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## Introduction

According to 1993 statistics<sup>1</sup>, some 750,000 new books are published annually in the various languages of the world. Of these, Britain publishes about 86,000, the US about 50,000 while France produces about 41,000. From the publication lists of the major countries that publish English language books, including Britain, the US, Germany, Holland, Canada and Australia (from which we order our books each year), we may choose to order from over 100,000 English language books, excluding children's books and textbooks: the highest number among all languages in the world. And if we were to count up the publicity for new titles reported in the catalogues provided by book merchants and publishers, we would have to read about 200,000 pieces of information on new English language books. However, each year, we acquire about 20,000 English language books, about 2,000 each of German and French and a small number of Spanish, Italian and Romanian books. Books in other languages are acquired only occasionally and not on a regular basis.

As the library has limited funds for purchase, we have defined the principle of 'Completeness for Chinese books and essence for foreign language books'. We can only make a limited selection from countless foreign publications, to satisfy the needs of readers and, in addition, to reflect the characteristics of the collections. It is easy to imagine the difficulties involved with the task.

Establishing a national library with a collection of foreign books with Chinese characteristics

The basic functions of a library include preservation of, and provision for use of

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# Western language books in the Beijing Library: criteria for acquisition and the method of selection

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*always seeking  
a balance  
between  
collection  
value and  
usefulness*

literary data. The modern library also bears the responsibility for transmitting scientific information, developing intellectual resources and promoting international exchange. The Beijing Library is the National Library of China. In certain ways, it is also the biggest public library in China. As a national library, one of its functions is 'the focused selection of foreign publications to establish, within the library, a rich collection of foreign books',<sup>2,3</sup> the standard of which reflects, in part, the overall standard of the Beijing Library collection and helps ensure that the Beijing Library will become the true National Library of China. In the course of promoting the development of China's spiritual and material aspects, the Beijing Library's foreign language collection has a special significance. According to the guiding principle of the library, the foreign language books ordered by the librarians should be mostly academic and reference materials. The works in the collection of foreign language books should reflect the latest scientific and technological achievements and the current trends in academic thinking. We must, as far as possible, also collect academic monographs of science and technology, and records of academic conferences and meetings. For reference, our collection of foreign language books aims to reflect the politics, history, geography, society, culture, and the art forms of the various countries in the world. Every attempt is made to collect reference books from many countries, on a wide variety of subjects and in different languages. Books about China are collected from all over the world.

The 19th century American library scientist Melvil Dewey<sup>4</sup> once said, 'Libraries should provide the best books that can be used by the largest number of readers at the lowest cost'. The well-known Indian library scientist, Shiyali Pamararita Ranganathan<sup>5</sup> stated the laws of library science as:

- Books are to be used
- Every reader has his books

- Every book has its readers
- The library is a growing organism

The words of these two masters reflect the important aspect of the 'user value' of the library's collection. When building the library's collection, there is always a contradiction between the value of the collection and the value to the reader. Some books have both the value of collection and the value of usefulness to the readers. For example, the famous physicist, Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* has collection value and it is also a book that the public love to read, a book that heads the list of bestsellers in the US.

Some books are useful but have no collection value. Examples would include some manuals on computer software development and records of meetings on science and technology, while books that have collection value but lack usefulness presently include the 'Complete Works of Marx and Engels' which do not have many readers. They are expensive but have very high collection value and are bound to have readers in future, therefore are books that we must acquire.

As a public library, it is essential to consider the needs of the readers, always seeking a balance between collection value and usefulness. Besides ensuring the collection value, close attention must also be paid to social, economic, scientific and technological development, thus contributing to the building of spiritual and material aspects of China.

How to ensure the quality of our collection? Firstly, we formed a group responsible for the selection and ordering of foreign language books which is done in accordance with the rules of acquisition. The library also enjoys the regular addition of books that have a collection value but were neglected in the past for historical or budgetary reasons. Secondly, a 'List of recommended books for readers' is provided at each service counter, and readers are encouraged to put forward their suggestions for additions to the collection of foreign language acquisitions. If the readers'

proposals conform to the acquisition policy and there are sufficient funds, the books may be purchased, thus satisfying the needs of library users while building the library collection.

#### Collection criteria of books in western languages

Over the past 10 years, Beijing Library has added some 25,000 new books in western languages to its collection each year. According to 1997 statistics, the library has more than 1,388,000 books in western languages, making it the number one in China and among the fore-runners in Asia.

Apart from the purchase of books on science, technology and social science with academic and reference value, there has, over the last five years, also been considerable additions of supplementary publications which include reference books (encyclopaedias and dictionaries in various languages), books on Sinology, works of Nobel Prize winners (mainly literature and economics), works of Poets Laureate of Britain and the US,<sup>6,7</sup> works of contemporary and well-known philosophers and thinkers.<sup>8,9</sup> After years of work, we have managed to form the preliminary criteria of our collection of books in western languages.

These are listed below:

The works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao Zedong and books of research on the above authors, socialism and communism. Beijing Library strongly supports the collection of these books which even include the complete works of Marx and Engels in English, German and Italian.

#### *Reference books in western languages*

Beijing Library has a collection of western reference books, including the best known encyclopaedias and dictionaries. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* the *Spanish Enciclopedia Universal Ilustrada Europeo-America* (107 volumes), the *Oxford English Dictionary* (20 volumes) and the only set of *Beilstein Handbook of Organic Chemistry*

(500 copies, each costing 3,400 German Marks) in its original edition; the only set in China. We also have many other dictionaries in different languages and a comprehensive range of reference books. Beijing Library also houses a collection of professional academic encyclopaedias such as the German edition of *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, a 17-volume encyclopaedia of music.

#### *Problems of China (written in western languages)*

Books on the problems of China by Chinese authors both from within China and living abroad are a focal point of the library. The books are added to the collection by various means including purchase, gifts and exchange

#### *Natural sciences*

The library holds selected works on natural sciences, including Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Astronomy, Biology, published in all the major countries of the world. They include publications of the German publisher, Springer Verlag and the Dutch publisher, Elsevier Science, and mostly reflect the works of the latest achievements in science and technology. We are proud to claim to have the finest collection of such books in China.

#### *World famous literary works*

A collection of world famous literary works, titles by Nobel Prize winners, Pulitzer Prize winners and the works of Poets Laureate of Britain and the US are contained within the library. Other well known authors who feature in the collection are such famous names as, Milan Kundera, Marcel Proust and William Somerset Maugham.

#### *Academic works of the world*

Classical academic works from various countries are naturally a characteristic of the Library. During the last two years the selected works have included most of works of contemporary, influential

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*a steady  
increase in the  
demand for  
books on  
Economics and  
Computer  
Science*

philosophers, economists, politicians and thinkers such as Sigmund Freud, the economist, Kenneth Joseph Arrow, philosopher Karl Raimund Popper and the works of over 300 others.

Library and information science

There has always been a focus on the selection of books concerning library science and information science, particularly the publications of IFLA and ASLIB. The Encyclopaedia of Library and Information Science. Beijing Library holds the largest collection of library and information science in China.

Reports of conferences and meetings

Whenever the funding allows, every effort is made to gather records of academic meetings that reflect the latest achievements in science and technology. These include the majority of the records of academic meetings published by commercial publishers and the reports of meetings published by important academic institutions such as the Royal Society of Chemistry, International Society of Optics Engineers and the Materials Research Society.

Recently, there has been a steady increase in the demand for books on Economics and Computer Science by the readers. It is felt that there is a need to increase the selection effort in these fields and thus make a greater contribution to our economic development.

*The publication of western language books*

Western languages include the most commonly used: English, French, German, Spanish, and Italian. Of these, English, German and French are the most important languages in science and technology and international cultural exchange. In our foreign language collection, western language books occupy the highest proportion. They are most in demand by readers, but they are also the most difficult to order. The publication of foreign language books offers many choices.

*There are many publishing countries.*

Nearly every country has publications in English. Some non-English speaking countries are big publishers of English books (e.g. Germany and Holland). Switzerland, Germany and Austria publish German books. France, Belgium, Canada and Switzerland publish French books. Spain and many countries in South America publish Spanish books.

*There are many publishers*

According to the figures in Book Find CD (1997 December edition) published in Britain, among publishers registered in its service network 6,500 of them are British, 61,000 American, 1,400 Australian and 1,800 are Canadian (these figures include the publishers' branches in different countries). These figures are astonishing.

*There are many forms of publication.*

The same book can be repeatedly published with the same or different title in a different country or by a different publisher. There are different forms of binding and different ISBN numbers are carried. For example, The Scientific Publisher of China and Springer Verlag Publisher of Germany often cooperate in publishing books. The books distributed domestically have different ISBN numbers and the prices are different from those published overseas.

*The publication information network.*

The West has been industrialized for many years. The publication industry has become a very systematic and standardised industry. Through the various communication channels, people can always check whether a certain book is being sold in the market, where it can be purchased and how much it costs. For example, the *Books in Print* that we often use (including the printed edition, the CD edition and network edition) supplies detailed information. In addition, some publishers can supply photocopies of books out of print (UMI in US), or supply the microfilms of rare books (Dutch IDC Company).

The existence of many countries with many publishers producing a wide variety of publications make scouting work more difficult. However, the publishing information network assists the tasks of selecting and acquiring the required books for the library's collection.

#### Diversification of information on publications

Information sources on the publication of western language books are different from that of Chinese books. There are many different sources of information including catalogues that are published regularly and those which only appear occasionally.

#### *Publishers catalogues*

Most publishers have their catalogues of new books produced at regular intervals, some monthly, others quarterly, the problem is that most publishers fail to send out their catalogues on their own initiative. The scouting staff have to know the major publishers in the world, write to them for catalogues or request them to mail new catalogues regularly. Normally, one member of staff has to be assigned to take charge of gathering and managing data, compiling files on publishers and sorting through the catalogues when they arrive.

These catalogues contain detailed information, sometimes even carry a summary of the book, an introduction and a book review. They also carry information on second editions and reprints. However, the publishers' catalogues are of many types and are published with different frequencies and unfortunately it is not possible for staff to gather the catalogues of all the publishers in the world. Therefore, this type of catalogue is only suitable for the selection and ordering of books from the larger publishers and for checking the details on publication information.

#### *Domestic book dealers*

Large-scale catalogues of new books are published monthly by domestic book

dealers such as China Book Import & Export Corporation and Beijing Publications Import & Export Corporation and these include the new books of major publishers throughout the world. They come with a Chinese translation of the titles and are convenient to use. Staff are saved the necessity of reading the catalogues from individual publishers and only have to select the books according to category, this avoids the problem of reading the same information repeatedly.

However, these catalogues are compiled from the catalogues of new books from foreign publishers. Sometimes, the information is incomplete (lack of information on prices and number of pages can be frustrating) and sometimes there are errors. Occasionally a change to the title and contents of the book after it is officially published, and it even happens that a publication of the book is shelved after its original announcement. Furthermore, the scope of publishers reported by domestic book dealers is narrow, leaving out the books of small publishers who form the majority.

#### *Foreign book dealers*

There are leaflets supplied by foreign book dealers (e.g. Blackwell's of Britain). Upon receipt of a book sample from the publisher, the book dealer will have the contents and subject analysed by specialists. He will then establish a data base, including information on title catalogue and subject. It also includes non-subject reference such as the level of readers (ordinary readers, postgraduates, etc.), and type of book (records of conferences and meetings, textbooks, monographs). When establishing a relationship with a library, the book dealer has to first understand the collection policy of the library (for example, Beijing Library wants to collect books for senior undergraduates and does not wish to collect monographs in the fields of medicine, military, geology, and agriculture).

With the help of a computer and according to the requirement of the library, the book dealer will regularly cut a stencil of the books that come within

*lack of information on prices and number of pages can be frustrating*

*it is not possible for many staff to be reading the same CD at the same time*

the scope and make leaflets of new books in card form or make a soft disc or a tape. These are issued to the library through various means (mail, network, magnetic disc and magnetic tape). The information transmitted this way is more accurate, more detailed and there is even standardisation of names. Staff selecting books can do so according to subject and non-subject reference and select more accurately books that conform to the requirement of the library. However, since the catalogue is made up from book samples, it takes a longer time than domestic book dealers to provide its information.

Due to the ease of use and operation catalogues published by domestic and overseas book dealers form the main basis of selection.

#### *CD-ROM catalogues*

Title catalogues in CD-ROM since the end of the 80s have provided a totally new form of information source. Since the production cost of CD-ROM is very low, many publishers present their title catalogues in CD-ROM format as free of charge, replacing the book catalogues of the past. The CD-ROM, the library currently has on order, catalogues the titles of books in circulation and those held in stock by publishers and bookstores in many countries; it also provides news of forthcoming titles. This type of CD-ROM is used mainly for updating records and the acquisition of old books previously omitted from the collection.

*Book-Find CD*, published in Britain, advertises new books that are due to be published in the next six months. It comes with a summary of the books, and many libraries depend on it when making their selections. However, Beijing Library is not yet sufficiently automated to make use of this as it is not possible for many scouting staff to be reading the same CD at the same time. In the meantime, the catalogues of several domestic and overseas book dealers (such as China Co., Foreign Bookstore, Blackwell) have already become the main sources of

information in the day-to-day work of selection. So, for the time being, we treat the CD-ROM as a supplementary measure for searching books of publishers that are not covered by other sources of information.

With the development of the information highway, many big publishers have begun to put their publication catalogues on the Net. This type of catalogue is fast and gives complete publication information. Sometimes, it is possible to use this method. However, for staff selecting books in a multi-function library, browsing through the Homepages, of a number of publishers each month, in order to select books is too tedious and the end result is not always satisfactory. As such, librarians still depend on the domestic and overseas book dealers as their main source of information for books, but search the Internet for detailed information on journals and other serial publications. In addition many periodicals carry much information on new books – *The Bookseller* of Britain and the *Publisher's Weekly* in United States are the most used.

#### Diversification of channels of acquisition

In general, acquisitions are made through domestic and overseas book dealers. By far the majority of western language books are obtained in this way. There are, however exceptions, some specialised publishers do not use book dealers as their agents and large publishers may offer better discounts thus encouraging direct purchase from the publisher.

Some overseas book stores publish catalogues of ancient and old books, giving information on the out of print and rare books in their stock. The library is able to select some at reasonable prices to supplement past inadequacies.

International exchange is another way of acquiring books. Through this channel, we acquire books from regions where the book trade is less well developed, such as Eastern Europe, parts of Africa and Asia.

### Selection of non-English books

By non-English books, we refer mainly to books in German, French, Italian and Spanish. For the selection of German and French books, a certain trend has been established. Importers such as China Books Co. and Foreign Language Books Store regularly provide information on books in these languages. One can also search the latest news of publications through the German Libri Aktuell CD-ROM. However, for books in Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and Swedish, one must order through an appropriate book dealer.<sup>10</sup>

### Acquisition of microform data

Many publishers of microform materials in the world have published valuable historical records and in the course of library acquisitions, attention is also paid to this category of published materials. For example, the Dutch IDC Co. published microform literature such as Chinese Books Published Before 1850, The Collection of Gao Lo Pei and Chinese Works by Missionaries. The American publisher of university publications (UPA) regularly publishes decoded documents from the American government (offering plenty of data on Sino-American foreign policies). However, as there are very few subscribers, these are not mentioned in the circulars on new books issued by China Books Import & Export Co. or the foreign book dealers. It is necessary to know the organizations that publish these materials and to request the relevant catalogues regularly.

When acquiring this type of publications, careful checks are made to avoid repetition among rare books, Chinese books, Chinese and foreign language periodicals and microform materials.

### Future improvements

#### *To raise work efficiency – automation*

At present, the selection and acquisition of western language books is mainly done manually. From book selection, preparation of order form, placement

of order, delivery by book dealer, registration, cataloguing, right up to the stage when the book is ready for the reader usually takes more than a year. A large part of the work is repetitious. On the other hand, communication means are backward, order forms to domestic book dealers are delivered by hand while overseas declaration forms and order forms are mailed. Contact with book dealers is through written correspondence. Good use is not made of the data to hand – for example, the British Blackwell Company and China Books Import & Export Corporation are able to directly provide electronic data to our own database, they occupy more than 75% of the data read by us but we fail to make use of them. These are problems that must be considered when the computer network system for acquiring information on western language books is installed.

#### *Standardisation*

In order to address the problem of damaged volumes of multi-volume books, library staff compile 'multi-volume book files' to trace important multi-volume books and to prevent them from going missing. They also compile 'celebrity files' to help in the acquisition of works by well-known authors. With a computer network, and the use of standard data cataloguing, it will also be possible to automate these tasks; check the collections more accurately, and hopefully resolve the problem of duplications.

Due to historical reasons, the catalogue system for western language books has been changed several times over the years and there is a lack of standardization. For example, encyclopedia and encyclopaedia are sometimes grouped together but sometimes they are separated. The German alphabet 'ü' is sometimes arranged as 'u' but sometimes as 'ue'. The cause of this problem can be historical (change of staff) or objective (the report of the publisher lacked details). It is difficult to resolve the problem totally but the establishment of some standardization should produce considerable improvements.

*A large part of the work is repetitious*

### *Work plans and rational distribution*

Currently, the library's plans for selection work and distribution each year depend, to a large extent, on past experience and the plans of selection staff are not coordinated rationally. Each year, planning the acquisition figures for the whole group according to budget is a matter based on past experience. By adopting a computer network system, it would be possible to calculate the prices and report numbers based on the classifications provided by the book dealers and therefore to plan the work more rationally. Besides, in the course of designing the computer system, it would be possible to plan an overall improvement to the whole operation process.

### *Work focus – statistical analysis*

In the preceding discussions, the author has mentioned the importance of appropriately considering the usefulness of the collection. To do this, we must understand the rate of use of books from various aspects. The methods include survey by questionnaires, statistics on book-order forms, observation on reading rooms and readers' seminars. However, for some reason, the library has not properly looked into this aspect in recent years. The author feels that with the design of the new computer circulation system there should also be incorporated the function of classification that reports regularly to the selection and acquisition staff on usage by readers. This could then be used as reference for book selection. In addition, on the Homepage of WWW, there could be a readers' recommendation list that serves as feedback to the selection staff at all times. In this way, the selected books would be more focused to the needs of library users.

### *Conclusion*

It can readily be seen that every aspect of work improvement considered, relates closely to automation and technological

advances. It is hoped that such innovations will be put in hand for the selection system for western language books and journals in the coming years.

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*it would be possible to plan an overall improvement to the whole operation process*