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International Federation of Library Associations World Library and Information Congress 2006

MARIAN KOREN

It was for the seventy-second time that the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) held its World Library and Information Congress (WLIC), this year in Seoul, Korea from 20–24 August 2006. IFLA seems to have built up a reputation of convening in places of significance at crucial times in history. This was the case at the time of the inner revolutions in Moscow, just before the increasing unrest in Jerusalem in 2000, and the September attacks in the USA. So it remains to be seen what Seoul 2006 might bring?

In the *IFLA Express*, good news was published that Ki-nam Shin, president of Seoul National Organizing Committee (NOC); Sang-wan Han, executive chairman; and Hyun-joo Lee, secretary general of the NOC had visited Pyongyang for four days beginning on 30 November 2005. They had a successful meeting with high-ranking officials from the North Korean government. As part of the effort for reconciliation, the 2006 Seoul NOC invited as many North Korean librarians as possible to come to this year's congress, but I could not find information on how many North Korean librarians actually participated. Nonetheless, it was remarkable that, for example, five colleagues from Iran could participate.

IFLA is not and should not be a forum for world politics, but nonetheless political realities have to be faced. Libraries are not islands, but they can be refuges when thoughts, ideas, and works of the imagination are threatened. Debates on the Danish Mohammed cartoons and on public libraries and the democratic process were part of the 2006 congress program.

Under the presidency of Alex Byrne, the relation between libraries/librarianship and human rights has been strengthened. The keynote speech of South Korea's former president and 2000 Nobel Peace Prize winner Kim Dae-jung testified to the importance of information for a democratic society and to literacy as access to lifelong learning. Along the same line, Yang-suk Kwon, first lady the Republic of Korea, in her remarks to the IFLA Congress supported the value of literacy and democracy. Her traditional dress, *hanbok*, contrasted with the high-tech stage where a real library hit-tune especially composed for the IFLA congress also was presented.

The theme for the 2006 congress: "Libraries: Dynamic Engines for the Knowledge and Information Society" was well chosen, as libraries have to develop their role and services to keep pace with the requirements of the twenty-first century. The word "engines," however, seems to stem from a different era and metaphor. Was there a hidden sponsorship by Hyundai, or are we still looking for the adequate metaphors of this new ephemeral, virtual era? Later in the program, when we had watched several cultural performances, the best of singing, dancing, and drumming, I started to understand the engine metaphor better: the sound and rhythm of the traditional Korean drums—thirty to forty (even more?) together on the stage—demonstrated a colorful, fascinating, and above all, perfectly coordinated human engine.

This image of perfect organization was the impression that remained after attending many sessions and meetings. The COEX Convention and Exhibition Centre in Seoul was such a huge place that I regretted not having brought my bicycle with me. One needed to be in good condition to get from one meeting room to the next. The volunteers helped with the directions, but the walking you had to do yourself. In the same complex, a natural science exhibition for young children was being held. Librarians had to cross lines of mothers and fathers waiting

with small, delicately dressed princes and princesses, giving us all a first glimpse into modern Korean family life. Visiting the shopping malls located under the convention center demonstrated the primary leisure time pasture for Koreans: a never ending stream of families, couples, and groups flowed by on a shopping stroll or squeezed into one of the many tiny rice and noodle restaurants. Seoul seemed to me a fascinating mixture of Asian and American way of life. Across from the convention center stands an older, newly repainted Buddhist temple which, even though some buildings are still under renovation scaffolding, is heavily frequented by all sorts of people. Whenever I went there, morning or evening, many people were there taking the opportunity to sit, read, or pray in meditation, their shopping bags waiting for them to step into the busy life again. I was told, that only in the hills and forests outside Seoul, in the very countryside, one still can find genuine temples and communities (including libraries?), so I regretted that my stay in Korea was limited to the activities of the IFLA congress.

Will IFLA make the changes necessary to become an international advocacy association for the library field? This was the question I addressed in December 2002 in the discussion paper “A Green Light for IFLA” (http://www.ifla.org/V/cdoc/green_light.html). A few years later, it is evident that sections within IFLA at least are willing to cooperate, making joint programs such as the government libraries working with social sciences libraries, Preservation and Conservation working with Continuing Professional Development, and Workplace Learning working with the Preservation and Conservation Core Activity. Crossovers of knowledge are very necessary in our field, but libraries are not very good at applying knowledge management to themselves. A review process of the IFLA sections has been started and will hopefully lead to a vivid professional exchange.

Another hopeful sign at the 2006 congress was the President-Elect’s Planning Session session. This open session, introduced by past president Kay Raseroka of Botswana, proved to be very fruitful for bottom-up communication and views on library matters. Advocacy is now an accepted focus of IFLA discussions and activities. President-elect Claudia Lux introduced her theme: “Libraries on the Agenda! (2007–2009)” (<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla72/papers/106-Lux-en.pdf>). Many

libraries are facing the situation that they are neither heard nor seen in the political debate, resulting in a decrease in subsidies and no recognition of their role in society. Therefore, libraries—from the local level up to the international level—must cooperate to get libraries onto the agenda at every level of government. They should take part in many different activities involving different political departments, even though it might not be apparent that those government departments have any responsibility for the well-being of libraries. In the Netherlands we attempt this by working with the Ministries of Economic Affairs, Social Affairs, and Youth Affairs, all outside the usual cultural and education departments. The constructive debates of this planning session were stimulating and promise further developments in this direction.

The 2006 IFLA Congress was the first one where Chinese was adopted as an official IFLA language. Arabic will follow in 2007. One can already see that many IFLA texts are translated into several languages. Take a look at the heading “What’s New” on the homepage of IFLA’s website (www.ifla.org). Moving away from being an association too strongly focused on English language and Western culture can only be beneficial and, in fact, is necessary in order for IFLA to become a truly global library community. Chinese translations of “Guidelines for Audiovisual and Multimedia Materials in Libraries,” “IFLA Disaster Preparedness and Planning: A Brief Manual,” and “IFLA Principles for the Care and Handling of Library Material” are among the first harvest of this new language and translation policy. I found it very stimulating to hear so many presentations from speakers from East Asia. It shows that colleagues around the world are working hard on the electronic web, on literacy and reading, on services to schools and education, on preservation, and on new professional education. The congress in Seoul proved to be an excellent opportunity to establish new IFLA relations.

Most stimulating, however, are the IFLA satellite meetings. They are very strongly focused on a particular theme, attract competent speakers, and build lively professional communities. I was fortunate enough to attend two in China this year: one on rare books and manuscripts in Hangzhou and a second on management and marketing in Shanghai. Here, many participants—first-timer participants in an IFLA meeting—took the first steps for meeting across language and cultural borders.

Learning about brushes, papermaking, printing, and library storage gave a special introduction to Chinese library culture. Seeing not only texts but also the environment in which the texts originated gave that extra enlightenment and insight one is seeking when reading a book in a library. Attending a specially staged Chinese opera based on the life of a book collector and librarian and then visiting that Ming-dynasty scholar's collection and library in Ningbo were other highlights. As a true generalist, I like to combine the knowledge of management and marketing with the specialist knowledge of rare books and manuscripts. It leads me to such questions as: How can we use marketing to create appreciation, education, and protection of rare books and manuscripts? And also, what can rare books contribute to a better marketing of the library services and profession worldwide? In my mind I saw already stimulating cooperation at work while traveling through China, Korea, and Japan, each with its own unique culture so distinctly different from my own. Knowledge of these cultures is essential to an understanding of the global community. I appreciated my first practical steps in these worlds thanks to international librarianship.