

But in China it's Quite Different

Some Observations on a Serials Management Seminar in Xian, China, June 1988

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Early in 1988 we were surprised and delighted to be approached by the British Council with a request to run a seminar in China on the theme of "Serials Management in National and Academic Libraries". As this is not the sort of offer one receives everyday, it was accepted with alacrity! The seminar was planned to run in the Library of Xian Jiaotong University from 8-17 June 1988 with approximately 40 delegates drawn from libraries all over China. Further details concerning both the seminar and the visit in general, however, were more difficult to elicit, and we decided at an early stage to devise our own programme, which we submitted to the British Council, in order to begin preparation of lectures, audio-visual aids and demonstrations.

Prior to our departure from England there was a fair amount of chaos, particularly during the last few weeks, concerning dates, travel arrangements, accommodation etc., and numerous telexes flew backwards and forwards between London and Beijing. Once we were in China, fortunately, everything went very smoothly and we were extremely well looked after by representatives from our host organization, the National Library and Information Committee for Universities and Colleges. During the first part of our stay in Beijing, chauffeur-driven, air-conditioned cars were provided for sightseeing trips to the Great Wall at Badaling, the Ming Tombs and the former Imperial Palace (the Forbidden City where "The Last Emperor" was filmed).

On arrival in Xian we were introduced to the seminar organisers and interpreters and discovered to our alarm that many of the papers we had sent on in advance (requested as merely an aid to the interpreters) had been completely

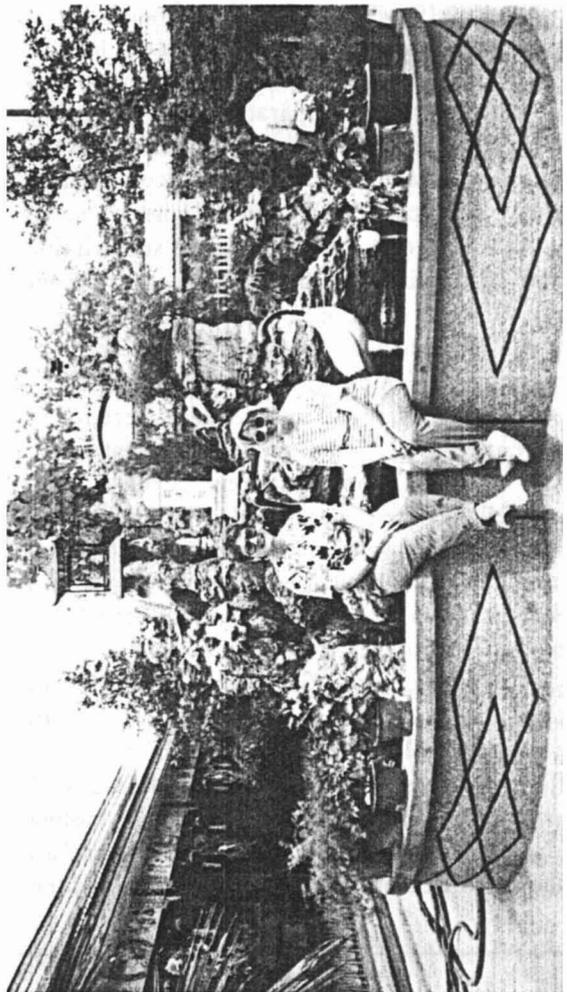
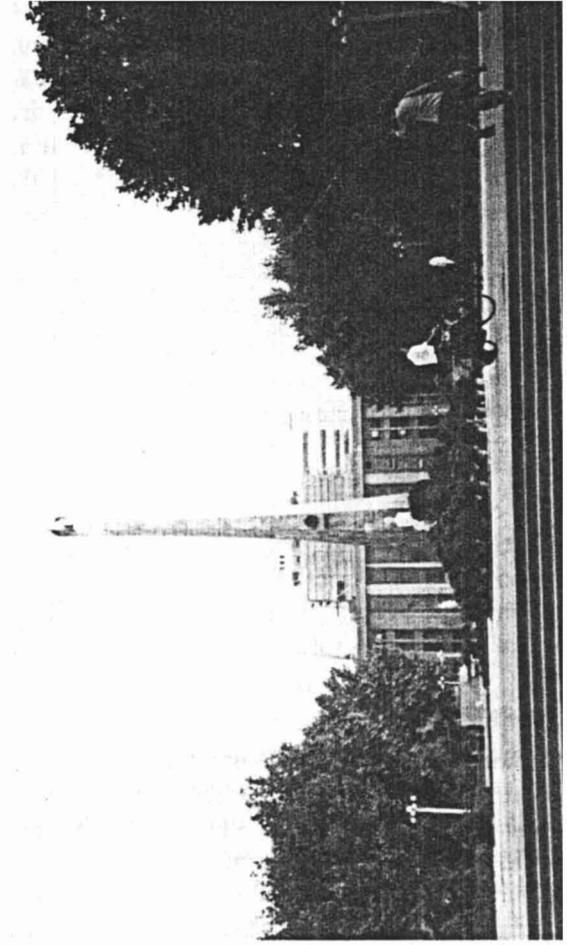
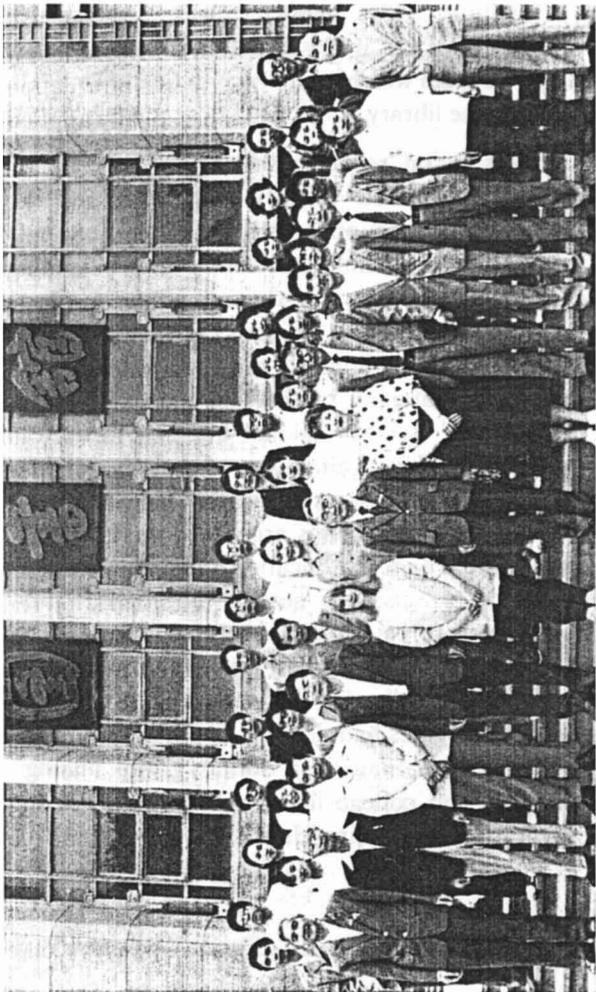
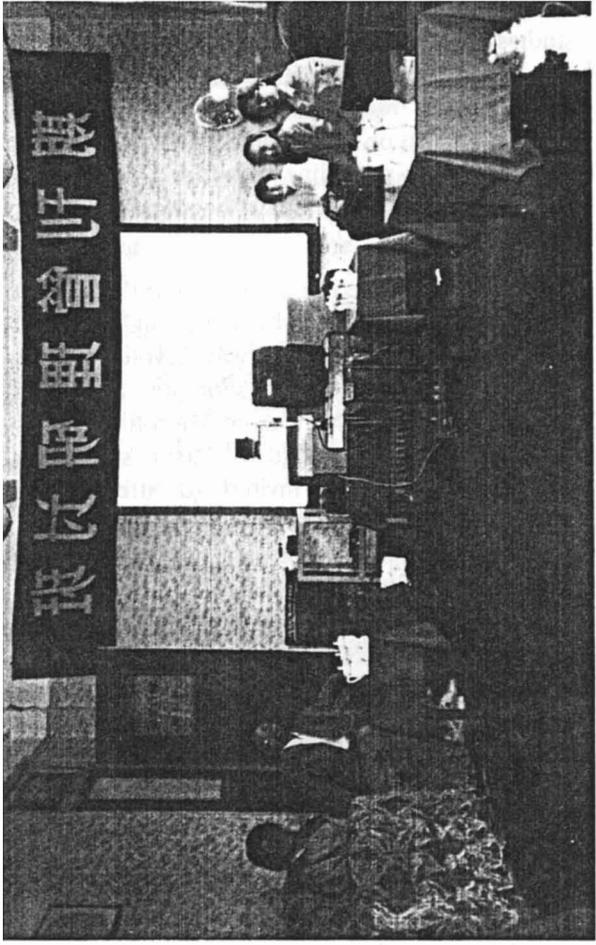
translated into Chinese and distributed to all the delegates. Luckily we had not sent advance copies of all papers and between us we were able to combine and reformat our lectures and other presentations creatively in order to produce an acceptable and varied programme. The delegates themselves ranged from Professors and Directors of Libraries to middle management Serials/Acquisition librarians, and there was clearly a small group of "experts" who led the questions and discussion groups. As many of the delegates could not speak or understand English we were fortunate in having good interpreters who were closely involved with serials in their everyday work, and therefore confident when dealing with serials-related terminology. The seminar room in the Library was wonderful (see photographs) - furnished with comfortable sofas and small tables upon which china tea cups were constantly replenished with jasmine tea. The equipment which we had requested in advance - overhead projector, 35mm slide projector, and IBM PC - was all provided in excellent working order.

All the participants in the seminar were very keen, interested and knowledgeable. They asked pertinent and searching questions and were not at all reticent. Serials are obviously as important in the Chinese academic scene as they are in Britain, and the problems faced are very similar. We covered a wide range of topics during the eight days of the seminar and the typical day consisted of breakfast around 7.15 a.m. (more about Chinese breakfasts later!), lectures and presentations from 8.30 a.m. to 11.30 a.m., lunch from 11.30 a.m. to 2.30 p.m. and discussion groups from 2.30 p.m. to 5.30 p.m. Lunchtime in China starts early and is long and sacrosanct; indeed it would be impossible to teach during this time because of the loud stirring music and public broadcasts emanating from the campus tannoy system.

After the seminar's formal opening ceremony which consisted of speeches and copious thanks to all concerned, we began with an introductory

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slide presentation showing the location and workings of the British Library Document Supply Centre and Loughborough University Library. These were very well received and served to "break the ice". The first major topic of the seminar concerned serials acquisition and de-acquisition and this was vigorously debated. Journal selection in Chinese academic libraries is undertaken mainly by the teaching and research staff. Delegates expressed considerable interest in the idea of collection development policies and it was apparent that most Chinese libraries had yet to compile formal selection policy documents. Most delegates were familiar with the basic, hard-copy bibliographical tools for serials selection and they claimed to have access to them. Sessions on the use of CD-ROM, access to subscription agents' databases and the use of automation in general to facilitate the collection of management information, promoted discussion.

Methods used in Chinese libraries for the acquisition of serials are very different from those employed in the West. Chinese serials are normally purchased direct from the publisher, and in some cases, paid for issue by issue (recognized as extremely inefficient!). Foreign serials are almost exclusively acquired from the China National Publications Import and Export Corporation (CNPIEC). Receipt of issues seems to be reasonably prompt but invoicing can take up to a year after receipt, causing enormous problems for budget preparation and forecasting. Difficulties associated with the budgeting and the continuing escalation of journal prices are also major preoccupations for Chinese serial librarians. The question of the use of subscription agents was initially dismissed as being irrelevant to the Chinese situation, but it was interesting to observe that when we began to outline some of the services which are currently being offered by the major agents, the points we made were noted with enthusiasm. Some delegates admitted to using an agent on occasions (Collet's and Blackwell's were mentioned) but generally speaking agents were not used. The subject of agents' services should at least have given the two delegates from the CNPIEC some food for thought. The subject of how to weed collections and cancel serials titles was greeted with enthusiasm. It seemed to come as a surprise to the Chinese to learn that Western libraries were suffering likewise from the combined results of journal price inflation and static or dwindling budgets. Ways in which cancellation exercises could be carried out were noted in detail, and the

description given in a paper on journal use studies stimulated intense discussion. This may be due to the fact that until recently many Chinese libraries have traditionally been "closed access". Putting serials on "open access" is raising the same questions regarding monitoring of use with which Western libraries have been grappling for some time.

We had been advised in advance that the subject of serials automation would be high on the agenda and one whole day was devoted to this topic. This included six separate afternoon demonstrations of the Faxon Microlinx serials check-in software package by Faxon staff, who had been specifically invited to attend. The demonstrations proved to be a great success and provided a useful opportunity to talk to the delegates in small groups. Automation in Chinese libraries is still in its infancy; it appears to be developing in a piecemeal fashion and to be totally developed in-house. Integrated packages do not seem to be available. Most delegates had access to their institution's mainframe computer as well as to at least one library-based personal computer, but as yet, serials automation is exclusively confined to the production of lists and indexes. Linked to the topic of automation, a paper was given on the automated serials financial control system at Loughborough University. This paper was extremely well-received, as it gave detailed information about a system which could be practically applied in a Chinese library.

The session on resource-sharing discussed the role of the British Library Document Supply Centre in connection with interlibrary lending and borrowing, and outlined other projects concerned with resource-sharing in the United Kingdom. There is no Chinese equivalent of the British Library, although a national union list of serials is maintained by the National Library in Beijing, and various regional efforts are under way. Automation again featured heavily in our discussions on resource-sharing as it clearly facilitates activities in this area. Our final session concentrated on user education and education for potential or existing serials librarians, and delegates were particularly interested in the role of the UK Serials Group. In fact, we are proud to announce that following this session, we were told that the delegates had decided to set up a similar body in China, namely a serials group linking university and college libraries, which would be organized from Nanjing University.

During our one and a half weeks at Xian Jiaotong University we were taken on a number of sightseeing trips, notably to the Terracotta Warriors at the Tomb of Emperor Qin Shihuang and the Huaqing Hot Springs. Xian itself is also a fascinating city to explore, being a former imperial capital of China and one of the cities on the famous Silk road. The nearby Shaanxi Provincial Museum had a particularly interesting exhibition celebrating the Year of the Dragon (1988) displaying priceless dragon relics from the earliest dynasties to the present day. Within the University we were shown round the serials department and given a guided tour of the whole library. Although somewhat old-fashioned in design, the Library appeared to be very well stocked, with large, if somewhat drab, reading rooms. Books, serial issues and abstracting and indexing tools appeared up-to-date. Xian Jiaotong University is in the process of building a new University Library, behind the existing Library, as part of a massive programme of academic library expansion. During our second week in Xian, we were invited to a meeting with the President of the University, and some of his senior colleagues, who outlined the history,

background and future of the university. There is no doubt that libraries and higher education in general are seen to have a key role in the future development of the country.

China is indeed a fascinating place to visit and it is difficult to isolate what our lasting memories will be, but the list will definitely include the splendid hospitality of people; the streets of Beijing and Xian with the bicycles, the people, the dust and the street markets; the splendour of the palaces and the awe inspiring sight of the Terracotta Warriors; the children of the university kindergarten "performing" for us; the inedible Chinese breakfasts of rice soup, pickled vegetables and steamed bread! and above all the friends we made during the trip. We were quite moved to receive a letter from our interpreter on our return, in which he said "I don't think you have discovered that the delegates, in front of you and in the lectures, called you Miss Woodward and Miss Pilling, but outside the lectures when we talked about you, we called you Hazel and Stella. This doesn't mean anything in Europe, but in China it's quite different."