ENRICHING CHINESE CULTURAL HERITAGE AT THE QUEENS LIBRARY

Gary E. Strong
Director
Queens Borough Public Library
Email: gstrong@queenslibrary.org

Keywords: Public Libraries, Services to Immigrants; Public Libraries, Services to Minorities; Libraries and Community;
Library Outreach Programs; Public Libraries, Cultural Programs

【Abstract】

The Queens Borough Public Library through its New Americans Program has been providing opportunities for the Chinese Community to experience quality library service for many years. By building collections, providing opportunities to learn English, providing job information, coping skills classes, cultural programs and electronic access to Chinese vernacular script, the Library provides a unique public library experience to its many immigrants. Through demographic analysis, the Library places its collections in the communities where immigrants live and provides programs of relevance to celebrate the cultures and traditions of the Chinese community.

I am honored to be able to speak with you this afternoon and to briefly explore the celebration of Chinese heritage and culture at the Queens Library. The highlight of our efforts was the presentation of an exhibition in early 2000, “Visible Traces; Rare books and special collections from the National Library of China.” As you know, the National Library of China was established in 1909 and was formerly known as the Beijing Library. It represents the largest collection of its kind in Asia. With some 22,000,000 volumes, the collection is comprised of documents covering the entire range of the history of writing in China with works of religion, philosophy, literature, art, archeology, medicine, and historical records of all kinds including ancient books, rubbings, and maps, in a variety of formats. Its earliest origins include the many successive imperial collections from the Song dynasty (960-1279) through the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). During the Zing dynasty, the collection was called the Capital Library (Jingshi Library) and was administered by the Board of Education, a division of the imperial administration. In addition, the collection has incorporated numerous private libraries over the centuries making for a very rich resource.

The exhibition presented sixty-eight objects that were representative of China’s continuing history of writing. Divided into four sections, the items represented rare books and ancient writings; rubbings from a variety of carved and engraved materials; maps; and documents from China’s numerous ethnic minorities.

Curators from the National Library were on hand for the four-month run of the exhibition giving lectures, workshops and studying at the Library. A scholarly symposium drew participants from across the United States and as far away as London. The proceedings from that event will be published in the fall. A bi-lingual catalog was produced and is now
available for continued research and understanding. A new collaboration with the Asia Society produced a teacher’s guide and web site highlighting the collection to continue its value and usefulness as a teaching tool.

Eighteen months earlier, the Queens Library was host to an award-winning exhibit of children’s drawings and calligraphy. The exhibit, displayed in the Library’s International Resource Center, was accompanied by demonstrations and workshops by one of the child artists and his teacher, who traveled to New York with a delegation from the Shanghai Library. At the same time, Queens Library hosted an exhibition of rubbings and calligraphy from the extensive collections of the Shanghai Library.

“Festivals of China’s Western Provinces,” a photographic exhibition, was presented during the summer of 2000 in the gallery at the International Resource Center. Film director and photography Wang Xin-jun presented a slide-lecture in conjunction with the very popular exhibition.

One might wonder why a public library would undertake such ambitious projects. Each required extensive negotiations, exhibition expertise, and scholarly understanding. The agreements alone were monumental. For Queens Library, this is a natural outgrowth of our cooperation agreements with the two libraries. We wanted something tangible for our Chinese customers in Queens and for a broader international audience that uses our libraries. We want to bridge the distance between our cultures and traditions.

Our programming has reached far beyond these two exhibitions. We present an outstanding array of programs on various aspects of Chinese culture. We are fortunate to have state-of-the-art performance facilities in our new Flushing Library, which include a 227-seat auditorium with computer-controlled theatrical lighting and sound systems and with a control booth and infrared headphones for simultaneous translation.

In November 1998 the International Resource Center presented a performance of Shaoxing (Yue-chu) style opera by the Shanghai Spring Drama Studio. The featured actress was Jin Caifeng, the most famous living performer in the Shaoxing style. Ms. Jin and her company traveled to New York from Shanghai especially for this performance. The Queens Library and the Chinese American Arts Council, a nonprofit organization based in Manhattan, jointly presented the program.

In April of 1999 Dr. Wendy Abraham presented a lecture entitled “The Chinese Jews of Kaifeng.” Dr. Abraham, one of the few Western experts on this subject, delivered the lecture in English and was simultaneously translated into Chinese by two interpreters from the United Nations. “Joys and Trials of Literary Life,” was an author program presented in Chinese featuring Wang Ting-chun. He is a renowned prolific writer selected as one of the 30 “Classic Writers” in the Republic of China.

A variety of special programs for the Chinese community have recently included, “Dancing Swords: Martial Arts in Chinese Opera,” a performance-demonstration by the Chinese Theatre Workshop; “A Musical Journey Through China,” a lecture-demonstration and concert by the performing group Music From China; and “Tiananmen Revisited: A Re-Examination of the 1989 Tiananmen Demonstrations in Light of the Recently Published ‘Tiananmen Papers’.”

In the later program, a distinguished panel discussed China’s democracy movement in light of newly published government documents concerning the 1989 demonstrations in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square. The panel included a student leader during the 1989 democracy movement, the former director of the Chinese National Institute of Economic Reform; a professor of political science and a columnist and advisor to the editor of the World Journal newspaper and political commentator on World Journal television. Press coverage prior to the program extended as far as a Chinese newspaper published in Paris. Mention of the program was made on Voice of America. People traveled from Manhattan, New Jersey, Connecticut and even Pennsylvania. The panelists spoke in Chinese and an interpreter translated their remarks to non-Chinese listeners via the wireless headsets distributed as people entered the auditorium. The 31 copies of the book, which had been purchased for the IRC, were checked out within minutes following the program.
A Chinese book discussion group was introduced in the spring of 2001. The group met for three sessions and discussed—in Chinese—books by three prominent authors, including a work by the 2000 Nobel Prize Winner in Literature, Gao Xingjian.

The Queens Library in the last thirty-five years has experienced a tremendous growth and maturity in serving its Chinese customers. First, there was the influx of Chinese librarians in the 1960s. These librarians bridged the gap between the Queens Library and its Chinese customers. Queens, the borough considered most suitable for living in the City of New York, is the choice of residency among many Chinese. A steady increase of Chinese immigrants has settled in Queens since the early 1960s.

Indeed, Queens is known as a community of immigrants. According to the 2000 census, more than 17% of Queen's population is now Asian. And, we see no end to that growth. Chinese immigrants who live here come from all parts of the globe. Most of them share one common characteristic. They are all very proud of their heritage—the long history of China and its culture. The United States has adopted them. They think of themselves first as Americans. They all like to see their children grow up with some knowledge of Chinese culture and history. Most do not identify themselves with any political system outside the United States. There is no difference between the Chinese immigrants and those immigrants who came from Europe in the early 20th century. The Queens Borough Public Library plays a very significant and meaningful role in the life of these Chinese immigrants by providing them with a diverse collection of Chinese materials, English materials on China and various programs in Chinese languages to prepare them to adjust to life in this country.

Chinese who traditionally put a great emphasis on their children's education have become a very significant group of customers of the Library. It is not accidental that the annual circulation of the Flushing Branch is the top one among the Library's 62 community libraries. On any given afternoon, Flushing branch looks like a public library in any Chinese city. Flushing branch by the way is not the only branch in the Queens system that is heavily used by Chinese residents. There are several other branch libraries, which are heavily used by Chinese customers such as the Elmhurst and Bayside branches. Special collections in the Chinese language are housed in 30 of the branches, at the Central Library and in the new International Resource Center.

In the 1960s, Chinese materials and books on China or about China were very few and insignificant. The philosophy of customer service at the Queens Library has always been to meet the needs of its customers and to provide the kind of materials and programs its customers want. The development of Chinese language collections shifted very significantly in the 1980s. The Library recognized the importance of its Chinese customers by formally establishing Ni Hao collections.

"Ni Hao" means greetings in Chinese. The Ni Hao program is the largest public library collection development program in the United States for general Chinese readers. During the past 12 years, the New Americans Program has built a well-rounded collection, totaling over 125,000 items with emphasis on publications of modern literature by best-selling authors from the 1920s through the present. In addition to adult and children's books, all Ni Hao collections have audio and videocassettes, CDs, DVDs, magazines and newspapers. Staff experienced and knowledgeable in Chinese language and literature select all materials. At least 90% of the adult books and all videotapes purchased are cataloged. The collection has been built balanced in terms of place of publication (China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong), reading level and subject matter. The preferences and needs of Mandarin and Cantonese speakers are considered in selecting audio and videotapes.

Ni Hao has many special features. For example, the Chinese Periodicals Subscriptions List, from which branches select newspapers and magazines, is the most comprehensive list of its kind of any public library in the United States. Through "standing order plans," NAP places the latest best sellers and other works by popular authors on library shelves as soon as they become available. Based on information
collected from regular branch visits, survey findings and direct communication with customers, materials are transferred between branches to ensure maximum use. Ni Hao was developed to meet the changing needs for Chinese materials in Queens; to promote awareness and usage of library facilities, programs and services of the whole library system. For several years now, NAP has been issuing a Chinese Best Sellers list.

Adequate collections are only one component of the Library's services to new Americans. Educational and cultural programs are available to assist new populations in acquiring the skills needed to cope in American life. We manage the largest library based English for Speakers of other Languages program in the country. Free lectures and workshops on coping skills are offered in Mandarin and Cantonese on topics essential to new immigrants' acculturation, such as citizenship and job training information, advice on helping children learn and information on available social services. The library coordinates its program with many other organizations so that there is maximum use of available resources. Free readings, concerts, and workshops held in the library celebrate the performing and folk arts of immigrants from Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America.

The Library is committed to electronic equity as well. In creating WorldLinQ, library customers can access the library's catalog using vernacular search strategies and retrieve results that are easily readable in GB and/or Big 5. The Chinese site includes links on Mainland China, on Taiwan and in Hong Kong. Arranged in broad subject category, the sites have been reviewed and contain rich information for easy access. The Chinese section of WorldLinQ includes joint homepages of the Queens Library and the National Library and with the Shanghai Library. The joint homepages are an initial result of exclusive agreements between these major Chinese libraries and the Queens Library.

Twice a month InfoLinQ classes are conducted in Mandarin. The classes include instruction in how to use the library's online catalog to find both English and Chinese language materials, how to access Chinese web sites via WorldLinQ, and how to use the Internet.

In response to the growing demand for information about other areas of the world, including China, the Library has established an International Resource Center. It is rich in materials and services for Chinese customers and for all customers with an interest in Chinese civilization.

The Chinese collection is divided into two parts. Through a grant from the Himalaya Foundation in Taiwan, the IRC has established the Han Collection on Chinese Culture. This collection that currently contains more than 9,500 volumes, focuses on traditional China, from early times through 1911. It contains both English and Chinese materials, selected by scholars in Taiwan and the U.S.

Among the English titles are the multi-volume Cambridge History of China and the monumental Science and Civilization in China, an encyclopedic work covering every aspect of China's pre-modern scientific, technological and material culture. Complementing these works are hundreds of monographs on every aspect of traditional China.

Among the Chinese titles is the collectanea Ch'uan shih ts'ang shu published in Hainan, China in 1995. The 123-volume set, arranged in the traditional categories Ching, Shih, Tzu, Chi (Classics, Histories, Philosophers, Miscellanea), and comprising 1000 titles, is the most comprehensive collection of classical Chinese literature available. Queens Library is one of only a handful of American libraries to own it.

Another comprehensive set is a modern reprint of the encyclopedia Ku Chin T'u Shu Chi Ch'eng. Originally issued in 1725, this 100+ volume set is the largest and most useful of the general encyclopedias compiled in Imperial China.

The other part of the Chinese collection focuses on Chinese history and culture from 1912 onwards. It includes wide-ranging collections of literature in vernacular Chinese from the late Ch'ing, Republican, and Communist periods on the Mainland and from all periods of twentieth-century Taiwan. In addition, there are hundreds of volumes on modern Chinese history, biography, art, theater, and social life and
As you can see, we at Queens Library have made a significant commitment to maintaining and sharing in the rich heritage of our Chinese community. We shall continue to "grow" both our collections and our programs. But it is the partnerships and coalitions that we build that are most important because they develop trust among us. I should note here that we have similar program and collection development services for our Spanish, Korean, Russian and South Asian speakers as well. We should do no less.

I thank you for giving me the opportunity to share our experiences with you today.