Building and Strengthening Communities in China: Working with the Apple Tree Library Foundation

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Introduction
Learning to read English is a vital part of becoming fluent in the English language. Books are expensive to purchase, even in the United States, and indeed many public libraries lack a complete collection they feel is needed to serve their community. Similarly, but in many cases with even fewer resources, Chinese libraries often do not have the funds needed to purchase the much more expensive English language materials. The nonprofit Apple Tree Library Foundation of Sunnyvale California was established in 2002 to promote English language competency in China through public/private collaborations. This poster will explore impacts and challenges of the development of Apple Tree Library English language sections in Chinese public libraries.

In February 2007 I had the opportunity to travel to Sunnyvale, California to meet with one of the founding members of the Apple Tree Library Foundation, Cathy Hsiao. Although our meeting was brief, she was able to share many success stories, as well as a few lessons learned, with me. The following summer I next had the opportunity to visit an Apple Tree Library located in Guilin, China. While there I held discussions with local librarians and conducted a storyline for one of the local elementary schools. My research is designed to study the following aspects from the perspectives of both sides of the world.

Open Access
Prior to receiving an Apple Tree Library collection the library must first agree to several conditions set forth by the Foundation. The primary rule is the collection must be housed in open shelving and accessible by all. For this reason school libraries have not been the main targeted audience. One challenge that has arisen is not all children’s libraries in China allow adults over the age of 18 to enter and use the collection.

Information Literacy
The main focus of Apple Tree Libraries is to assist with English language development. Collections are normally housed within a special dedicated area of the library making it easy to locate and use. Librarians at the Guilin Children’s Library are trained in English and equipped to assist the children with finding materials. While information literacy is not formally taught at the Guilin Children’s Library, individual learning does take place when assistance is provided by the librarians.

Conclusions
The Apple Tree Library Foundation is a model of success. It strives to continuously change and adapt to new ways of thinking in order to fulfill their mission of providing access to knowledge for Chinese children. The challenges are great and include locating funding to purchase materials, finding storage for the thousands of books waiting shipment, locating volunteers to assist with shipment preparations, and shipping the materials to the other side of the world. Once the books arrive in China another set of challenges takes place: the continuance of help from the Office of Ministry of Culture, choosing libraries that have the space and willingness to have an Apple Tree Library collection, providing the assistance the librarians need to ensure the collection is used. These are just a fraction of the challenges, but they manage to persevere – and it all started with one family’s dream of providing English reading materials for the children of China.

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