# A Reflecting Pool or an Alternative Reality? An American UX Librarian in China

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## Abstract

A UX librarian travels to China to present research and met librarians at Beijing Normal University in Beijing and Southwest University of Political Science and Law in Chongqing. This reflective essay is based on observations as well as a post-trip interview with a librarian at Beijing Normal University.

## Introduction

A week after my return from China, I sat down to watch *The Last Emperor* for the first time. I am ashamed to say I learned more about the Forbidden City's history watching this old, fictional movie about the last Chinese emperor then I did standing at the steps of the Hall of Supreme Harmony. Was I that loathed species: a lazy American tourist? Fortunately, I came around to a gentler and more complex opinion about my experiences in China. Because what I *did* learn at the Forbidden City doesn't conform to bullet points and isn't even necessarily all about China. What I gained is an increased self-awareness that is the result of a patchwork of observations and experiences about Chinese people, culture, and institutions. I visited the Forbidden City to learn about being an American.

The impetus of this late-spring trip to China was scholarly: my colleague and I were invited to present our research to librarians at Beijing Normal University and the Southwest University of Political Science and Law in Beijing and Chongqing, respectively. Both universities have relationships with our institution and this was one of many diplomatic/academic trips zig-zagging across the Pacific Ocean. I was enthusiastic to learn more about how Chinese academic libraries functioned, especially in my areas of interest: user experience, intellectual freedom, and web development. This was an incredibly simplistic goal and I returned with more questions than answers. When all communication is cushioned by interpreters, it can be difficult to determine the meaning and intention of everything you're told. I found this to be especially true in China where my questions about context and the larger forces that shaped institutional decision-making were met with wooden, repetitive answers that I had difficulty understanding. One of my translators, whose English name is Ran, graciously agreed to be interviewed once I was back in the States and feeling sheepishly empty-handed. Our conversation ranged in topics from flipped classrooms to YouTube. What this paper presents, instead of tidy comparisons about American academic libraries compared to their Chinese counterparts, is a series of questions that puts observations of both nations' academic libraries in conversation.

## Background

My interviewee, Ran, is an instruction librarian at Beijing Normal University (BNU) in Beijing, China and she interpreted a paper I presented at an instruction conference in Beijing. The title was "Connecting Information Literacy and User Research" and in it I addressed how my teaching has changed as a result of my experience doing user research, particularly, usability testing of the library website at the University of Montana's Mansfield Library, where I am based. Ran has been an instruc-

tion librarian for ten years at BNU and teaches credit classes as well as workshops. In her ten years at BNU, the library has never used user research or UX methodologies to inform any it its decision-making. Ran herself is interested in user research and UX but has no education or experience in the area. In fact, she attempted to take a class on the subject while a visiting scholar at an American is-chool and was turned away by the instructor because of her temporary status. I was incredibly discouraged, even ashamed, to hear this but cannot help but remember my own graduate school observations that international students, most often from Asian countries, were isolated in classroom settings because of their relative inexperience speaking English.

When Ran and I got together, our conversation was structured around questions I had prepared and had previously sent her via email. We video chatted using WeChat, the ubiquitous Chinese application used for messaging, banking, and even reference services at Beijing Normal University. I've organized our conversation into three larger questions I continue to ponder with regards to student use of library physical spaces, user research, and intellectual property. These questions reflect not only our conversation but also incorporate my observations and research on Chinese academic libraries.

**Library physical spaces: how and why students do use them?**
The biggest and most immediate difference I observed between American and Chinese academic libraries was the use of physical space. There were students everywhere in both Chinese libraries I visited: few seats were available. Ran, who has visited US academic libraries, told me that "Chinese students prefer to study in the library" more than American students. When asked to explain why she thought that was, Ran explained that Chinese undergraduate dorm rooms contain six to seven students each. Undergraduate through doctoral students are required to live on campus and like most of China's urban centers, BNU's campus is very densely populated. Ran even pointed out separate buildings on campus that housed showers because there weren't any inside at least some dormitories. In this environment, the library is about the only place for quiet and a guaranteed seat… as long as you reserve it through the seat reservation system. Observing students at BNU, I noticed that although the space was quiet, students were also watching TV shows (using headphones), eating, and using their phones. The living conditions experienced by Chinese university students contrasts greatly with the US's sprawling college campuses where students choose from the library, dorm common spaces, coffee shops, or maybe even an off-campus residence to do curricular and leisurely activities. I hypothesize that because of this difference in living conditions, American students spend less time in their libraries than their Chinese peers.

American academic libraries are struggling with their campus communities to agree on how to innovate physical spaces (Watanabe 2017). We fastidiously measure and report daily headcounts and increase programming and move books to increase that metric. Chinese academic libraries, it appears, feel no pressure to modify their spaces because students are already there; a fact emphasized by the BNU library dean over and over as she showed us the library's very crowded spaces during our tour. The theatrics used by this dean to demonstrate her pleasure and astonishment at how many students were in the space led me to believe that this is perhaps a much-praised feature of the BNU library. Because of the frequency with which this detail was emphasized, I had the sense that library administration interpreted this quantitative measurement as an indicator that Chinese students wanted to be at the library and that the library was providing good service to its user community. I instead saw it as an

indicator that given the overall living conditions of students, the library had no competitors and simply provided the only such service to its user community. But their interpretation implies that the library doesn't have to do anything to change or improve the spaces they provided. I wonder if our American administrators are essentially chasing this same homeostasis. In the cutthroat landscape of corporatized, American academia, success is defined by one number: retention. Is headcount the library's equivalent all-consuming metric? And do we even want our library spaces to be filled to the brim like the Chinese counterparts I witnessed?

**User research: do we guide behavior or follow experience?**
At Beijing Normal University, user data is not utilized on a regular basis except usage analytics of digital resources. Ran articulated that demographic and use information is incorporated into special projects but "normally collecting data is not a part of our work." By contrast, a large portion of my job at the University of Montana is making and executing decisions based on user research I conduct or analytics we collect through Google analytics, our discovery services' analytics, and transaction logs. When I asked Ran what made it difficult to interpret my presentation, which is predicated on the regular collection of user research, she told me that it was difficult to explain why I did user research at my institution because "In China, most librarians want to lead (or guide) students' behavior but not follow their experience." I admired this frank delineation between the desire of librarians to guide or influence student behavior and the desire to understand it; unfortunately, I think it is an accurate reflection of librarian mindsets. Ran's statement relies on the classic education structure of omniscient teacher and obedient pupil; a structure China and America's higher education system predominantly follows. Ran's comment made me think about my own library and the tension felt when interface or functionality changes are made to the website or digital resources without consulting some groups. For example, I have worked with instruction librarians who think that their copious time spent teaching and assisting students with research alone qualifies as user-centered decision-making. Ran said that "librarians want to understand users very much, but not everyone has solution(s)." What binds all librarians is our desire to understand students and to help them, what separates us is *how* to go about that decision-making.

Those of us working and researching in the trending realm of "user experience" and "assessment" are taught the gospel of data-driven decision-making: if we make decisions, we should have data, especially data specifically from our users, supporting that decision. At various points in my career, this imperative has come back to haunt me when I attempt to use my expertise in the field instead of specific data points to justify a change. Does my UX expertise trump an instruction librarian's expertise just because mine is based in the field of user research even if I'm not using a specific data point? Perhaps librarians using UX methods need to be clearer with our librarian and staff colleagues about what expertise and user research matters and when. Ran's questions about user research and her explanation of Chinese librarians' trepidation about my topic forced me to explain and justify my work for an audience that admitted it didn't understand or buy into the concept of user experience.

**Intellectual property: do we teach what matters?**
When I found out Ran used to teach a class on intellectual property to information management students at BNU, I couldn't help but ask about the current political climate and if she was aware of our government's accusation of intellectual property thievery by Chinese companies. Ran was not aware

of this. It is not surprising; China bans Google, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Wikipedia and many Western information sources. The non-profit international civil liberties organization Freedom House ranks China as having the least free media of the 65 countries it surveys (2016). But as university faculty, Ran's internet access unblocks YouTube, and other websites for academic purposes, particularly Google Scholar. When I explained to Ran that American companies and the government accuse Chinese companies of violating patent and trademarks, Ran still wasn't aware of what I was talking about but explained that intellectual property is very confusing in China. She explained, for example, although authors can sue for compensation when their work has been published without permission online, there is no organization or infrastructure to prevent that work from going up in the first place or to alert authors when a violation occurs. Similarly, Ran noted that on a Chinese video/social media platform similar to YouTube people download and re-upload content all the time without consequences.

In the classes she teaches now, Ran only discusses information ethics with regards to proper citation and plagiarism; "using another's paper" and treating each other's work with "respect". That sounds a lot like the topics I focus on when I do instruction. There are increasingly complex intellectual property issues making global news and we're all still spending all our time talking about APA? Our professional frameworks may use holistic language to construct these issues ("scholarship as conversation", for example) but the fact of the matter is that professors ask us to go no deeper than to demonstrate citation management software and to enforce a deep fear of plagiarism in students. And outside the classroom, the intellectual property issues students will have to face as working American and Chinese citizens lie in wait.

## Conclusion
These three topics, although wide-ranging, all lead to one conclusion: my academic library is much more similar to the Chinese counterparts I observed and, consequently, far less progressive than I would like to assume. Instead of interacting with an alternative reality of academic libraries in a Communist country without free press, I am gazing into a reflecting pool of two nations' academic libraries that grapple with many of the same issues.

What did I really learn in the Forbidden City that *The Last Emperor* couldn't teach me? When I visited this holy site on a Saturday morning in early April, the Forbidden City was swarmed with tourists – a vast majority of whom appeared to be Chinese. All ages were represented, in particular, multi-generational families. All buildings are sealed off by glass and staged in darkness to preserve intricate imperial objects. Selfie sticks thrashing, people sought to collect every possible shot of themselves with the ornate buildings. The backdrop was a matte, smoggy sky. There isn't much to do at the Forbidden City besides take photos and read small, brief plaques but still it was the busiest place I visited in China. I couldn't help but compare to important cultural and historical heritage sites in the US. American equivalents inundate attendees with context and content to prove their own importance and relevance. But I saw no such concern here: the Forbidden City is just something you do. As an American, the swarms of native Chinese tourists I saw reflected a unity of mission and assurance in identity. My conversation with Ran, who helped me reflect on my time at Chinese academic libraries, led me to question the mission and identity of my own library. The similarities I observed between American and Chinese libraries makes me worried that at our American institutions we aren't asking the big

questions of why we do what we do and who do we do it for. And when we don't ask the big questions, they are answered for us by administrators or fade into an unquestioning, banal adherence to tradition.

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