

Impressions of the Dalian Conference of the China Society of Indexers

Alan Walker

A report on the fourth annual conference of the Chinese Society of Indexers as seen through the eyes of an overseas visitor, together with some discussion of the Chinese approach to index arrangement and alphabetization, including the Pinyin system of transliteration.

Sixty indexers – 59 of them Chinese and one Australian – met in Dalian, northeastern China, for an indexing conference in October, 1999. This is a report by the lone westerner. My account of the conference will be partial – both in the sense of being incomplete, and in the sense of conveying only my own unofficial impressions. Given my complete ignorance of the Chinese language, in any of its forms, it could not be otherwise. Any errors in the following account should not be blamed on my Chinese indexing colleagues, but attributed to my own misapprehensions.¹

Dalian

Dalian has an air of prosperity, newly achieved, and with more expected. The city's history and geography make it an interesting place to visit, sited on a beautiful rocky coastline, with the largest harbour in the northeast, a terminus for the Manchurian railway and (according to my guidebook), 256,700 intellectuals. Recent developments include a new economic zone, gleaming coastal resorts and parks and tourist roads, a forest zoo, and striking statues and monuments. The rare donkey cart will not be around much longer.

The conference was held at the Center of International Cultures at Liaoning Normal University, which felt to me like a comfortable western hotel with an excellent Chinese restaurant.

The China Society of Indexers

Mr Ge Yong-Qing, Vice-President of the Standing Committee, in his speech at the opening ceremony, told us that this was the fourth annual conference of the China Society of Indexers (CSI), and the second national contact working meeting. The CSI has grown strongly since its foundation in 1991, and now has about 1200 members, including 38 institutional members. The Society has three subcommittees, devoted to academic research, index compilation and publishing, and education and training. I met indexers from libraries and information centres, universities and colleges, research institutes, and other organs and enterprises, including publishing.

How do the Chinese index?

The first question most western indexers ask, when I mention my visits to China, is: 'How can they index without an alphabet?' There are two answers to this. First, there are conventional, traditional arrangements of characters. The order usually described is based on the number of strokes in the radical element of the character. Nevertheless, since a well-educated, contemporary Chinese might know and use between 6000 and 8000 characters, any such system must necessarily be more complex than western systems based on a roman alphabet of about 26 letters in a fixed and well-known order. While a conventional order of Chinese characters has certainly been the basis for the arrangement of dictionaries, encyclopaedias, reference works and indexes over centuries, it seems that the principles of arrangement are not immutable, and that more than one system exists. Indeed, at the Dalian conference, one delegate made a gift to the Society of a new system of ordering characters which he had developed.²

The second answer is that alphabetical order is increasingly used. In 1958 the Chinese adopted a system of writing their language in the roman alphabet. This system, called Pinyin, is very well understood, I was told, by all educated young people in China, who have learnt it as part of their schooling. Westerners became aware of the introduction of Pinyin when Chinese names familiar to them through earlier systems of transliteration changed; so Peking became Beijing, Canton became Guangzhou, Mao Tse-tung became Mao Zedong, Chou En-lai became Zhou Enlai, and so on. While the original idea was to do away with characters, they have survived and the two systems co-exist.

Some indexes are arranged alphabetically, under initial letter headings: A, B, C, etc. And under each letter heading are listed characters, followed by Pinyin letters which reveal the order, e.g.

A
[character] a
[character] ab
[character] ac
[character] ad

One computer-compiled printed index demonstrated at the conference dispensed with the Pinyin letters, so it must be assumed that users are so familiar with the Pinyin transliteration of the characters that the order is obvious to them.

Software demonstrations

One afternoon was devoted to demonstrations of indexing software developed by several delegates. A system demonstrated by a professor of literature from Guangxi, a vice-president of the Society, showed navigation through a database containing a collection of historical texts. The display and design are clear and elegant. The texts are those that were used in civil service examinations for choosing and promoting mandarins. The system is stored on a number of CD-ROMs, but the developers would like to improve access to it by mounting it on the Internet. The indexing component included elements of classification and links between character-indexes and alphabetical indexes. While it appeared to be based on Chinese characters in a traditional order, alphabetical access was possible through Pinyin indexes. The Windows-style interface incorporated features such as Boolean logic, homonym differentiation and navigation to related terms.

Another system produced an index to the yearbook for a district of Beijing – a text containing some 800,000 words. The publication is now published both as a single printed volume and on two CD-ROMs. Previously there was no printed index, but since the information on index cards has been computerized, an index is included in the volume. This is the computer-compiled printed index mentioned above, and which I found interesting because it is arranged alphabetically but displays characters without the Pinyin equivalent, so it must be assumed that users are so familiar with the Pinyin that the order is instinctively understood.

Professor Zhang Qiyu,³ who is interested in database indexing, demonstrated a system (which I did not see) described as ‘a simple natural language indexing system using dBase’.

Cross-cultural communication

Through the generosity of the CSI in accommodating me during this conference, and through the kindness of many

Chinese indexers whom I met, I had the opportunity to learn a little about the CSI, and something of the work of indexers in China. I am also grateful to them for providing me with many new and delightful experiences unconnected with indexing – attending three delicious banquets, eating many unfamiliar shellfish, drinking excellent beer, playing tennis at dawn on a terrazzo court (the list could go on).

Indexers from different cultures have much to teach and learn from each other. Indexing societies from six countries are now affiliated with each other. I urge the office-bearers of all of those societies to do everything they can to facilitate communication amongst the group. Participating in a conference is one of the best and most personally rewarding ways of stimulating cross-cultural communication.

Notes

- 1 It would not have been possible to attend and participate in a conference held in a language foreign to me without the help of my many interpreters and translators, to whom I extend my very warm and sincere thanks. These people worked very hard during the conference to help me understand something of the proceedings, to translate my speeches so that delegates could understand me, and to facilitate social communication. Their skill in the English language helped to overcome my illiteracy in Chinese. I acknowledge them in alphabetical order: Miss Gao Chunling, Mr Guan Shi-Hua, Dr Hua Wei-na, Prof. Li Rong, Prof. Wang Guo-long, Mr Wei Haisheng, Mr Xu Jia-Qi, and Mr Zhao Yunsheng.
- 2 During this enterprise the indexer, a retired actor, was provided by his wife with an allowance of 100 yuan per month.
- 3 Professor Zhang is a distinguished senior academic from Shanghai, Director of the China Society of Library Science, Vice-President of the China Society of Indexers, and the author of books on information linguistics and knowledge organization.

Alan Walker is president of the Australian Society of Indexers (AusSI), 1997–2000. He met officials of the China Society of Indexers (CSI) in Shanghai in October 1998, and attended the Dalian conference at their invitation. Email: alan.walker@s054.aone.net.au

CONFERENCE 2000

The Cambridge Sidelights Review

14–17 July 2000 at Homerton College,
Cambridge

Please contact

caroline@barlow-indexing.freemove.co.uk
with your ideas and rough draft of the poster.

Call for posters

During the conference there will be an opportunity to present items of general interest in the form of posters, which will be displayed on a central noticeboard. Your details can be included on the poster so that interested parties can contact you during the conference, or talk to you during any time allocated to a poster session. The subject can be anything associated with the conference or indexing in general. Posters are particularly welcomed from overseas, perhaps detailing how indexing differs in the international context.