

Libraries, Books, and Reading In The People's Republic of China: A Traveler's Account

by

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Chinese culture has always stressed the importance of books and scholarship, yet prior to the 1949 Communist take-over, the level of literacy was low. The new government had as one of its earliest goals to raise the literacy level. A set-back occurred from the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 to the downfall of the "Gang of Four" in 1976. During this period being "red" was considered better than being "expert." Some libraries were closed, and others were broken into by the Red Guards. The type of material the populace was allowed to read was severely limited. Recently, libraries, scholarship, and knowledge have been allowed to flourish.

I arrived for a twelve-day general tour of China in December 1979, three years after the downfall of the "Gang of Four." This was my first visit to China. It gave me an opportunity to combine my interest in East Asian history with observation of the role of libraries, reading, and books in another society. Since my visit, I have had the privilege of corresponding with three people in China. Two are English majors attending a University in Xian; the third was our group's national guide. Our correspondence has been in English and covers a large range of topics. But some of their comments pertain to books and reading, and these comments prove enlightening.

As I wrote down my observations each night while I was in China, I wondered what observations a Chinese traveler would make, based on a twelve-day, four-city visit in the United States with limited command in English. Yet, because of the lack of information presently available to us concerning Chinese society, travelers' observations are one of the few ways Americans have of learning about Chinese libraries and Chinese attitudes toward books and reading. Even though the observations are casual, the comments made here may be instructive not only about the role of libraries, books, and reading in Chinese society but about their role in American society as well, since studying an institution in another country often raises questions about the role of the institution in one's own society.

Canton Happy Machinery Park

The first stop on our trip after entering the People's Republic of China was Canton. Our local guide announced that the next morning we would be

visiting a factory. Having done some prior research on libraries in China, I realized the factory might have a library or, as the Chinese call it, a reading room. I made inquiries through the proper channels to see if I might visit the reading room sometime during the tour of the factory. Since no one mentioned my request, I imagined it had not been granted. As with all our tours of factories and communes, we had a briefing by officials, accompanied by tea at the start of our tour. After the briefing an official asked to see the person who was interested in seeing the reading rooms. All had been arranged, but not quite the way I had expected. I had tried out my Chinese on our local guide the day before. (I had studied Chinese for three years but the last time I had tried to carry on a conversation was in 1973.) My conversation with the guides had not been overly successful, but they kept on encouraging me. Our local guide had had arranged with the factory officials for me to see one of the two reading rooms. He said that to help me practice my Chinese, I would be accompanied by a young factory worker who did not know any English. By necessity, my Chinese did improve greatly during the forty-five minutes I was away from the group, but not having a translator severely limited the number and type of questions I asked.

The name of the factory we were visiting was translated for us as Canton Happy Machinery Park. It has six thousand, one hundred workers and produces primarily sugar refinery equipment and all types of drilling equipment. The two reading rooms were in two different buildings. At first, the official asked me which reading room I would like to visit, explaining that one was for leisure reading, the other for technical research. I indicated the former. There was a conversation between two of the officials which I could not follow. Then I was told that the reading room for leisure reading was closed, would I like to see the other? I speculated that the leisure reading room might have been closed because it was Sunday (the traditional day off except for round-the-clock shift work) or that it was very close to lunch time. Consequently, my factory worker guide and I walked over to the building that housed the technical research reading room. It was made up of two rooms, the largest being about twenty by fifteen feet. Books in Western languages were in a glass door bookcase which could be locked. This was located in the smaller room. When I walked into the reading room there were seven or eight young men at various tables. All activity stopped and my guide explained who I was. For many of these men this may have been the first time for them to have personal contact with a Westerner. Fortunately, one of the young men knew a little English. What questions he could not understand I tried to ask in Chinese; whereupon, all of them would discuss what I was trying to ask and after some clarification or writing down of characters, I would usually get some kind of answer. I was told that the library contained about 10,000 volumes. The card catalog was entirely in Chinese. Either Western books were not cataloged, or the information was translated into Chinese. All the catalog cards were handwritten. Even call numbers and dates were written in Chinese characters. (Many newer classification schemes in China use Arabic numbers, and dates are often expressed in Arabic.) The card catalog allowed for access by

author, title, place being described, and subject. I asked if the catalog was easy to use. The English-speaking worker said it was very hard to find material in the catalog. Almost all the books I glanced at were over ten years old, both for foreign and Chinese titles. On the magazine racks, however there were many recent issues in Chinese, Japanese, English, Russian and German. My guide indicated it was time to go. There were still so many questions I wanted to ask, but there was not the time nor the language expertise.

Shansi Teacher's Training University

The only other library I was able to visit was at the Shansi Teacher's Training University. Here, the whole group toured the University and visited the library. The university has as its sole purpose the training of teachers for all levels, elementary through college. It has a student body of 2800 and 1500 teachers and staff. It is a four-year institution. Part of our tour was spent talking to English majors; afterwards, other students who did not know English joined us to show us around. Evidently, word spread quickly that I was the only one in the group that knew any Chinese at all. I soon had several students around me asking questions so that I had very little chance to ask questions of my own. But, as I joined the group in the library, a student who did know some English started talking with me. The library is not in a separate building, but takes up the larger part of three floors of a four story brick building. The group was told that, before 1949, the library had 20,000 books; it now has 1.2 million books. One room had current periodicals; nearby was a desk and behind it a closed stack area. This was a periodical service desk and the stacks contained back issues of periodicals, mostly unbound. There was also a reserve reading desk but no reserve reading room. Professors could ask that certain titles be put on reserve. Otherwise the normal loan period for circulating materials was one month. If material was not returned on time, borrowing privileges would be curtailed, a much stiffer penalty than is common in our country. Only teachers, staff and students of the university can use the library. They are not permitted even to enter another university library. A special card is required for admission into the city and provincial libraries. There are very few bookstores, and—compared to American bookstores—very few titles in stock. Even if a title were available to a student who had been denied borrowing privileges, chances would be good that he or she could not afford to buy the title.

The card catalog was set up in one room to itself. It was divided into two sections, one for Western material, the other for materials in characters. The character catalog was arranged using what is called the "four-corner system." This means the cards are arranged in the order of the direction of the first stroke in the first character. Several students I talked to said it was a difficult system to use.

Much of one floor of the library was devoted to reading rooms. There were no individual carrels, but rather long tables. Each reading room could seat up to ninety-six people, and there were four reading rooms. The reading rooms

were a popular place to study, especially in the winter time as it was warmer in the library than other places. However, the rooms were cold by our standards; the temperature the day we visited was about 60° F. Students try to get to the reading rooms early so as to get good seats under the lights. By our standards the lighting would be considered poor. The reading rooms were open in the morning and from two to six in the afternoon.

The faculty had their own set of rooms: one for preparing for classes, another for their own collection of books. Both in the general stacks and in the stacks for the faculty I noticed a wide variety of subjects. Unlike the factory reading room the collection included books with recent imprint dates. Western books were housed in separate stacks, and there I saw such titles as: *Reader's Digest*, *Popular Science*, *Index Medicus* and *U.S. Monthly Catalog*.

Later on the same day, after we had visited the university library, I asked one of our local guides about restricted books in libraries. He told me valuable classical books, some foreign books, some translations and books containing political thinking not in favor were restricted. To use any of the books with restricted access one must give a legitimate reason for wanting to read them and obtain permission from local party officials.

The Thorn Birds and the English Classics

While we were visiting the fourth city on our tour, Changsha, a young man of about college age, struck up a conversation with me in English. After answering many of his questions, I had a chance to ask a few of my own. He had been studying for graduate exams in the city library and was returning from having lunch with his family. He said the library was about the only place where one could find materials in English to read. I asked if he had read very much English literature either translated or in the original. He replied he had read *Treasure Island*, *Oliver Twist* and *Tom Sawyer*. I had asked the same question of a few students at the Shansi Teacher's Training University. They had read *Oliver Twist* and *Tom Sawyer*. These students as well as other students were very interested in reading more contemporary works in English. One of the first questions our English speaking guide asked me, once we had gotten to know each other, was what was on the best seller list. One of the first books I mentioned was the *Thorn Birds*. He replied that he had read that book, and that it had too much sex for him.

This young man, age 25, is very interested in modern American literature and has written some interesting comments about our literature and history. He wrote saying he had recently finished reading *Gone With the Wind*. His comment was: "The book was so well written, but I can't agree to the author's viewpoint toward the American civil war. I think the war was great because it had liberated the black slaves in the south and smashed the feudal society." For most Chinese, any written material, whether fiction or nonfiction, has a purpose in teaching or reforming the person reading the material. To have a novel written for pure enjoyment is an unusual idea. Although I have tried to

explain that our literature, especially our popular fiction, does not necessarily have any other purpose except to entertain, I often wonder how many Chinese students are trying to figure out what our novels are teaching our population.

While my friend is interested in modern American literature, for him to be admitted to the graduate level of the educational system he must read more traditional British literature. In one letter I asked him what type of questions were asked on these exams which he kept writing to me about not making a high enough score. He replied: "Now I am going to present you a few questions from the examination paper last time: Identify the following characters in what book they made their appearance: Angel Clare, Becky Sharp, Mrs. Bennet, Ernest Everhard and Falstaff ... Study the following list and give brief and pertinent answers: (1) Stevenson's method of writing (2) The younger romantics as distinguished from the old ones (3) William Tyndale and the Biblical Style (4) Ben Johnson and Shakespeare contrast ..." As I am not an expert in British literature, with the assistance of one of my colleagues in the reference department I searched for materials that would answer these questions without resulting in exorbitant mailing costs. I wanted to ask him if the staff at his college or public library would have provided such assistance.

Service to Library Patrons

Indirectly, I received the answer to my unwritten question several letters later. I mentioned in one letter that I had been busy preparing bibliographic instruction lectures for students of Asian history. He wrote back: "By the way could you explain a little bit about the library system in your country?" I responded by briefly indicating the types of libraries we have, whom they serve, the difference between public and technical service areas. I also mentioned that, in theory and, I hoped in practice, librarians try directly or indirectly to help their patrons find materials they want or need. His comments were as follows: "The library system in China is quite similar to yours, so far as the classification of books is concerned. But in China the library never provides or helps to find the research materials you want. To say nothing about teaching you how to use the library and how to do research. All they do is to take out the books from the bookstore in line with the booklist you give them." It is interesting to speculate what American college students might write to a foreign librarian about the library system in this country.

Access to Libraries

Throughout my trip and in the letters from my friends in China I received the impression that books and libraries are very important to the Chinese. Two or three times in each city we visited I had a chance to go out by myself and wander around the streets of the city. Usually, I would strike up a conversation with someone in Chinese, indicating that I was an American. As I talked, other Chinese would join in the conversation. (Many Chinese are still not used to seeing Westerners, especially in the smaller cities, and to hear one attempting to

speak their language, no matter how poorly, is even rarer.) When I mentioned I was a librarian there would always be nods (of approval or understanding I do not know). If I asked if the city had a library everyone would nod their heads and point out the direction. When I asked if they went to the library often, I received an affirmative answer.

Most Chinese have little access to television, and both radio and television stations broadcast only a limited number of hours; it appears that reading is one of the main sources of entertainment. As there are not enough copies of popular books in bookstores or libraries, reading and the borrowing of books are considered a privilege. Another of my friends wrote that, although libraries are free, they are only open to citizens of the jurisdiction or school and "one has to hand in a small sum of money to guarantee that he will not lose or spoil the book he has borrowed." The young national guide indicates there are limits on how many books may be borrowed from the library. "For some popular books, such as Kissinger's *The White House* we are only allowed to read them in the reading room in the library there."

I hope to return to the People's Republic of China to visit my friends and to request permission to visit some of their libraries. Until then, I will be left with the impressions I have given here, along with information I have gathered from other librarians who have traveled to China in the last few years. Included is a selected bibliography of articles published since 1978 that will broaden one's knowledge of the Chinese and their world of books, reading and libraries.

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