Dr Xiong and two young librarians - who stayed for about 3 and a half months.

Though Dr Xiong obviously ran the library in 1986 he was still only the Assistant Director and China is a very hierarchical country. We were again fortunate because in 1987 he was promoted to be a Research Librarian and thus eligible to be appointed Director of the Library. If he had not been the Director I think we would not have been able to invite him first and would have spent a large part of the grant on bringing a very pleasant but "figurehead" Director to McGill. Since Dr Xiong was the Director he could be invited first and his one month visit was a great success. Apart from anything else he came to see how our library is organised and was able to choose and then brief the two "interns" very carefully. This was important as they would be with us for 4 months or so.

The interns arrived in October 1988, two months late due to problems in getting Canadian visas, and their visit was really very successful. Not only did they fit into Canadian life right away, but their pleasant personalities helped them to integrate right into the life of the Library. As you can imagine, not all staff were initially overjoyed at the prospect of "more work" but once the interns arrived this seemed to be a non-problem and departmental supervisors were almost fighting to have more time with them. By the end of their visit they knew our library well and our staff had a much better idea of what would be of interest to them once they returned home. I still send Dr Xiong bits of information gleaned at conferences or read in journals but I am now not alone in this. Staff send their Chinese friends information on new CD-ROM databases (they have Medline and Science Citation Index), articles on collection analysis (a particular interest of Dr Xiong's) and the occasional gift. In exchange we receive university publications, postage stamps (stamp collecting is a very popular Chinese hobby), books on Chinese traditional medicine and Chinese publications on Dr Norman Bethune.

Since 1988 the program has continued, I was on sabbatic leave last year and visited Shenyang for four months - the China Medical University providing accommodation - and two other staff from our library will visit in 1990.

This is WHAT has happened and some of HOW it happened. Now I will discuss briefly some of the lessons we have learned from this experience.

Firstly, it is very important that you initiate cooperation with the right people. We were fortunate that the Director of the Library, though an academic, was favourable to the idea of contact and that the Assistant Director - who really ran the library - was very keen. In addition, the support of the University administration, in the person of the Vice President was essential.

Secondly, it is important that the match of institutions is fairly good. In our case it helped with the fund raising that the China Medical University is one of the 13 "key medical universities" supported directly by the Ministry of Public Health. It was also useful because the goals of our two universities are not dissimilar. Both our universities train researchers and teachers and this commonality of interests made the idea of a linkage much more acceptable to the administrations in both places. In China (and, I imagine, many other developing countries) many medical schools train primary care physicians only. In China this kind of medical school offers a 3 or 4 year degree course following high school whereas the key universities offer 5 or 6 year courses.

Thirdly, you must be able to communicate easily with your foreign partner. We were again fortunate as Dr Xiong has an excellent knowledge of English and the Vice President has studied in the US. If one was always dealing with the decision makers through a translator I think the level of cooperation would be much less.

Fourthly, you must always remember that a library exists in its own institution and within its own cultural norms. What is acceptable or even essential in Montreal may be unacceptable or impossible in Shenyang. For example, Dr Xiong is going to retire in a year or so, he will probably be succeeded by another Professor and the library will again be run by an Assistant or Associate Director. This is because most of the senior library staff is female (and it is rare for females to become directors in China) and because a Director must be a certain age (and there is a missing generation in the library due to the Cultural Revolution.) This certainly seems "unfair" to a westerner and, when I was asked, I said so but it is the norm in a country where tradition is strong and job mobility rare and difficult.

Now I will say something about WHY I think international library cooperation is valuable. As I said at the beginning, we started this project without really thinking about it, as it has progressed we have developed a "philosophy" - if that's not too important a term. Our aim is to help the China Medical University develop a core of librarians who have been exposed to a western library. We would like to have another 4 or 5 interns visit us at McGill over a 5 year period so that there is a "critical mass" of ex-interns at the China Medical University. (This would train about one quarter of the librarians.) From talking to other western librarians and meeting foreign librarians who have been trained in western countries it appears to me that one major problem experienced by foreign librarians who return to their own country is that they have nobody to talk things over with, nobody else who understands what they have seen abroad and what they are trying to do. Though I do not intend to criticise "one off" training programs, they often lack long term commitment and the trainees appear as if from another world and return to be swallowed up by it. Our aim is for the trainers to understand, at least a little, of where the interns come from and what they will return to and for the interns to have a group of fellow interns to talk ideas over with when they return home.

Why one should think of becoming involved in an international project is complicated. Partly it is the desire to share some of the wealth we have with others, partly it is because it is fun

(at least I have found it to be) but mainly it is because by sharing with other librarians one realises that our similarities (both professional and personal) are much greater than our differences. We all live on a small planet and life would be much better for everyone if there was a greater mutual trust and understanding. A library cooperation project may be a small thing but our little project has given many of us new friends and new insights and has helped us to see our own library with different eyes.

There is no magic formula for success in such projects, though I think our observations have relevance elsewhere. If you have a chance to develop an international contact I urge you to try - you will not always succeed but I guarantee you will always learn something.

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