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A glimpse into academic and research libraries in North Korea

Collaboration to bridge societies

While many library researchers and practitioners, especially those who are interested in international collaboration, have sought to find ways to engage with the North Korean library system, it has not been fruitful due to the dearth of information as well as political restrictions. The recent détente in the Korean peninsula raises hope that we may now have unprecedented opportunities to learn and understand the country since the Korean War ended in 1953. Obtaining any information on North Korea is still difficult. We need to depend on the information released by the North Korean government and personal records of visitors in various forms. Confirming and validating any research results on the country remains extremely challenging, and this leads to the lack of meaningful scholarly discussion and literature on libraries in North Korea.

This article presents my personal experience with North Korean libraries. I visited North Korea several times to study its library system and also to help a local university develop its print and electronic collection. Although still lacking details, this article hopefully provides some insights into the role and state of North Korean libraries, especially with a focus on academic libraries.

Digital library at Kim Chaek University of Technology

The opening of the digital library at Kim Chaek University of Technology (KCUT)

in 2006 is perhaps the most significant academic collaboration between the United States and North Korea. A group of computer scientists at Syracuse University helped open the country's first digital library through the use of open source software. This was widely publicized by the North Korean government, and led to the creation of digital libraries at other universities as well as provinces and cities in subsequent years.

According to its website, KCUT has a total of 16 departments and 11 institutes in various engineering programs, such as electrical, mechanical, industrial, shipbuilding, and material sciences.[1]

The digital library (called "E-Library") at KCUT offers more than 30,000 volumes in its print collection and 12 reading rooms for electronic content materials. In its 16,500 square meter building, the library also offers 11 additional reading rooms, and five reading and browsing halls. Often seen and promoted as a major landmark

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for KCUT, the digital library holds its significance as the first major digital library in North Korea, as well as the first major academic collaboration between universities in the United States and North Korea.

I visited the university and had the opportunity to explore its library system. The most notable feature of its system was its online lecture database. Lectures were video-recorded and stored in the library server; students could easily find recorded lectures categorized by the title, course number, and instructor of the course. The library offered media space where students could watch lectures with

Grand People's Study House.

headsets. In 2010, KCUT started its online distance education program, which not only provided teaching materials, but also educational resources to those residing in other provinces. Online lecture materials managed by the library thus must play a significant role in offering distance education in the country.

Digital Library at Kim Il Sung University

Established in 1946, Kim Il Sung University (KISU) is the first university built in North Korea, and is widely known as the country's flagship university. Interestingly, the digital library at KISU was completed with the assistance of South Korea in 2007. As a part of cultural collaborative programs between the North and the South, this modernization of KISU's library system began in 2005 and ended in 2007. According to the agreement, a consortium of South Korean universities

and institutes provided technologies and expertise needed to construct a digital library; the counterpart in North Korea, on the other hand, offered the bibliographic information database of North Korean publications to the South Korean consortium. The North Korean counterpart also agreed to provide some scholarly publications to South Korea. This collaborative project contributed to upgrading KISU's library system with a library automation system and starting digital library programs based on the Web interface. Unfortunately, the program could not continue due to the sudden deterioration of the relationship between the North and South.[2]

Similar to KCUT's digital library, KISU's library boasts not only its large volume of print collection, but its facilities for lectures, conferences, and multimedia rooms. KISU uses the digital library to host international conferences and seminars; students utilize the digital library for group discussions and special seminars. While it has not been verified whether the digital library at KISU now has full access to the Internet, the digital library does have access to locally digitized contents of various scholarly and state-published materials. I conducted interviews with the library administrator during his visit, and it was evident that the digital library at KCUT aimed at becoming the center of all learning activities outside classrooms via online lectures, group discussion space, and automated library systems.

Grand People's Study House

With more than 20 browsing rooms seating 6,000 users and over a total of 600 rooms to its name, the Grand People's Study House (GPSH) is truly the center of learning for North Koreans. GPSH is known to have the ability to house up to 30 million books in its 100,000 square meter building, but its actual collection size is unknown. GPSH is literally built at the very center of the capital city, and it overlooks the Kim Il Sung Square, where military parades and other national events often take place.

This national library provides materials not only in Korean but also in English, French, Russian, German, Chinese, and Japanese. Several international organizations have reportedly donated books on a consistent basis. The Asia Foundation, for example, began its book donation program to GPSH in 1996. While visiting GPSH, I was able to browse the volumes donated by international organizations in multiple subjects ranging from finance, economics, and basic sciences to international languages and agriculture. It was also impressive that there were CDs and video recordings on agriculture, originally produced in Chinese.

GPSH's position as the center of learning for all citizens is demonstrated in its services beyond offering large collections of books and multimedia materials. GPSH offers continuing education programs, with English classes reportedly being the most popular. Classes in multiple subjects are offered throughout the year and citizens usually take classes at night and receive certification after completing certain requirements. Further, retired and current faculty from local universities spend certain hours during the week at GPSH, providing consultation services to users. I visited several night classes, as well as these consultation rooms. The name of the Grand People's Study House itself demonstrates the building's exact purpose—a public library with a massive collection of resources and opportunities for continuing education.

An international language lecture room at Grand People's Study House.

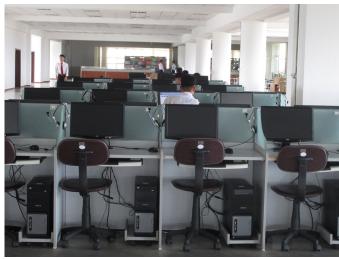## Digital Library at Pyongyang University of Science and Technology

Pyongyang University of Science & Technology (PUST) is truly unique in that it is the first and only higher education institution founded jointly by North Korea and international entities. PUST offers programs in electrical and computer engineering, international finance and management, agriculture and life sciences, and general studies. It has also recently started a medical program.

By teaching all classes in English, PUST provides opportunities to its students through a Western-style education. Since its inception in 2010, PUST has gradually grown the size of its faculty and students, and furthered its impact by sending some students overseas, especially to Europe, for further study and research opportunities.

Faculty and graduate students at PUST have access to the Internet. Although the

digital library does house books and scholarly materials, access to information on the Internet greatly enhances the quality of teaching and research. The digital library offers a number of computer terminals with access to the Internet. Additionally, PUST has a computer

Pyongyang University of Science and Technology Library.

workstation equipped with the Essential Electronic Agricultural Library (TEEAL). TEEAL is a full-text database of more than 450 international research journals in the fields of agriculture, life sciences, and other related sciences.

Located at Cornell University's Albert R. Mann Library, the TEEAL Project Office produces this valuable database at a low cost for research institutions in income-eligible countries. The TEEAL workstation at the PUST library is actively used by faculty and students for

Internet room at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology Library.

research in agriculture and related fields. The TEEAL database alone is an important research library for PUST faculty and stu-

dents. The digital library also purchased the eGranary Digital Library in a 6 terabyte hard disk from the Wider-Net Project. However, due to some technical difficulties, the computer workstation equipped with the eGranary Digital Library did not fully operate at PUST's digital library.

Personal reflections and suggestions for collaboration

A great degree of uncertainty exists when considering any type of collaboration with North Korea, and it will not diminish anytime soon. As mentioned above, the collaborative project between North and South Korea for KISU's digital library in 2005 lasted only two years, due to the worsening political environment. If the project continued, it would have produced amazing advances in scholarly communication by fostering exchanges of scholarly

content and developing standards and policies together for library management systems. It is very unfortunate that no further progress has been made in the subsequent ten years.

However, education still remains an excellent venue for international collaboration. When many believed that the door to North Korea was closed, a group of scientists at Syracuse University visited the country and helped build the nation's first digital library. Nonprofit organizations continued to send books and other educational resources.

As shown by the example of PUST, electronic resources produced by international library organizations help expand access to the latest research for local economic development and advances in various fields such as agriculture, medical science, forestry, and veterinary science. Hence, the library can pave a way for international collaboration between North Korea and the rest of the world by providing a platform for the exchange of scholarly resources and knowledge. Libraries in North Korea and other countries can start with scholarly communication via research resource exchanges, seminars, and copublications.

North Korean libraries are seeking for their collections to be updated. Furthermore, their library education may need significant collaboration from the international library community in the age of electronic resources via the Internet.

The advance in North Korea will definitely aid the country's effort to improve its economy by providing the latest knowledge and resources. The economic development requires extensive time, but the seed, the latest research and knowledge, for economic development must be planted via international library collaboration.

Engaging with North Korean academic and research libraries result in benefits for libraries internationally. First, academic and research libraries worldwide can contribute to the development of North Korean libraries by engaging in the following activities and others:

• sending textbooks in various subjects to university libraries;
• providing seminars on global library trends on technologies, management, and practices;
• providing education on hardware and software purchases and maintenance; and
• providing education on managing electronic information resources.

Second, the international community can benefit from North Korea by having access to its publications that have generally been difficult to obtain, as a result of collaboration between libraries in North Korea and other countries. Researchers will find resources directly coming from North Korea extremely valuable in understanding the country. Most publications on North Korea in the Western world deal with political situations and implications. However, international library collaboration will aid in understanding the country from cultural perspectives.

As we have witnessed in the case of the German reunification, the library has a significant role in bridging the gap between two societies, especially when they have been closed to each other for a long time.

Notes

1. Kim Chaek University of Technology, accessed November 11, 2018, www.kut.edu.kp.

2. Sungsup Song, "A Study on the Current Status and Development Possibility of Digital Library in North Korea," *Digital Library,* 72, winter (2013): 3–18. ℥