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Housed in a tall attractive redbrick building, the Taipei County Cultural Centre makes a striking impression upon the visitor. Impatient to see the interior of a Taiwanese public library, I wondered how it would compare with an urban public library in South Africa? Armed with a digital camera and in the good company of my Taiwanese friend, we eagerly ventured forth.

The library itself is located on the third floor and at the time could only be reached by an elevator (stairway under reconstruction). As you exit from the lift, the larger book collection is to the right and the study/magazine area to the left. What immediately struck me, was the lack of extras I am used to finding in South African libraries. No colourful posters, no tasteful displays, no carpets on the floor and sadly, no beautiful music. A library is strictly a no-nonsense place of study and research.

The main area of the library seemed to be on the right hand side of the entrance so we headed in that direction first. Immediately to the right is a wooden counter where several library assistants sat behind computers, ready to assist patrons. Graciously, though somewhat perplexed, permission was granted that I could take pictures inside the library. I noticed the book collection was organised in what, although in Chinese, seemed to be a cataloguing system similar to Dewey. Patrons quietly read books at wooden tables, browsed the metal shelves or sat in front of computers. Bright fluorescent lights lit up a windowless room. It was all very ordinary, except that all the patrons were Chinese of course!

I approached the library assistants for more information about the library. This caused consternation and many giggles. Only one lady was prepared to brave the strange foreigner, but after many back and forth queries both in English and Chinese, she didn't feel she could really answer my questions. I had to make an appointment with Mr Liu (she didn't know how to explain exactly who Mr Liu was).

Weeks passed, Mr Liu didn't return any calls and didn't seem to be available. Finally I decided, this was now or never, and went back. Once more Mr Liu was not in, but the assistant this time contacted one of the



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librarians to assist me. She took me to the office area and soon three very curious, but friendly librarians surrounded me. My questions were answered patiently, but often only after serious debate. It was quite a challenge for both parties to make sure we understood each other correctly! A pleasant hour passed very quickly and when the interview was over, we took pictures and even exchanged e-mail addresses.

I left not only with a positive impression about the comprehensive services provided by the Taipei County Cultural Centre, but also impressed by the willingness of the busy librarians to patiently answer all the questions of a strange 'Nanfeian' (Nanfei is Mandarin for South Africa). But then again, the people of Taiwan are well known for their friendliness and hospitality to foreigners. The identity of Mr Liu remains a mystery, not one of the librarians seemed to know who he is!

About the Taipei County Cultural Centre

There are 23 cultural centres in Taiwan, at least one in every county. Although each county has many smaller public libraries, the cultural centre is the only one fully subsidised by the government Council for Cultural Affairs. The Taipei County Cultural Centre comprises an adult resource centre with books and magazines, a children's library, a study area for students, a research area with Internet access, an archive, video room, and a cultural exhibitions area.

Students make up the largest percentage of patrons; they visit the library mostly for study and research purposes, but also for leisure. Nine fully qualified librarians and eleven library assistants work in the adult section alone. Patrons can request interlibrary loans, though individual requests are unusual; most interlibrary loans are done

for schools as schools don't have their own library collections.

Patrons don't have access to CD-ROMs, but can search the holdings of the library on computers in the adult resource centre. Here they also have access to Taiwanese databases on newspaper articles and periodicals. The holdings are organised according to a unique Taiwanese cataloguing system very similar to the Dewey Decimal System. Internet searches can be done in the research area.

Although they are on a government budget, the librarians seem to have some autonomy about making acquisitions to the library's stock. The library stocks books, magazines, newspapers, encyclopaedic and audiovisual material; no e-books as yet. Community activities are not high priority items, but the children's library has regular story hours.

County cultural centres will reflect the regional speciality in their resource collection, for example, in Pingtung County the speciality is dried tea products, so libraries in that county will stock more books and resource material on the subject matter. The Taipei County Cultural Centre has an exhibition of exquisite pottery from Yingde, a town famous for lovely pottery.

Statistics

Circulation per annum: 700 000 books

Highest circulation: Chinese fiction books (there are only a few English books, separately catalogued according to the Dewey Decimal System)

Stock: Books, CDs, DVDs and videos, magazines

Computer system: EUREKA

Training: Librarians need a formal four year degree, but library assistants can train for free at the library, no tertiary qualifications required

Hours: Open seven days a week, Monday to Friday 08:30-21:00, Saturday and Sunday 08:30-17:00 (hours for adult section)

Fully subsidised by government, all services are free.



Clockwise from top:

The Taipei County Cultural Centre

A busy newspaper and magazine section

A young patron browsing among the shelves in the adult section

The children's section showing a Christmas display

Three friendly assistants in the adult library

