The International Resource Center: A Local Library with Global Reach

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【Abstract】

The International Resource Center of the Queens Borough Public Library is a new special library of international studies for general readers. The article describes the multi-lingual collections and services of the Center and its efforts to extend services worldwide via the Internet and through agreements with libraries in other countries. Collections and services for Chinese readers are detailed, and the role of the Center in the Queens Library's strategic plans is explained.

An importer needs urgently to identify the scientific name of the fish he is shipping to the U.S. from China. Without the name, U.S. Customs will not permit import. A businessman seeks an attorney who specializes in international law. A reader requests a book in Spanish about the involvement of the Colombian government in the drug trade. An organization about to host visiting professionals from Croatia needs the latest information on economic and political conditions there. An academic library in Minnesota requests the loan of a biography of a nineteenth-century American missionary to Korea.

These are a few of the requests received by the International Resource Center since its opening in June 1998. The IRC is the newest agency of the Queens Borough Public Library in New York City. Occupying the third level of the new Flushing Library, the IRC was created to be a citywide...
resource for customers who wish to learn more about the peoples and cultures of the world.

The IRC is a public library for the twenty-first century. It is a special library for general readers, a local library with global reach. Within an area of 15,000 square feet it brings together materials usually found scattered throughout the subject divisions of academic and large public libraries or distributed among special libraries. The materials, diverse in language and subject matter, all concern some aspect of the Earth's peoples and cultures.

Though its collection is special, the IRC aims primarily to serve general readers and students from the high school through the master's degree level. Many of its materials cannot be found in other public libraries, some not even in academic libraries, but nearly all are of interest to educated general readers.

Whether it is a guide to doing business in Bahrain, a historical dictionary of Burundi, a study of the independence movement in East Timor, dictionaries of Zulu or Kurdish, fiction from Bosnia or Bolivia, feature films from Japan, or online analyses of economic conditions in Belarus, the IRC has resources for the researcher and the recreational reader.

Through outreach, the IRC extends its reach far beyond its own walls. Center staff are intimately familiar with information sources outside the library and can make appropriate referrals. At the same time, the Center is widening its walls, as the Queens Library seeks to establish agreements with other libraries throughout the world concerning exchange of information and reference services. The IRC is one of the principal library agencies involved in these exchanges.

IRC customers also have access to Queens Library's WorldLinQ. Developed through a partial grant from AT&T, WorldLinQ makes Queens Library's catalog searchable in languages other than English and makes non-English Internet-based resources readily available.

IRC Collections and Services

The core of the IRC, however, is in its print collections. The IRC has a unique collection of books on international subjects, approximately 30,000 volumes of which about 80% may be borrowed. The collection, focused on the humanities and social sciences, will eventually expand to 55,000 volumes.

Approximately 50% of the items are in English. Currently there are collections in 13 other languages. The largest are in Chinese, Korean, Russian, and Spanish. There are smaller collections in French, German, Gujarati, Hebrew, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Persian (Farsi), and Urdu. These are among the most widely spoken languages in Queens. Additional languages will be added to the IRC in the future.

The Center subscribes to more than 250 newspapers, magazines and journals in English and in international languages covering politics, business, economics, literature and the arts. Many of the publications are not available in other libraries or on the city's newsstands. Daily newspapers from Asia, Europe and Latin America arrive several times a week by airmail.

The Center also circulates videos of documentary and feature films from around the world, as well as CDs of ethnic and world music.

The International Resource Center has special collections on subjects of particular interest to Queens Library customers.

The Han Collection on Chinese Culture contains thousands of books in English and in Chinese relating to traditional Chinese civilization. It includes important collections of classical and modern literature, history and philosophy not generally available in public libraries.
The International Dictionary Collection contains monolingual, bilingual and multi-lingual dictionaries in more than 75 languages. More languages will be added in the future. The collection includes dictionaries that relate English to international languages, as well as dictionaries that relate one international language to another, such as Chinese-Spanish and Spanish-Russian.

The International Business Collection contains directories of international business and finance, studies of economic history and conditions throughout the world, and guides to doing business in particular countries. Many titles are not found in other public libraries in the New York area.

The International Biography Collection contains hundreds of volumes about the lives of historical and contemporary individuals who have shaped our world. The collection includes hard-to-find studies from small press, academic press and international publishers.

The International Fiction Collection contains the finest classical and contemporary fiction from all over the world in English and in English translation. (Novels in their original languages are available in the Center's international language collections.) It includes outstanding but hard-to-find works from Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Southeast Asia.

The Ethnic American Fiction Collection contains novels and short stories by writers from a broad array of ethnic groups that explore the meaning of race and ethnicity in America.

Most books may be borrowed for 21 days. Magazines, journals, CDs and documentary videos may be borrowed for 7 days, feature films for 3 days.

All titles are fully cataloged according to the Dewey Decimal System and can be accessed onsite or from home or office through the Queens Library’s web site at http://www.queenslibrary.org. Offsite access requires a PC and modem. Through the Queens Library’s WorldlinQ service, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Russian titles can be accessed in their original character sets. Circulating titles are available for interloan to libraries participating in the OCLC network.

The multi-lingual IRC staff has wide latitude in acquisitions. Staff may choose titles from the Queens Library’s biweekly order lists and from the shelves of local booksellers. They may arrange standing order plans with booksellers and distributors, order from catalogs, and purchase from other libraries and private collections.

Many of the IRC’s international language titles are ordered directly from abroad. During the 1998-99 fiscal year, staff selected books at the Latin American Book Fair in Guadalajara, Mexico, at the Kyobo Bookstore—Korea’s largest—in Seoul and, via the Internet, from sources in Moscow and Fuzhou, China. In July a staff member will attend the Hong Kong Book Fair.

In addition, many of the international language titles supplied by local booksellers are not chosen from their shelves, but are ordered specially from their home countries. Some booksellers have acted as purchasing agents for the IRC, making buying trips to their home countries especially to fill IRC orders.

As a result, many international language titles in the collection are unique to the IRC among public libraries. Among the 13 international collections, 40% of the titles are not owned by any other of the participating libraries in the nationwide OCLC cataloging network. For the Korean collection the figure is 70%.

Staff select books according to the IRC collection development guidelines. Basically, the guidelines limit selection to titles concerning the world’s peoples and cultures that are of enduring interest for general readers.
Treatment may be historical or contemporary, geographical or topical, within the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. Works of science or technology are excluded, with the exception of studies of the flora and fauna of particular regions, histories of science, medicine, and technology, and other works that relate their subjects to particular peoples and cultures or to the evolution of civilization.

Also excluded are juvenile titles, how-to and self-help titles, and genre fiction such as romances and mysteries. Literature titles in international languages are limited to works in the original language. Non-literary titles are limited to works concerning the peoples and cultures represented by the language. The English-language collection, on the other hand, includes literary titles in translation and non-literary titles concerning every country and region.

In addition to its print collections, the International Resource Center provides access to a wide range of electronic resources. Its ten online public access catalogs (OPACs) allow customers to search the Internet directly as well as through Queens Library’s WorldLinQ services.

WorldLinQ enables customers to visit websites in selected international languages that Queens Library staff have evaluated as being of particular interest or usefulness. There are separate menus for sites in Chinese, French, Korean, Spanish, and Russian. Other languages will be added in the future.

Menus are bilingual; those in Chinese, Korean, and Russian can be accessed in their original character sets. WorldLinQ also allows customers to input names of authors, titles, and subjects in these languages into the OPAC via romanization. The bibliographic records retrieved from these searches are then displayed in the original Chinese, Korean, or Russian character sets.

The IRC also makes available several databases that offer the latest information on political, economic and business conditions in countries around the world. The most wide-ranging of these databases are licensed from the Economic Information Unit, an arm of the corporation that publishes The Economist magazine. Through E.I.U., customers can obtain authoritative, detailed assessments and forecasts—supported by copious statistical data—of political and economic conditions in 75 countries. The information, in the form of yearly and quarterly reports, is prepared by E.I.U.’s field staff in each of the countries surveyed.

Another set of E.I.U. reports details the laws and regulations governing the establishment of businesses and the conducting of import-export in each of the 75 countries. These databases can be accessed only onsite in the International Resource Center and on the others floors of the Flushing Library. Queens Library is the only public library in the United States to license E.I.U.’s databases.

The International Resource Center provides customers with reference and referral services. Staff speak 14 languages and are trained in traditional and computer reference techniques. They are able to guide customers in their research and to instruct them in the use of the Center’s specialized resources. Additionally, they are able to refer customers authoritatively to sources of information outside the library.

Staff teach regularly scheduled classes in how to find information through the Queens Library’s OPAC. Classes are conducted in English, Chinese, Korean, and Spanish. In-person pre-registration is required. Tours of the Center, which include demonstrations of its online resources, are arranged for classes and groups.

The IRC offers lectures, seminars, conferences, concerts, and theatrical presentations that are international in scope. The Center also offers
workshops in the use of its International Business Collection and other special collections and resources.

The Center also houses an exhibition space, which is managed by the director of the Queens Library Gallery. Exhibits explore the diversity of the world’s peoples and places.

A detailed guide to the IRC’s collections and services, as well as schedules of its programs and exhibits, will be available on the Queens Library website beginning in July 1999.

**IRC Services for Chinese Speakers and Students of Chinese Culture**

The IRC 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, which currently contains more than 2500 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 of *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 customs. These include comprehensive modern encyclopedias, dictionaries, atlases and other reference works. Both parts of the Chinese collection include publications from the Mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

The periodicals collection includes 49 magazines from China and Taiwan and 3 daily newspapers airmailed from Beijing and Guangdong.

Through an exclusive agreement with National Library of China in Beijing, Queens Library customers can access the CD-ROM catalog of the National Library, which is the equivalent for Mainland China publications of the American *Books In Print*.

The Chinese section of WorldLiNQ includes joint homepages of the Queens Library and the National Library and of the Queens Library and the Shanghai Library. The joint homepages are an initial result of exclusive agreements between these major Chinese libraries and the Queens Library. Cooperation in other areas of service is under discussion.

The IRC staff currently includes four members who among them can provide reference service in Mandarin, Cantonese, Shanghainese, and Fujianese.
Two of these staff also conduct, in Mandarin, regularly scheduled classes in the use of the Queens Library’s OPAC. The OPAC displays the Queens Library’s system-wide holdings in Chinese characters and allows input of Chinese characters through romanization.

During its first year of service the IRC presented several outstanding programs on various aspects of Chinese culture. As one of three agencies housed in the Flushing Library, the IRC benefits from the library’s state-of-the-art facilities, which include a 227-seat auditorium with computer-controlled theatrical lighting and sound and with a control booth and infrared headphones for simultaneous translation.

Among the IRC’s programs on Chinese culture was a performance of Shaohsing (Yue-chu) style opera presented in November 1998 by the Shanghai Spring Drama Studio. The featured actress was Jin Caifeng, the most famous living performer in the Shaohsing style. Ms. Jin and her company traveled to New York from Shanghai especially for this performance. The program was presented jointly by the IRC, the Flushing Branch, and the Chinese American Arts Council, a non-profit organization based in Manhattan.

In July 1998 the city of Shanghai provided the Queens Library with an exhibit of award-winning children’s drawings and calligraphy. The exhibit, which took place in the IRC, was accompanied by demonstrations and workshops by one of the child artists and his teacher, who traveled to New York with a delegation from Shanghai.

In April 1999 the IRC presented a lecture entitled “The Chinese Jews of Kaifeng,” by Dr. Wendy Abraham. 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.

Queens Library’s Local and Global Strategies

The International Resource Center is but the latest of many efforts by the Queens Library to provide services that meet the needs of all of the people of Queens. With a population of 2 million people comprising residents from more than 100 countries, speaking 120 languages, Queens is the most diverse county in the United States, and the neighborhood of Flushing is one of the most ethnically diverse areas in Queens.

Beginning in the late 1970’s, the Queens Library initiated a series of strategies designed to give its customers the highest possible quality and variety of service with the widest possible access. In the 1990’s, under the visionary leadership of Director Gary Strong, the library has begun to extend access to customers worldwide. The IRC is one of the means by which Mr. Strong is reaching out internationally.

Underlying all of the library’s approaches to service is a commitment to diversity. Queens Library’s 62 branches are not miniature versions of its Central Library. Rather, each is tailored to its particular neighborhood and offers collections and services that reflect the characteristics, needs and interests of its community.

The special character of each branch’s collection is made visible by the practice of merchandising. Parts of the collection are placed on bookstore-type display furniture and arranged according to topics of local interest, such as African-American Culture, Romance Fiction, or Chinese-Language Books.

OPAC terminals in all Queens libraries make possible county-wide access to materials. Bibliographic records include a display of all branches that own a particular title. Titles can be sent to any branch upon request. OPAC and Internet access is now available in the Central Library and all branches, as well as from home, school or office.
The units of the Programs and Services Department work closely with the branch libraries to address the needs of different segments of the population, including children, young adults, adults, older adults, persons with disabilities, adult new readers (adults who read below a fifth-grade level), and immigrants.

In 1977 the Queens Library initiated the New Americans Program to introduce new immigrants to the library and help them adjust to American life. NAP has grown to become the largest such program offered by any American library.

Among NAP's services is the establishment and management of popular collections in widely spoken immigrant languages. These collections are not confined to the Central Library or to language centers but are distributed among all branches according to the language needs of their neighborhoods.

The most widely spoken languages have dedicated collection development programs: the Ni Hao Program for Chinese, the Say Si Program for Spanish, the Hannara Program for Korean, the Privyet Program for Russian, and the Namaste Program for South Asian languages.

In June 1998 the library opened a new facility in Flushing. The Flushing Library, with four levels occupying 76,000 square feet, is the largest branch library in New York State—and one of the busiest. By the end of June 1999 Flushing Library will have received more than 2 million visitors and circulated more than 1.5 million items. (In FY98-99, the Queens Library circulated more than 17 million items, the highest circulation of any public library in the United States.)

The Flushing Library houses three separate agencies. On the lower level is the Adult Learning Center, which serves adult new readers and immigrants studying English; on the first and second levels is the Flushing Branch; and on the third level is the International Resource Center. The branch is an agency of the Extension Services Department; the Adult Learning Center and the IRC are agencies of the Programs and Services Department.

As the newest agency of the Queens Library, The International Resource Center has benefited from the institution's more than twenty years of experience in specialized service to international customers. In particular, the expertise of the New Americans Program in areas such as community outreach, collection development, and programming has enabled the IRC to establish itself quickly as a viable service for customers with a serious interest in international languages and global studies.

The IRC also benefits from its location. The Flushing Library was planned to serve an international community. Its award-winning design is based on the concept that an urban library should be a window to its community, not a haven from it. With high ceilings, glass walls, and wide vistas, the activity of the library is visible from the street, attracting the attention of passersby and inviting them to enter.

The international character of its services is visible from the front steps. On the risers of the steps are carved—bilingually—the names of famous travel stories of many cultures. China is represented by Hsi Yu Chi, The Journey To The West.

The IRC has barely begun its journey to the West, East, North, and South. It aims to become an important resource for international studies in New York City and, via electronic services, throughout the world.

The next few years will see a doubling in size of its collections, the creation of more in-house services, and participation in the exchange of services between the Queens Library and libraries worldwide. The International Resource Center—truly, a local library with global reach.
References
