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Abstract

Cultural phenomena develop over hundreds, even thousands of years, but are capable of destruction in a short time, even within a decade. One example is the traditional culture of the Li ethnic group. The Li are the indigenous residents of Hainan Island in southernmost China. Their language is only oral, and there is no written script. The Li have developed a unique culture, retaining certain folkways such as their unique tattooing customs for thousands of years, and up to the foundation of the new China in 1949, they continued to live a primitive communal life.

But the diversity of the Li culture is rapidly vanishing. The women with tattoos we see nowadays are over 60 years old (often in their 70s and 80s), and few Li people can sing the folk songs which relate their history and stories: the whole Li culture is on the verge of extinction. The library of Hainan University has previously paid relatively little attention to local documentation, but in the past three years, the situation has changed dramatically. The development of local documentation has gradually become a priority for library work, and the library has assumed an active role, being involved in various activities to salvage, excavate, study and develop the Li traditional culture.

Not only have we paid more attention to collections on Li culture (focusing especially on photographic, audiovisual, and multimedia collections), but with the help of Prof. Ching-chih Chen, of Simmons College, USA, we took part in a training opportunity in 2005 with Global Memory Net (GMNet) in Boston to learn the advanced digital library technology. We have a key project to digitize our multimedia collections, in order to develop a database and information service on the Li traditional culture.

In addition, the library is increasingly cooperating with the local governmental departments, other university and public libraries, museums, and archives as well, and international exchange is becoming more active too. In a word, in this paper, the authors want to tell you what efforts we have taken and will take to try to construct a dynamic platform from localization to internationalization en route to salvaging the vanishing Li culture.

Introduction

• The vanishing culture of the Li ethnic group

There are 56 nationalities in China, of which the mainstream Han nationality is the largest, all the remaining nationalities are called minority ethnic groups, including the Li ethnic group.

The Li are the indigenous residents of Hainan Island in southernmost China. Their language is only oral, and there is no written script. Li people were mostly illiterate in the past, they made knots on ropes or counted beans to keep records and notes. The earliest document on Li recorded by the Han nationality goes back some 3,000 years, and the Hans of central China found the Li particularly exotic because of the Li's costumes, including the way they arranged their hair and tattooed their bodies.

Li Ethnic Minority Group

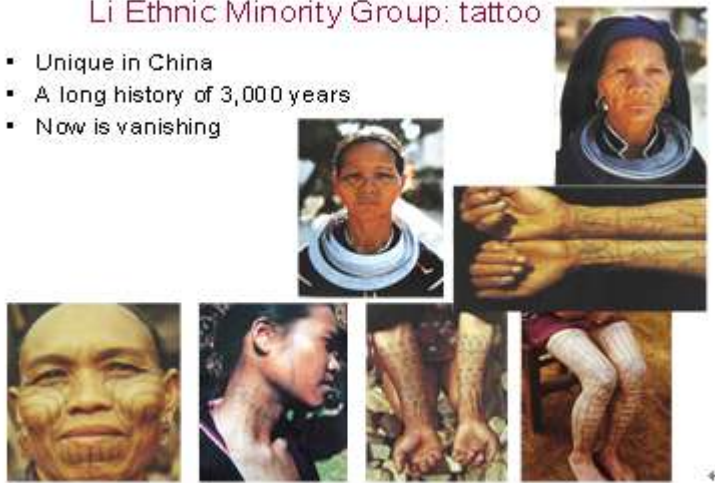


The area the Li inhabited was very far away from the central government and the transportation was very backward before the foundation of new China in 1949 (for

example, the city of Sanya, in the south of Hainan Island, is called “the ends of the earth” by Chinese, because the island was so remote). In these circumstances, the Li have developed a unique culture, retaining certain folkways, such as their unique approach to marriage (a relic of a maternal clan society), and their tattooing culture, for thousands of years.

Li Ethnic Minority Group: tattoo

- Unique in China
- A long history of 3,000 years
- Now is vanishing



Li Ethnic Minority Group

As for the primitive folkways, let’s explain by way of an example. When a Li girl reached adulthood at 12 to 13 years old, she had to be tattooed and her parents built a single room called “Liao” for her beside the family house. in this room, the girl started to have assignations with any man she liked: even after she was married, she still lived with her mother’s family and was able to entertain any other man(generally excluding her husband) until she became pregnant. That virtually ensured that her first baby would not be her husband’s child. Once she had had a baby, she would start to live with her husband, and from then on, she was not allowed trysts with any other man, except on the special Li festival, on March 3rd. In the past, on 3rd March, every Li people could date with whoever he or she fancied.

As to the tattooing custom, there is a folklore to interpret the origin of the tattoo, tattooing is a practice handed down from the ancestors – if a woman did not have tattoo on her body before her death, she would not be accepted by her spirit ancestors after she died, and thus would become a homeless and wild ghost. Because of such strange customs, the Li have been regarded by the central authorities to be quite alien for thousands of years, and so, up until 1949, they were still living a primitive communal life.

In constrast to such primitive folkways, Li costumes and brocade are considered a pearl in china’s cultural treasure house.

Li hand-made brocade: costumes and bedcover

The Li people have the earliest weaving technology in Chinese history. Li hand-made textile technology reached a



considerably high level in the 5th century, and became well-known in the Song Dynasty (a thousand years ago) . In the early Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), Huang Daopo, the legendary weaver in Chinese history, learnt advanced textile skills from the Li people and invented a cotton fluffer, a pedal spinning wheel and looms, which were the most advanced in the world at the time. There is no doubt that the advanced textile skills of the Li people, to a great extent, pushed the development of China's traditional textile industry forward.

From the foundation of new China in 1949, most customs of the Li were prohibited by the new Chinese government as corrupt practices and bad habits, including the approach to marriage and tattooing customs we mentioned above. The Li had to learn and speak Chinese, and the Li culture has been gradually assimilated into the Han mainstream. All the more so after 1988, when Hainan Island was separated from Guangdong Province and established as an independent Hainan Province, and the Chinese government (in order to change the backward situation of this area and speed up its development), designated Hainan Island as the largest special economic zone in China. Dramatic changes have taken place, and the modernization process has impacted the Li traditional culture extensively and deeply.

As social productivity advances, lifestyles change and cultures mix together, the diversity of the Li culture has been rapidly vanishing, especially in the last three decades. The women with tattoos we see nowadays are over 60 years old (often in their 70s and 80s), and few Li people can sing the folk songs which relate their history and stories, and the new generation have limited knowledge of hand-made textile techniques. The whole Li culture is on the verge of extinction.

- **Awakening to cultural diversity**

In the later part of the 20th century, the Chinese government had gradually become aware that the policies of homogenisation are very harmful to the development of ethnic minorities; they acknowledged that cultural diversity is the common heritage of humanity and that its deference is an ethical imperative, inseparable from respect for human dignity. With the advent of the new century, the faster pace of modernization and the globalization process has created an urgent need to protect the intangible cultural heritage, which is universally regarded as a mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development.

Between 1997 and the present day, the government of China has issued a series of regulations and laws on the protection of the natural and intangible cultural heritage. Since 2005, China has been carrying out the creation of a comprehensive, systematic inventory of all forms of intangible heritage in its territory. To date, 518 items have been proclaimed first “Masterpieces”, of which just 4 items have been recognised by UNESCO. There are 9 items from Hainan Province listed in the national catalogue, 6 of which relate to the Oral and intangible culture of the Li.

Starting the journey salvage the vanishing Li culture

• Awakening to the library's functional missions

The traditional Li culture constitutes the code of cultural life of the Li ethnic group; it not only encompassed its own cultural diversity, but is also a vivid and direct reflection of the cultural diversity of Human Heritage.

Cultural phenomena develop over hundreds, even thousands of years, but are capable of destruction in a short time, even within a decade. One example is the traditional culture of the Li ethnic group; most of the cultural diversity of the Li no longer exists .

In the face of the vanishing Li culture, what should a library be doing - and what is it able to do, especially if it is the library of Hainan University? Because there has been no provincial public library in Hainan until 2006, it has for many years been regarded as not only the university's library, but also as a provincial public library, so the library has shouldered both the mission of both a university and a provincial public library. Although its functional missions have included the preservation and dissemination of local culture and knowledge, the library has previously, for a variety of reasons, paid relatively little attention to the development of the local documentation.

Three years ago, there were just over 300 categories of books of local documentation among the library collection, and only some 10 were about the Li ethnic group, to say nothing of multi-material collections.

Fortunately, in the past three years, the situation has changed dramatically. The development of local documentation has gradually become a priority for library work, and the library has assumed an active role, being involved in the various activities to salvage, excavate, study and develop traditional Li culture. It has been making great efforts to try to construct a dynamic platform from localization to internationalization en route to salvaging the vanishing Li culture.

• Story: Two old professors and enhancing the collections for salvaging

On the top floor of the library building of Hainan University, there is a special office for two elderly people. Almost every day they come to the office, however bad or good the weather is. For a long time in the past, few librarians knew who they were and what they had been doing. Nearly three years ago, the Director of the library knocked on the door of this office, and from that moment, a special door was opened, not only to a treasure house within in this library building, but also to the start of a journey to salvage the vanishing Li culture.

Today, we all know them as Professor Zhou Weimin and Professor Tang Lingling, each of whom is not only over 70 years old, but also has a high reputation in the university. Although they are retired, for more than 10 years they have been engaged in research on Hainan local history and genealogy, focusing especially on the traditional culture of the Li ethnic group. They have covered almost all of Hainan Island to investigate, and collect first-hand materials and documents, and have been to Taiwan, Hong Kong and other countries, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Canada, and America to have scholarly exchanges.

We can see how this office is filling up with their cherished collections, including more than 20,000 volumes of books on Hainan local history, over 200 series of genealogies with 700,000 pages, 1000 individual photographs of Li tattoos, and rare collections of bark clothes made by Li people, etc. These collections are like a treasure house in terms of not only the quantity but also the quality; many of them are very rare, including the genealogies; among them there is one called the Han family genealogy. The surname Han is the original family surname of the Soong Sisters Soong Ching-ling and Soong May-ling, who were respectively the first lady of Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek, the provisional President and President of the Republic of China(1911-1949), and the hometown of the Soong Sisters' farther is located in the city of Wenchang, in Hainan Province.

In the past three years, these two experts have often been invited into the library to give instruction on the knowledge of Hainan local history and how to collect local documents, etc. and the library has set up a team to collect, sort out and study local documents. we pay a great deal of attention to the collections on Li culture; as we mentioned above, there are six items on Li intangible culture listed in the national catalogue. This causes us to focus especially on photographic, audiovisual and multimedia collections. The library collection of local documents has been gradually enriched to a certain extent and now covers 3500 categories.

Deepening the foundational functions: a path from collecting to study

• Story: Mr. Wang Xueping and compiling a series of books on the Li ethnic group

Mr. Wang Xueping, Vice Chairman of the Standing Committee of Hainan Provincial People's Congress and member of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, the former vice governor of Hainan Province, is a son of the Li people, and has done a great deal to protect traditional Li culture. At the end of 1990s, in order to implement the policy of "salvage, excavation, study and development" of ethnic cultures, and to let the world know more about Hainan and the Li ethnic group, the Working Committee on Ethnic and Religious Affairs of the Standing Committee of the Hainan Provincial People's Congress, Hainan Provincial ethnic and Religious Affairs Department and the CPPCC Hainan Provincial Committee decided to publish

a photo collection – “Traditional Culture of the Li Ethnic Group”.

From July 2000, an editorial board for the book was set up, with Mr. Wang Xueping as director; a multi-department research team was organized with scholars, including the two professors Zhou Weimin and Tang Lingling. The research team investigated the area where Li people live, village-by-village, one-by-one, taking thousands of pictures. Finally, after more than three years of efforts, two books were published; one is concentrated on pictures and the other is concentrated on the text.

During the process, Mr. Wang, taking the manuscript of the book with him, visited remote areas populated by the Li group, interviewed hundreds of people and invited individuals from all walks of life to review the manuscript. His work laid solid ground for the books’ successful publication. Certainly these two books were added to our library’s collections later and now provide an enormous amount of data for researchers. In addition, the vast number of valuable pictures in those books became the object of digitalization in the next story we will mention.

As we have indicated, the Li people only has spoken language and has no written script. Writtings on the Li are scattered among the enormous corpus of Han documents, and are not convenient for the researcher to seek out and use. So from 2005 Mr. Wang Xueping undertook to compile a series of books on the Li ethnic group, with the intent of drawing the materials from ancient documents published before 1949, including overseas documents, and then arrange them into different topics and compile 20 volumes of books containing about 8 million words. It will take 5 years to complete; the library of Hainan University has been participating in the compilation and is responsible for the work of collecting material; to date we have completed the basic collecting work and have started to write it up.

• **Story: Involving in the establishing the Hainan history & culture research base**

As the largest comprehensive university, Hainan University is increasingly aware of important role which it should play in the development of the local economy, culture and education of Hainan. It is very necessary to study local history and culture, so the Hainan University History & Culture Research Base and the Hainan History & Culture Institute were established by the Hainan provincial government and Hainan University in January 2007 and integrated into one organization, located in the library. Four primary research topics have been decided for the research base:

- Hainan Oral and intangible culture and heritage
- Hainan natural heritage and tangible culture
- Hainan history & culture and social development
- The history & geography of the South China Sea and the culture of south-east Asia.

The library has participated in the preparation of the base and was designated to be responsible for the collection development of the research base, especially focusing

on genealogy, and oral and intangible heritage collections. So, there is a long way to go for the development of local documentation. It is very fortunate for the library that the two professors Zhou Weimin and Tang Lingling have said they would donate all of their cherished collections to the library in the future, which will enrich the collection of the library and the research base to a great extent.

A path from traditional preservation to digitalization

• Story: Collaboration with Dr. Ching-chih Chen in the Global Memory Net (USA)

Dr. Ching-chih Chen, Professor of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Simmons College, USA, is a sought-after consultant and speaker to over 40 countries. She served as a member of both President Clinton's and President Bush's Presidential Information Technology Advisory Committee (PITAC) from 1998-2002, and was actively involved in several PITAC subcommittees, including Digital Library, Digital Divide, Future of Learning, Individual Security, and International Issues.

Dr. Ching-chih Chen, of Simmons College, USA, has devoted her major efforts in recent years to digital library research and development. Her Global Memory Net (GMNet), is a multi-year International Digital Library Project, supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF/IDL), intended to be a gateway to world cultural, historical, and heritage multimedia resources.

In order to preserve, excavate and add values to the library collections, and also to learn about advanced digital library technology, the Library started to explore, in the early 2005, the possibilities of collaborating with Prof. Ching-chih Chen, who is also an Honorary Professor of Hainan University, in her Global Memory Net. Prof. Chen has agreed to invite



Hainan University Library's vice research librarian, Zhang Hongxia (the first author; the picture in the right shows the GMNet visiting research team with Dr. Chen in a red dress), joining her project for a duration of 6 months. For the purposes of this collaboration, Hainan University agreed to provide Prof. Chen the necessary images or multimedia contents on the Li or Miao Minority Groups for consideration to be included in the GMNet.

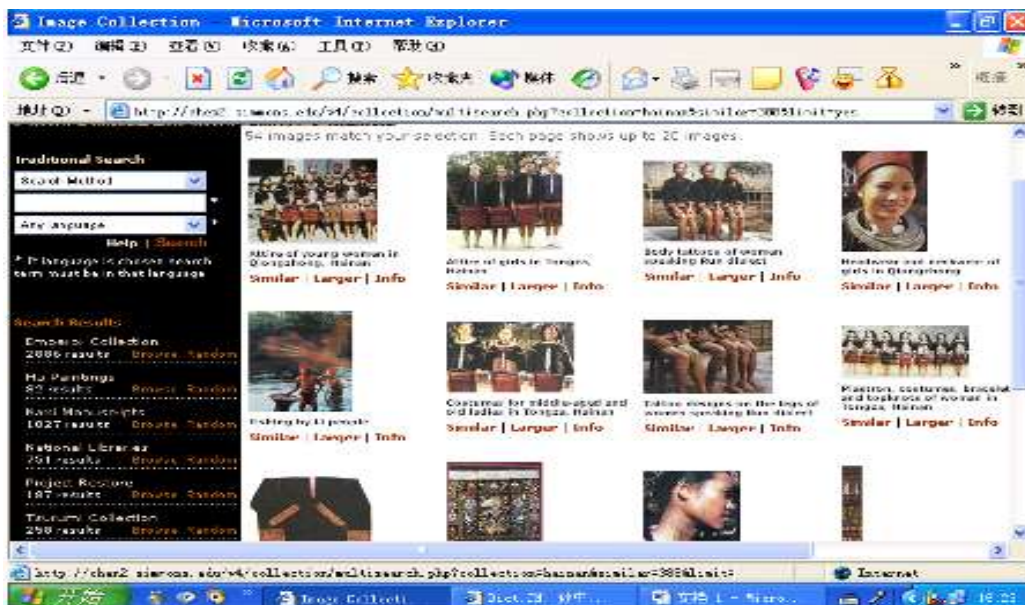
Prior to the journey to Boston, there were only a few of multimedia collections about the Li in the library, and few of those could meet Prof. Chen's criteria in terms of both copyright ownership and the contents of images and multimedia, portraying Li costume, religion, worshipping, funeral rites and folk music. How could we proceed?

Firstly, we went through all of the collections on the Li in the library, and found that

the pictures in the two books “Traditional Culture of Li Ethnic Group”, “Li Ethnic Group of China”, compiled by Mr. Wang Xueping (as we have mentioned above), covered almost all aspects of the Li lifestyle and could meet the requests of Prof. Chen. In addition to having a professional photographer to re-take hundreds of pictures, the director of the library went to Mr. Wang’s office on several occasions and reached an agreement with Mr. Wang to permit the library and GMNet to digitize the pictures and use the content from the two books, thus smoothly resolving the issue of copyright clearance.

On the other hand, we planed to collect some new images to supplement the content. There are Three Brothers called Yuan in the city of Sanya, who for more than 20 years, have accumulated thousands of pieces in a collection on the Li culture and built up a private museum. So, the director Zhan contacted them and arranged for the author Zhang to visit them. With the permission of the Yuan Brothers, we took some hundred of pictures and brought them to the GMNet for possible use.

During Zhang Hongxia’s stay at Simmons, she used those pictures to create both Chinese and English ACCESS-based local databases on the selected 410 images, and with GMNet’s in-house developed LINUX/MySQL/PHD-based i-M-C-S system, the collection of a multi-lingual “Chinese Minority–The Li” was developed (<http://memorynet.org/collection/intro.php?project=hainan>) and now it represents an open window for the world to know more about the Li ethnic group. A illustration on one of the image displays of this collection is taken from GMNet, <http://www.memorynet.org>, as the following:



Images of the Li in GMNet

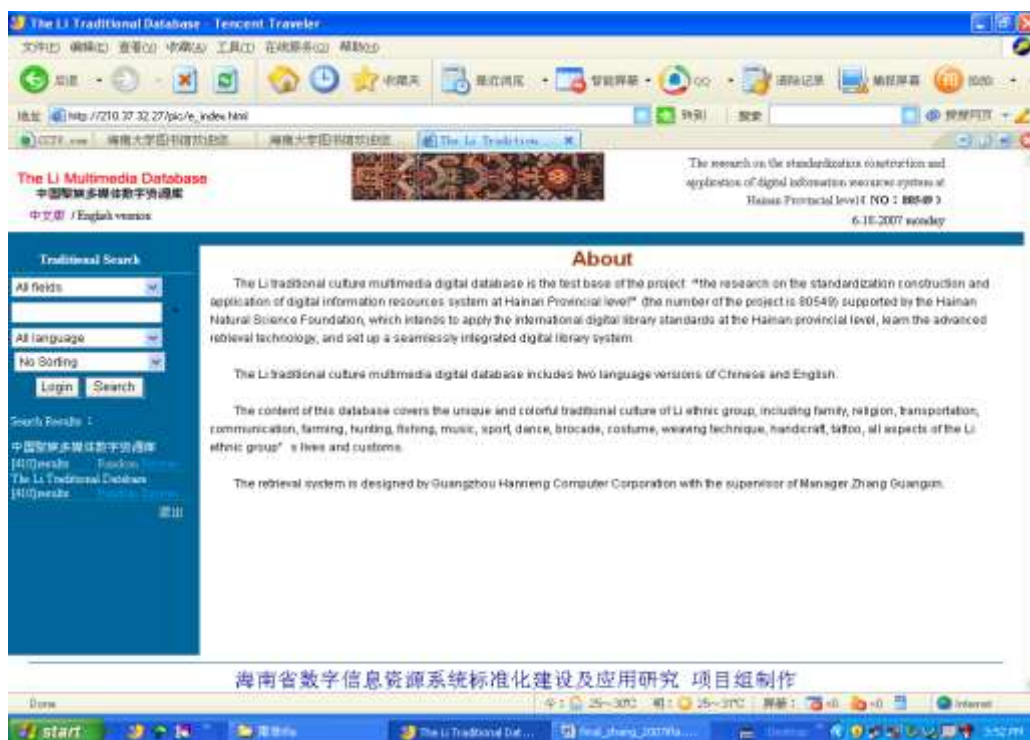
- **Creating the multimedia digital database of Li traditional culture with two language versions (Chinese and English)**

After Zhang Hongxia's returning from Boston, in 2006 we applied for a project on "research in the standardization, construction and application of the digital information resources system at Hainan Provincial level"(the number of the project is 80549). This project is supported by the Hainan Natural Science Foundation, and we will research and adopt digital library standards to create a multimedia digital database on the Li traditional culture as a test base, which is intended to be an example of applying international and national digital library standards and regulations at the level of Hainan province, to set up a seamlessly integrated digital library system.

The Li traditional culture multimedia digital database, tailored after the GMNet format, is compliant with Dublin Core and accommodates all types of languages and multimedia formats. At present it includes two language versions (Chinese and English). The content of this database covers the unique and colorful traditional culture of Li ethnic group, including family, religion, transportation, communication, farming, hunting, fishing, music, sport, dance, brocade, costume, weaving technique, handicrafts, tattooing, and all aspects of the Li ethnic group's lives and customs. The prototype of the Access Database was developed using the GMNet's system, the retrieval system with traditional retrieval capabilities is designed by the research team of the project, two of them are from Guangzhou Hanneng Information Technology Corporation and developed the main functions of the system. At present the whole system is being matured and has been launched on the library website (see the project web page as illustrated below. Cited from: <http://210.37.32.27/pic/index.html>). We still seek for further collaboration in Global Memory Net and want a remote link from GMNet to this local database.



instructions on the database (Chinese version)



Instructions on the database (English version)

Constructing a dynamic platform from localization to internationalization

• Widening library services for scholars and researchers

In the library, there is another reference team to provide a variety of services for scholars and researchers, such as document delivery, an alerting service, and a translation service. Taking our two professors as a prime example, the reference librarians help them to translate the abstracts of their papers into English, (they filled up the forms to apply for passport and visa when they were invited to the University of Utah by the Genealogical Society of Utah to give a scholarly speech in 2005), and often help them to search overseas materials and translate into Chinese for them. For example, the author of this paper, Zhang Hongxia, has not only provided all those kinds of services to them, but also helps them to master basic computer skills and maintains their computer and printer in working order.

As for the alerting service, we also have done a lot for them. Take the Li intangible culture for example, the two professors are also experts involved in the work of proclaiming “masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage” in Hainan province. They have been responsible for recommending two items of Li intangible culture: Li bark cloth making and Li tattooing. Although the former has already been listed in the National catalogue, they have so far suffered failure regarding Li tattooing, because some scholars and officials still regarded Li tattoos as a kind of corrupt custom, not worth protecting. From a librarian’s perspective, the authors think that although the Li

tattoo is a relic of the maternal clan society, a product of matriarchy, it directly reflects the primeval religion of worshipping nature, ancestors and totems, and has lasted for 3000 years, so that it is a spectacular cultural phenomenon in the history of the Li ethnic group. As we have indicated, the Li tattoo was prohibited after 1949 and nowadays it is almost dying out. In order to record its special culture and history, we urgently need to record the tattooing skills and colorful patterns of Li tattoo in multimedia format; otherwise, the spectacular cultural phenomenon of Li tattoo will be totally extinguished.

At this point, the author Zhang is greatly interested in the work of proclamation and has collected a great deal of information on intangible culture. This year the two professors wanted to submit the Li bark cloth making to be proclaimed by the UNESCO; the author Zhang found that “Bark Cloth Making in Uganda” has been listed in the UNESCO’s Third Proclamation of Masterpieces(2005). She also searched related information, such as bark cloth in Tonga, and in Hawaii, and supplied it in support of the two professors’ study and research.

- **Building a bridge for cooperation and exchange**

In addition, the library is increasingly cooperating with local government departments, other university and public libraries, museums, and archives as well. On Jan. 21, 2007, 16 directors of public libraries of cities and counties in Hainan province took part in the conference of the compiling committee for the book “Catalogue of Hainan genealogies” sponsored by the library of Hainan University and the Hainan history & culture research base. During the conference, they have agreed to collaborate in collecting genealogy and other local special collections, including the traditional culture of the Li. Many of the directors had participated in the work of proclamation of masterpieces. Two weeks later, the library and the research base organized a team including librarians, which visited the city of Sanya, the county of Lingshui, Changjiang, etc. and investigated the collections of genealogy in these public libraries.

For the purpose of studying and disseminating the history and culture of Hainan as well as the Li culture, international exchange is becoming more active too. From Oxford University, the National University of Singapore, the University of Technology Sydney, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, etc. we invited many overseas special scholars into the library to give speeches, and the two professors Zhou and Tang from Hainan University were invited to Canada, America to have exchanges as well.

- **Story: Dr. Mattiebelle Gittinger and assisting her investigation on the Li textile**

Dr. Mattiebelle Gittinger, Research Associate for southeast Asian Textiles at the Textile Museum in Washington DC., USA, she has been the curator of each of The

Textile Museum's exhibitions of Southeast Asian textiles. In the past 30 years she has been to Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia, and Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam to investigate textiles and costumes. Although she knew the textile of the Li in China many years ago, she had never been to Hainan before. Invited by Prof. Zhou Weimin and Tang Lingling, on 3rd November 2006 she arrived in Hainan Province and started a visit of nearly a month. During this period she has gone to 8 cities and counties; the library of Hainan University provided a librarian to be an interpreter for her and accompanied her closely from her arrival to departure. The last stop of her visit was the library of Hainan University, where she gave a keynote speech and talked about her experience and discoveries in a symposium, which many librarians and scholars took part in and had active discussions with her.

Conclusion

For salvaging and developing the vanishing Li culture, we have made and will continue to make great efforts. Nowadays, the scope of collections is widening from paper-based to multimedia, the means of preservation is developing from traditional ways to digitalization, the library functions are deepening from collecting, preserving, and dissemination to studying and excavating, the users the library serves are increasing from domestic to overseas, the methods of services are changing from traditional to modern. In a word, what we have done and will continue to do is try to construct a dynamic platform from localization to internationalization en route to salvaging the vanishing Li culture.

Acknowledgement

Thanks to the committee members of the IFLA Genealogy and Local History Section and the IFLA Audiovisual and Multimedia Section, for their great help and kind suggestions (one of those members, Mr. Melvin P. Thatcher, Asia/Pacific Area manager of the Genealogical Society of Utah, is able to read Chinese and suggested that the author should also provide a version in Chinese), especially Janice McFarlane, Enquiries & Reference Services Manager of National Library of Scotland, and Professor Bruce Royan, CEO of Concurrent Computing Limited. In addition, especially thanks to the invitation and great support from Professor Ching-chih Chen of Simmons College and also the financial support of the US National Science Foundation's International Digital Library Project for Zhang Hongxia's stay in America. Thanks again to Mr. Wang Xueping for his support, Vice Chairman of the Standing Committee of Hainan Provincial People's Congress and member of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. Also thanks to our colleague, Deng Ling, vice research librarian of Hainan University Library, for her help in information provision.

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