

## Chinese libraries: access to current information hampered

Maureen Mann reports on a recent visit to China

From 4–17 October 1994, a group of Australian librarians, led by former ALIA President Jenny Cram, visited Beijing, Kunming and Shanghai to compare the Chinese library scene with what we know at home. The trip, organised jointly by People to People in USA and China International Cultural Exchange Centre, whetted many appetites for further China visits, both as professionals and as tourists.

The group's common interest was services to young people, but was not restricted to school librarians. We were hosted by libraries with the same emphasis — school, public, university and national. We were warmly welcomed by the Chinese who were anxious to hear of trends in Australian librarianship, as well as our individual strengths and interests. Most of the Australian delegates had prepared brief papers but only some of these



Christine Warhurst, Scholl of the Air Broken Hill, Gu Li Ping, China International Culture Exchange Centre and Jenny Cram, delegation leader

could be given because of the formal format of most of the sessions. Often we would arrive at a library and no-one knew who was to be asked to talk — it would depend on the time allowed and the subjects implied by our Chinese hosts. We all came away with great respect for Chinese librarians, many of whom work in adverse conditions, with very low funding. The best sessions were often the more informal ones where a group of Australians were able to chat with a small group of Chinese counterparts.

Chinese libraries seem to be graded according to size, which dictates staffing and funding levels for collection development and salaries. Books are highly prized and many collections are closed to access. Many of the collections we saw were old and uninspiring, but

with size determining so much it is difficult for them to discard what is superseded especially if there is no replacement. Several Chinese chief librarians commented how much they need current material on Australia. Donations would be welcomed everywhere, but we need to keep in mind the guidelines by ACPAD published in January 1995 *inCite*.

The information highway was not very evident in any of the libraries we visited, but there was much talk and great interest expressed in being part of these developments. Many libraries still have huge rooms devoted to catalogue drawers. Large numbers of staff are employed, with low productivity, ensuring China's policy of full employment.

It was a wonderful, hectic and rewarding two weeks combining our professional visits with much sightseeing. Our hosts were enthusiastic and welcoming, and we developed friendships which will continue at home. Most of us would love to return, travel further and visit more libraries. If you have the chance to do something similar, jump at it!



Australian library delegates in front of the Shinjingshan District, Beijing children's library

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