PREFACE

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The 2006 Pre-Conference of the IFLA Rare Books and Manuscripts Section was generously hosted by the Cultural Department of the Zhejiang Provincial Government in the beautiful and historically important city of Hangzhou, China. As is evident from these Proceedings, the program dealt with many aspects of the long history of Chinese writing and printing, cultural heritage and library work.

That long history has extended from characters scratched on ancient bones to contemporary applications of information and communication technologies. It is recorded and celebrated in the libraries of China including the vaults of the National Library of China and the historic pavilions of the Ancient and Rare Books Department of Zhejiang Library, overlooking the Emperor’s Lake at Hangzhou.

The sense of that history permeated the program and papers of the Pre-Conference which covered many aspects of printing in China and the challenges of conserving and preserving both the printed items and the wood blocks with which they were printed. Papers were presented by colleagues from as far afield as Germany and the United States as well as many by Chinese scholars and librarians. They demonstrated both the intrinsic interest of many beautiful examples and their value as vital elements of the heritage of humanity. But they also showed the skill and care applied by specialists to protect and, where necessary, repair rare books and manuscripts – as one paper put it, “repairing the old one like the original.”

The application of that expertise is a fine example of the central contribution which libraries and librarians make to the preservation and transmission of the memory of the world. Complementing the other services provided by public, educational and specialist libraries and information services, the work of rare book and manuscript specialists ensures that we can all look back as well as looking forward. It ensures that we can all learn from the past but also enjoy the vitality of our predecessors’ cultural expression and appreciate the technological developments which enabled humanity to progressively enhance its ability to create and communicate.

Formal sessions of the Pre-Conference were followed by visits to major cultural sites including the 440 year old library of Tianyi Ge in Ningbo City, which I previously had the memorable fortune to visit thanks to the generosity of colleagues at Zhejiang Library. That visit and the others on the study tour reinforced the professional and scholarly exchanges during the program. They demonstrated the international collaboration fostered by the IFLA Rare Books and Manuscripts Section which is so visible in these Proceedings.

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