
Once upon a time in China

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In April 2007 I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to visit the Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University (XJTLU). This new international university, established in Dushu Lake Higher Education Town, Suzhou Industrial Park, is the result of a partnership between Xi'an Jiaotong University in China and the University of Liverpool in the UK. It was born as a result of the convergence of Liverpool's widening open-door policy and globalisation in education. The rapid economic development of Suzhou and its neighbouring regions attracted the two parent universities to establish this new international university, initially offering degree programmes in the subject areas of science, engineering, and management.

The main purpose of my visit was to provide an opportunity for the University of Liverpool library service to offer support and advice on existing library provision and to advise on scaling up the service for the future. In addition it provided the opportunity to contribute to a design brief for a new purpose-built library for the university, memorably known then, and now, as Building 3.

Two years later, in May 2009, I was invited to revisit XJTLU. I present here a flavour of the visits.

In April 2007 the most exciting and longest trip of my life gets off to an inauspicious start when my lift to Manchester airport fails to show. In the end, Andrew Burgess, deputy director of facilities management, with whom I am travelling, arrives in his wife's car with said wife Helen stuffed in the back of what is really only marginally more than a two-seater. I wonder how they are ever going to get my massive case on board and to my horror poor Helen ends up with it on her lap!

At a standstill on the M6, Andrew's mostly cheery disposition is rapidly evaporating as white van man rolls into the back of our car; luckily there is no damage to be seen. We miss our flight to Heathrow but luckily manage to get on the next shuttle.

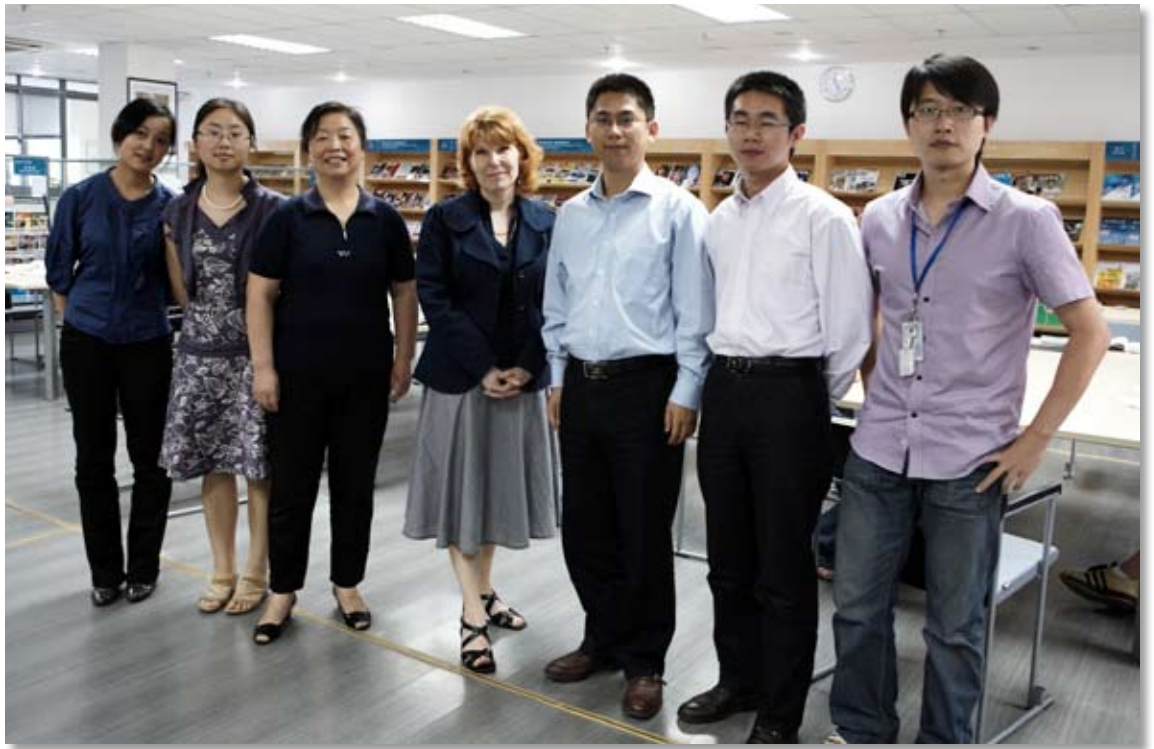
It's a night flight, and when I initially resist being bedded down, a member of the cabin crew who has clearly attended matrons' training somewhere along the line gets me bundled off to the loo to change into my sleep socks whilst she 'makes up' my bed. I can't drop off, so while away many hours watching films. At last breakfast time arrives and I opt for everything on the menu – cereal, fruit and a bacon sandwich. Sadly, only the cereal and fruit arrive and so commences the first of many days of carbohydrate deprivation.

From Shanghai Pudong airport we make our way into the city. My first impressions are intense; it's wet, cold, grubby, chaotic and totally wonderful! The sheer number of people is incredible and they all seem to be in cars. The pollution over the city is very apparent but paradoxically, as I find out later, it throws a beautiful pink-tinged haze over the city as the sun goes down. We are straight off to a meeting with architects. The sheer buzz of the city and the startling views from the 35th floor of the office (and very strong coffee) keep me awake throughout a succession of afternoon meetings regarding the construction design for new buildings at Suzhou.

We are shuttled down to Suzhou and XJTLU by the enigmatic Mr Woo. Suzhou materialises as a green and spacious oasis. XJTLU itself comprises one huge impressive building, light and spacious with expanses of marble and granite finishes. Beautiful natural stone, so costly at home, is cheap and plentiful here and is widely used.

I meet the staff including Professor Jeremy Smith, vice-president of academic affairs, and get a full tour of the building, including the library. Serving just 200 students at this time, the library has around 15,000 items, but as yet there are no dedicated library staff and so it is run on a part-time basis by clerical staff from the administration team. I'm told that the student population is expected to quadruple every two years, which certainly creates a challenge in terms of library provision. Professor Smith explains that the library has an essential role to play in providing both social and quiet space for students to work in. Chinese undergraduates are routinely housed in dormitories when studying away from home and therefore lack any personal space of their own.

In the evening we attend a formal dinner being hosted by the vice-chancellor. I am ushered into a large private room filled with – at last – middle-



aged people: I'd been struck by how virtually every Chinese person I had encountered up to this point was very young. I was starting to feel like Methuselah, but now encounter a group of eminent academics and business people who have lived long enough to acquire some grey hair. Apparently the jobs in the new service industries that are rapidly developing are almost entirely undertaken by well-educated young Chinese men and women who invariably speak excellent English. This formal occasion is the first of a number of challenging meals, particularly as I'm not as dextrous with the old chopsticks as I imagined. Professor Smith quietly keeps me up to speed on protocols as the meal progresses. It concludes with appreciative thanks and applause to both Professor Smith and 'Laura Librarian from Liverpool'.

One of my objectives is to prepare a report on the library in advance of the planned accreditation visit later in the year. I spend the morning gathering information, specifically on numbers of study spaces per Full Time Equivalent student, PCs, opening hours and so on, then taking pictures and arranging visits to other libraries on the education site.

Attending the first of my planned library visits, I am warmly welcomed by the librarian at Suzhou Dushu Lake library (SDLL). The building is beautifully appointed and covers around 23,000m². The building houses approximately 125,000 books, including an English-language collection of some 5,000 items. The library serves students studying

within the education park, members of the public and commercial businesses. It provides me with an excellent example of a purpose-built library and an opportunity to consider the size, design, layout and finishes of the building.

The second of my planned library visits is to Soochow University to look around Binglin library. This is a hugely impressive academic library and another extremely hospitable librarian takes the time to show me around, despite the fact that he is expecting an accreditation visit at any moment from high-ranking education officials. Binglin library opened in 2006 and is one of four serving Soochow University. It is around 32,000 m² in size and houses 70,000 items. The entire collections of Soochow University number over 3 million items.

Both the libraries I visit have well-established IT infrastructure and use smartcard systems allowing students to pay for resources, purchase books, pay fines and so on. Study space is plentiful and well-appointed and invariably the cafés have either stunning views or are situated in roof gardens. Both libraries have well-established intranets, with access to a wide range of electronic resources, including information literacy resources developed by librarians. Everything we would strive to provide in our own library services can be found here, with the added bonus of beautifully designed, spacious buildings finished to the highest standard.

My final morning is spent writing up my report, addressing the most urgent issues for the chal-



lenging expansion the library service has to meet. First and foremost is the recruitment of an experienced librarian and team to drive forward the ambitious development plans. Later, back in Shanghai before the journey home, I enjoy steak and chips in a restaurant of a building that is 92 stories high. The view over the city is one I will never forget, likewise the almost imperceptible swaying of the building!

In May 2009 I was able to pay a return visit to XJTU to meet the architects designing Building 3 and to see at first hand the development that had taken place since my last visit.

On my first day I am scheduled to meet librarian Xin Bi (Tony) and his team. It's a real pleasure to finally meet Tony and his staff and once again I am made to feel every inch the honoured guest. Tony was appointed to his post around 20 months ago and has managed an impressive rate of development in the service in that time. The library now has a team of eight full-time and five part-time staff, is open seven days a week and has some 80,000 items in stock. There are now around 2,200 students studying at XJTU, with a further 420 splitting their studies between here and the University of Liverpool. During this time Tony and I have been meeting regularly via Skype so that I and my colleagues at Liverpool can provide advice and support to him and his team as required.

I am scheduled to hold a question-and-answer session with the library staff (I hope there's nothing about cataloguing in there)! The team's main area of interest focuses around acquisition and management of electronic resources and, more unusually, student conduct in the library. Just at the point where I've got the whole team engaged and feel like I'm delivering a master class in

librarianship, someone has to go and raise the thorny issue of MARC records – oh well, it was good while it lasted. I agree to put them in touch with an 'expert' back at Liverpool.

The next day is spent discussing the architect's plans in detail. I am keen to ensure that the new building will include the best examples of library design both from the UK and from my recent library visits. Following much discussion, the scope of Building 3 has now expanded and the proposed design now takes the opportunity to bring together the library and other services supporting students on campus, including the careers advice service, a student activity centre, a training centre and a home for central administration. Building 3 will be some 60m high and have a total area of over 51,000m² including the basement. The library will be located over seven storeys of a thirteen-storey building. Meanwhile the existing library is already at full capacity and a temporary move before the completion of Building 3 is unavoidable, forcing a further relocation for Tony and his team.

Before my visit concludes I have the opportunity to join Tony in conducting interviews for an assistant librarian and a further library assistant post. He is very keen to learn as much as he can about the University of Liverpool's interviewing procedures; the interviews progress very well and we are easily able to appoint to both posts from a number of well-qualified young hopefuls. Taking my leave once more, Tony and I arrange our next group of Skype meetings.

Since May the plans for Building 3 have been finalised and preliminary works have begun preparing the site. Meanwhile, I wait, hopeful of a return visit at some point.