

China, the inventor of paper and printing has been famous for its Imperial Libraries. According to archival research, even before 1600 BC there existed at least one 'library' consisting of bone-and-shell inscriptions. However, according to the recorded history the first official library was set up during the sixth century BC and Lao Zi, the great philosopher was its custodian. Subsequently, each small royal state of China started its own library. Simultaneously, every school of scholars began to store their own private collections. Paper was not invented by then. Therefore, all these 'collections', royal or private, were mostly engravings on bamboo or wooden strips, or writings on expensive silk.

These ancient libraries suffered a setback in 221 BC. The Emperor of the newly unified China thought that the writings and inscriptions would confuse the people's mind, and therefore, ordered the burning of all these (except those on agriculture, medicine and divinity). But some of these collections survived as people resisted the move and the Emperor himself was deposed soon after.

Libraries in Feudal Period

Emperor Wu (140-87 BC) of the Han dynasty established the first well organised Imperial Library. It was not meant for the

general public, but served the royal family, ministers, high officials and noted scholars. At a slightly later stage, at the behest of the Emperor, the 'Librarian' Liu Xiang started to compile 'Qi Lue' and 'Bie Lu', which were completed by his son Liu Xing. While Qi Lue or 'Summary for Seven Classics' was the first bibliography to be compiled in China. Bie Lu or 'The Other Register' was the first collection of abstracts.

Work on compilation of bibliographies progressed. During the period of Jin (265-316 AD), 'New Library Catalogue', was compiled by Xun Xu. The invention of paper (1st century AD), printing technique (5th century AD) and block-making art (9th century AD) by China made book production easier, and books were cheaper and easily available. Libraries, especially the private ones, started growing up. Emphasis was also given on compilation and indexing jobs. In 1408 AD a comprehensive encyclopaedia, 'Yong Le Da Dian' was completed. It consisted of 22,877 volumes of text and 60 volumes of index. The National Bibliography, 'Si Ku Quan Shu' (in 36,275 volumes) was completed in 1782.

The librarians/compilers of this period used their own classification systems. In "Qi Lue", Liu Xing classified the collections into six categories. Xun Xu in his 'New Library Catalogue', classified the books

into four divisions using his 'Four Division Classification Method'. Later scholars started further classifying the books into 12 divisions. From 18th century upto the beginning of this century another scheme followed in which four divisions and 44 categories were recommended for classification of books.

Birth of Modern Libraries

Libraries in the modern sense started in China by the end of 19th century under the influence of the West. In 1896 AD, Emperor Guang Xu proclaimed an order for establishing public libraries. In 1903 AD the first public library was founded in Wuhan. Other provinces soon followed the step. Dewey's Decimal Classification was adopted in 1904 as a national scheme. In 1910, Beijing Municipality Library was transformed into the National Beijing Library. China Association of Libraries was formed in 1925. By 1930 there were 2935 libraries of various kinds in China. Further development in the library movement started only after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

Present Day Libraries

In China, at present there are more than 200,000 libraries, including one National Library, about 1800 public libraries, 700 higher education libraries, 1000 scientific & research libraries and 110,000 trade union libraries.

Different types of libraries are under the administrative control of different authorities. But the Administrative Bureau of

Library Service of the Ministry of Culture coordinates different library systems in the whole country. Inter-library loan service is widely used and accepted throughout China.

National & Public Libraries: It is interesting to note that there are two national library network centres in China. One national centre is in Beijing and the other one is in Shanghai. Nine regional library network centres function at Tianjin, Liaoning, Heilongjiang, Shaanxi, Gansu, Si Chuan, Hubei, Guangdong and Jiangsu. All these libraries function under the control of Ministry of Culture.

The National Library of China (Beijing) is the largest comprehensive library in China with the richest collection of books, periodicals, newspapers, maps, photographs, carvings & inscriptions, manuscripts, microfilms and tape recordings. Its present holding is about 12 million items, of which 60 per cent are in Chinese and the remaining part in 140 different foreign languages. It has 55,100 titles of periodicals and 3,600 titles of newspapers. More than two million volumes of its holdings are considered rare. Its rich holdings can be traced to the Government regulations that require every publisher in China to deposit three copies of each new title with the National Library. With a staff of about 1000, the library has the following departments: Personnel, Security, Administration, Capital Construction, Acquisition, Cataloguing, Periodicals, Newspapers & other Publications, Rare Books & Special Collections, Reference & Research, Library Science & Bibliography and Document Press.

Amongst the public libraries, the Shanghai Municipal Library is the largest in China. It has more than seven million volumes in its holdings, 850,000 of which are in foreign languages. It has compiled numerous important bibliographic catalogues including 'Catalogue of Chinese Collectanea' and the 'National Index of Newspapers & Periodicals'. It employs a staff of about 550 and is organised into six major departments: Acquisition & Cataloguing, Stacks & Readers, Reference & Circulation, Children's Books, Bibliography and Administration.

Educational Libraries: Libraries of higher education include university, college and school libraries. These are under the authority of the Ministry of Education and funded by the institutions concerned. At present, there are about 700 university and college libraries accounting for 200 million volumes of acquisition.

Beijing University Library is one of the best university libraries in China. It has about four million volumes, one-fourth of which are in different foreign languages. The library employs a staff of about 300 members and it consists of the following five major departments: Ordering & Cataloguing, Reference & Circulation, Serials, Binding & Preservation and Editorial & Translation. The other large university libraries are at Nanjing, Wuhan and Fudan.

The school libraries mainly collect text books, popular science materials, literature, reference and children's books.

Scientific & Research Libraries: In this category there are about 150 libraries of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and a large number of libraries attached to research institutes of various ministries.

The academy of Science Library in Beijing with a staff of about 400 persons is mainly engaged in the acquisition of pure and applied science publications. A large number of foreign publications, including periodicals, are received in exchange with the publications of Chinese Academy of Science. The Academy library offers micro-filming and plain paper photo-copying service.

The Institute of Scientific & Technological Information of China (ISTIC) functions under the administrative control of the State Commission for Science & Technology. It houses the largest collection of technical literature, such as patents, standards and reports from home and abroad. ISTIC has its headquarters at Beijing and a branch office at Chongqing. Its activities include coordination and production of secondary and tertiary publications.

Trade Union Libraries: There are a large number of factory libraries organised by the trade unions within the factories. Almost all factories have their own trade union libraries.

Towards Automation

The automation of library and information processes still remains far behind the western standards. This is mainly because of historical, political and economic reasons. Some progress in this field was

made in early sixties, but the same was undone during the Cultural Revolution. However, from mid-seventies new stress is being laid in this field. In 1975, the Ministry of Machine Building experimented with machine retrieval of 500 papers on metallurgy. The same Ministry also successfully conducted online retrieval experiments in 1977. All these were done on indigenous computers.

In recent years, the National Library of China has taken the lead in library automation activities. An American specialist was invited in 1981 for consultation. As a result, the National Library commenced cataloguing work in MARC on a trial basis for western language periodicals.

ISTIC has achieved moderate success in the field of computerization. In collaboration with major libraries, ISTIC has also launched an ambitious 15-year plan, to be completed in three stages, for introduction of online information retrieval and automatic production of secondary publications. The first stage envisaged creation

of data-files for foreign and domestic scientific articles, patents & standards and compilation of a subject thesaurus in Chinese. The work is supposed to be completed in 1986, when the next stage to systematize and revise the database will be taken up. In the proposed third stage (1991-96), online information retrieval network on national level will be established. This will then be linked up with international database networks.

One more point worth mentioning is that the main collections in all the major libraries are in Chinese language. The peculiar pictographic nature of Chinese written language appears to be a major hurdle for many important computer applications. Therefore, the automation of library services cannot be realized unless the ability of computers to process Chinese characters is increased. It is, of course, heartening to note that the Chinese Government is giving high priority to overcome this difficulty. We, therefore, hope to see China on the library and information services map of the World as a prominent figure before the end of this century. □