

# *inPite* 9

Newsletter of the Australian Library & Information Association

## The President reports: The Australian Libraries Delegation to China, 15-17 May 1991

by John Levett

'Any fool can go to China for a week and then come back and write a book on his experiences'; author unknown, but the phrase haunts me as I sit down to write these notes. Like all aphorisms there is some truth here, which derives, I think, from the understanding that for any first-time Western visitor, the impressions gained even from a short visit are overwhelming, and induce a tendency to logorrhoea.

*there was great interest in the implications of the development of closer relations*

I should perhaps point out that what follows is not the formal report on the President's participation in the delegation; it is a brief article, written at short notice at the Editor's suggestion and its intention is to present to colleagues the first impressions of a totally unsophisticated traveller. (Perhaps I should also acknowledge that I do not propose to deliver an arid, second-hand discourse on the history and provenance of the libraries of China; readers avid for a factual recitative may refer to the excellent review in *The World of Learning*.)

The invitation to join the delegation (which included the State Librarian of NSW and President of ACLIS, Alison Crook, the Director of the State Library of Victoria, Leah Mann, and the National



*The Australian delegation with some Chinese colleagues*

Library's Director of General Collections and Services, Jan Fullerton) was extended by the Australian Government and conveyed by Warren Horton, the Director-General of the National Library and nominated leader of the group.

General Council agreed that the invitation should be taken up, and authorised my participation. My business partner was also consulted and gave her enthusiastic agreement; other close ALIA colleagues, including the Executive Director, the Vice-President, and the Chair of the Board of Education also supported my attendance, and assured me that despite my intimations to the contrary, I could in fact be spared for a fortnight; in short, that I was entirely dispensable, and thus the first of many lessons in a highly instructive experience was learned.

Our itinerary was as follows:  
6-9 May, Beijing, including visits to:  
Ministry of Culture;  
The National Library of the PRC;  
The Institute of Medical Information of the China Medical Academy;  
The Institute of Scientific and Technical Information of the PRC;  
The China National Publishing Industry Trading Corporation;  
Beijing University Library;  
Changpin County Library;  
The China International Book Trading Corporation.  
10-13 May, Shanghai, with visits to:  
The Shanghai Library;  
The Shanghai Huangpu District Library.  
14-15 May, Guangzhou, including

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our non-metropolitan members.

General Council decided at its March 1991 meeting to survey samples of current and lapsed institutional members to determine the reasons for joining or failing to renew membership. That review will doubtless be interesting but it will not demonstrate that the Association is prepared to address its objects in relation to institutional members.

Here I am in Darwin, using institutional and personal time to compose this Front Line. I do it because I believe ALIA is important to my institution, and my institution is important to ALIA. But does ALIA think the same way?

To conclude where I began: Should ALIA be rethinking its relationship with institutional members — actual and potential? □

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**The President reports:** continued from 1...

visits to:

Zhongshan University Library;  
Zhongshan University Department  
of Library and Information Science.

16-17 May, Shenzhen New Economic  
Province:

Visit to the Shenzhen Library.

The delegation arrived in Beijing on 5 May, and was met by a party including Professor Du Ke, the Director of the Library Department of the Ministry of Culture, Chief Deputy Director of the National Library of China, and Deputy President of the Council of the China Society of Library Science. Professor Du Ke is an 'old friend' of Australian librarians, and was the principal and indispensable organiser of our Chinese itinerary. Assisting him was Yang Hongbo, Chief of the China National Microfilming Centre, who was to be our Admirable Crichton for the duration of our visit.

Yang Hongbo personified the nature of our reception; he was polite, humorous, attentive, energetic, and a master of protocol. His second name, 'Hongbo' translated as 'big wave', and he was immediately christened 'Boomer!' a title which he wore with delight. He literally and metaphorically opened the doors of China to us, and in no small measure, the success of our visit was directly attributable to his labours on our behalf.

On Monday, 6 May, we settled down to business, and paid a courtesy call on the Vice-Minister of Culture in the PRC, Liu Deyiu. Our visit lasted an hour, in the course of which our host delivered an extensive summary of the achievements of Chinese libraries and the importance attached to them by the government of the PRC. It was an erudite, informed and humane address, and outlined for us what was in store. I discovered here previously unsuspected reserves of diplomacy, since I found myself called upon to second the Director-General's response. It was a

privilege to do so, and to attempt to convey our Association's interest in the work of colleagues in China, to outline our work in Australia, and to explain the shift in our perspective from a European to an Asian and Pacific view.

This exchange set the tone for all our subsequent diplomatic encounters in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen: elaborate courtesies and the studied exchange of compliments, lubricated by the consumption of copious quantities of Jasmine tea (which early underlined the validity of the Queen Mother's apocryphal advice on what to seek out on state occasions) intermingled with the serious business of the visit.

On Tuesday, 7 May, the delegation attended a dinner at the Australian Embassy in Beijing, hosted by the Ambassador, David Sadlier; the dinner was a pleasant occasion as all such are; what was also underlined was the considerable significance of the Embassy's role during the days of June 1989. If any of us had thought that diplomacy was an occupation for the effete, this illusion was dispelled in and by the Ambassador's presence.

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Of our visits to libraries, much could be said; but within the confines of a short article for *inCite*, brevity rules and generalisations must prevail. My overall impression was of friendship, mutual and colloquial respect, and a deep interest in the ways in which Australian libraries have addressed some of the problems which confront our colleagues in China. These are clearly enormous; the tasks which loom are daunting, and the cheerfulness with which they are contemplated induces humility in the Western observer.

There were specific requests for staff and book exchanges, and there was great interest in the implications of the development of closer relations between professional bodies. The presence of ALIA President on the delegation was taken as a signal of serious interest on our part, and an indication that we would be interested in extending the connection. I have one note of caution here; we saw numerous examples of imported but dormant technology. The electronic solutions may only work well where there exists the technological and personnel infrastructure to support them.

Contrary to my misconceived view,

China is not a monolithic society; its diversity is staggering, endlessly interesting and of enormous potential to Australia. Although nominally of a socialist political cast, this does not appear to stifle enterprise: not in her libraries, nor in the wider society. In her streets, enterprise, initiative and a cheerful approach to the resolution of problems is the dominant mode. The same approach obtains in her libraries. Those Australian librarians who cleave to the philosophy that the user should pay for nothing would find a visit to the libraries, particularly the public libraries of China, enlightening. There is a ready acceptance of the view that the library should raise a proportion of its funds by enterprise, and we saw several manifestations of this philosophy, ranging from the provision of a very well-patronised bookshop in the Shenzhen Public Library, to what appeared to be a karaoke bar in the basement of a library in Shanghai.

Future relations between ALIA and colleagues in China? Very much worth putting on our International relations agenda in my view. If the membership agrees, the opportunity for us to be involved, both as an Association and individual practitioners, is considerable, and potentially very rewarding. The decision by the Australian government to invite ALIA's President to join the delegation is an indication of the possibility which exists for us to take an active role in liaison and support; there is also an opportunity for us to work closely with ACLIS in the development of exchange and assistance programs. The already considerable initiatives undertaken by the National Library of Australia offer an invaluable doorway for both ALIA and ACLIS; it is important that all three bodies work together to ensure that whatever is undertaken is done in concert and shared awareness, and to maximum effect.

One final thought; a totally unexpected benefit of the trip: the opportunity to spend uninterrupted time with a group of Australian colleagues, exchanging ideas, arguments and philosophies, and resulting in an extension of mutual respect and understanding. We/I need to do more of this. □



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