

BUILDING BRIDGES IN TIANJIN HUNGARIAN LIBRARIANS EXPLORE CHINESE ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

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In the summer of 2025, a delegation of Hungarian librarians took part in a week-long professional study trip to Tianjin, China, where they gained insight into its library system and cultural environment where libraries play a key role in shaping the learning and knowledge-sharing processes of society. Author examines how traditional library functions are being transformed through advanced digital technologies, data-driven management, and user-centered service design. In addition, he deals with how university libraries work in China; how their services, reading culture, and digital solutions differ and how a bridge can be built between Hungary and China. The paper demonstrates that successful libraries – regardless of size – balance innovation, tradition, and responsiveness to user needs, positioning themselves as key intellectual and cultural hubs in the 21st century.

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In the summer of 2025, a delegation of Hungarian librarians had the rare opportunity to take part in a week-long professional study trip to Tianjin, China. The visit was organized by the Association of the Hungarian Librarians (Magyar Könyvtárosok Egyesülete) and the Confucius Institute of the University of Debrecen, with the Tianjin Foreign Studies University (TFSU) as the Chinese partner. Not only did they gain insight into the library system of a geographically distant country, but also into a cultural environment where libraries play a key role in shaping the learning and knowledge-sharing processes of society.

Tianjin, a metropolis with a population of nearly 14 million, is not only an important city in the Chinese library system, but also has a special historical connection to Hungary: at the beginning of the 20th century, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy had a concession area here. Architectural monuments from that era (the former consulate building, officers' casino, etc.) can still be explored today.

But how does an university library work in China? How do the services, reading culture, and digital solutions differ? How can a bridge be built between Hungary and China, i.e. between European and Asian cultures? This is the subject of my article, in which I present three large university libraries in Tianjin: Nankai University Library, Tianjin University Library, Tianjin Foreign Studies University Library, and the National Library of China.

NANKAI UNIVERSITY LIBRARY¹

Nankai University was founded in 1919 and is one of China's most prestigious research universities, playing a prominent role in the fields of social sciences, economics, and international relations. In addition to other programs, this university also offers librarian training in Tianjin.

From a Hungarian perspective, the university campus is almost city-sized. The library is housed in a modern, imposing building in the central part of the university campus. Its location also reflects the fact that knowledge and research play a central role in the institutional structure, not only symbolically but also in reality. The university has approximately 30 – 35 thousand students. It is ranked among the 200 – 300 best universities in the world in interna-



FIG. 1 HUNGARIAN LIBRARIANS' DELEGATION
(JUDIT GERENCSÉR)

tional higher education rankings, and is among the top 100 universities in Asia.

The Hungarian delegation gained insight into the library's service structure, digital content provision, and forms of support for local reading culture and learning. During the meetings, mutual professional interests emerged, with particular regard to the international exchange of experiences related to artificial intelligence (AI), library digitization, and the possibility of Chinese professional publications in the *CeLISR*² (*Central European Library and Information Science Review*) library and information science (LIS) journal published jointly by the National Széchényi Library and the National Technical Information Centre and Library at the Budapest University of Technology and Economics.

The huge, multi-story reading rooms offer both quiet study areas and communal learning spaces. For example, in line with modern learning needs, the library provides soundproofed pods for individual use, which can be used for concentrated work or online meetings. At the same time, group study areas also ensure that students can prepare effectively, allowing those who want to study or help each other to do so.

We also saw impressive library furniture in the rooms. The oldest documents are displayed in an impressive manner, in a fitting environment, with special protection. Respect for tradition is also reflected in the comfortable and functional furnishings reserved for the wider reading public, which reflect traditional Chinese furniture-making styles and techniques (Fig. 2).

On the shelves, alongside the books, there are beautifully designed information boards introducing readers to renowned authors of both Chinese and universal literature.



FIG. 2 TRADITIONAL FURNITURE IN THE NANKAI UNIVERSITY LIBRARY



FIG. 4 COMPUTER LEARNING SPACE



FIG. 3 A POD THAT PROMOTES QUIET WORKING

In terms of staff, we saw a minimal number of librarians in the reading areas; instead, the concept of a self-service library was evident. An informative signage system helps visitors find their way around.

Many copies of textbooks are available to students, but several databases are also accessible electronically, which aids academic research and student preparation.

The Nankai University Library not only has modern and functional spaces, but also exemplary data management. A huge touchscreen control panel allows real-time monitoring of visitor numbers, library space utilization, and loan statistics. For example, visitors can see how many seats are available on each floor and how crowded each section of the reading rooms is. The data visualizations – pie charts, bar charts, and time trends – are well structured and easy to interpret. The system serves both to inform visitors and to aid the library management in strategic decision-making, while also helping to allocate resources efficiently.

One of the most interesting parts of the library tour was the university's own paper restoration workshop. In the workshop, we had the opportunity to learn firsthand about the traditional Chinese techniques used to restore damaged documents. The restorers not only work by hand, but also use special machines for paper reinforcement, cleaning, and refolding. They pay special attention to preserving old Chinese prints in their original form, so they use natural materials such as rice paper and vegetable glues in their work. The workshop also serves educational purposes, where library science students can learn the basics of document preservation and restoration.

The first stop on our tour of Chinese libraries, Nankai University Library, is an impressive example of how traditional library functions can be taken to a new level with digital technologies. Data-driven operations, real-time statistics, and user-friendly

solutions are well suited to an institution that serves students, researchers, and the wider community.

TIANJIN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY³

After visiting Nankai University Library, our next stop was Tianjin University Library. This institution was particularly exciting for us, as the university was founded in 1895 by **Emperor Guangxu** (1875 – 1908) under the name Peking University. It was China's first modern institution of higher education, which played a leading role in the modernization and development of the country. Today, Tianjin University is one of China's largest multidisciplinary technical universities and is among the top 16 national key universities. This historical background alone shows that the country's earliest university library is not only the driving force behind academic life, but also one of the symbolic centers of modern Chinese higher education.

The central building of the library is impressive in both size and function. The huge reading rooms can accommodate thousands of students at a time, and modern digital services and traditional library functions form a close unity. Tianjin University has more than 40,000 students, so the library's task is not only to serve educational and research needs, but also to maintain a complex knowledge and community space that supports individual immersion, community learning, and sophisticated entertainment options for young people, whether it be traditional Chinese chess or watching a modern film.

In its current form, Tianjin University Library consists of three architecturally distinct buildings. The first is called the North Library, which is essentially a bastion of knowledge spanning eight floors and covering 9,853 m². The North Library was built in 1958 based on the visionary plans of professor **Xu Zhong**, founder of the Department of Architecture at Tianjin University and renowned architect, and was significantly expanded in 1986. The second large building, the 10,968 m² Science Library, opened in 1990 thanks to a donation from film producer, philanthropist, and media mogul **Run Run Shaw** (1907 – 2014), whose spirit has left an indelible mark. The third, newest, and largest building, the 50,000 m² Zhengdong Library, opened in September 2015 on the Pejang Park campus. The modern building was de-

signed by **Zhou Kai**, a famous alumnus of the university and an internationally renowned master architect. **Zheng Dong** is also a famous alumnus of the university who, on the 119th anniversary of the institution's founding, generously established an alumni education fund to support the construction of a new library on campus. In recognition of Zheng Dong's generosity, Tianjin University named the library after him.

The Hungarian delegation was also welcomed by the library management in this spectacular building. Upon entering, we were immediately impressed by the sight. Similar to Nankai, access was fully automated here as well, with students able to access services in a matter of seconds using their university cards. Book borrowing and returns are completely self-service, with numerous RFID stations located throughout the library.



FIG. 5 THE READING ROOMS OF TIANJIN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

The library's design combines monumentality with student comfort. Here, too, the library spaces reflect a conscious effort to flexibly serve different learning styles and student needs. The quiet, individual work booths – soundproof, small, well-lit cabins – provide an ideal environment for concentrated reading or online consultations. At the same time, the library also houses a small cinema room that can be used for screening audiovisual educational materials, film clubs, or university events. This space goes beyond the traditional functions of a library and also serves a cultural and community function, reinforcing the library's role as a diverse venue for university life. Another very space-saving, imaginative, and effective marketing solution is to advertise individual items from the film collection on the staircase railings.

During the visit, we also held professional discussions with the library managers. Our Chinese col-

leagues showed great interest in the National Széchenyi Library digitization experiences, while we also learned a lot from their system-level solutions. We learned that China does not have a national digital archive or a national electronic library. Another key topic was the application of AI in libraries, which is a promising area for both parties. In addition, the library's curator, professor **Pingqing Fu**, said that Chinese students' demand for e-books has remained strong for years, while at the same time they are buying fewer and fewer paper-based documents.

During our tour of the library, we came across an interesting and motivating solution in one of the corridors, where the library displayed photos of the students who borrowed the most books, together with their favourite books. Each book had a QR code that, when scanned, immediately opened the document's record in the institution's integrated library system, allowing visitors to find out about its availability or even reserve the book. This playful and motivating initiative not only promotes library use, but also creates a community experience by allowing students to look up to their peers' reading habits as role models. From a Hungarian perspective, this practice is most comparable to *Reader of the Year* type library awards, which are a well-established tradition in several domestic institutions. At the same time, Tianjin University's solution, with its digital extension (QR codes, online searchability), encourages immediate action and brings the logic of social media into the library environment.

We were particularly impressed by the library's initiative to preserve the works of the university's famous alumni, both deceased and active, in a special collection (Fig. 6). The selected works and publications are not only mementos of academic achievements, but also serve as a source of inspiration for current en-



FIG. 6 FAMOUS ALUMNI OF TIANJIN UNIVERSITY

gineering students. The collection is complemented by panels and exhibition installations that present former students of the university and their life stories and professional achievements with a picture and a short biographical description. This tradition-preserving and exemplary practice clearly demonstrates how the library can become a key player in institutional identity and community memory.



FIG. 7 THE BUILDING OF THE TFSU LIBRARY

TIANJIN FOREIGN STUDIES UNIVERSITY⁴

The third stop on our trip was also in Tianjin, where our host institution, Tianjin Foreign Studies University (TFSU), gave us a glimpse into the cozy world of its library. The university was founded in 1964 by its legal predecessors, and its downtown campus is located in the cultural and tourist district of the city's five main streets. As a result, the institution differs significantly in character and size from the huge, new campuses we had seen previously, with most of the university buildings constructed in European style during the British concession period (1860 – 1943).

It is interesting to note that, in addition to the major world languages, the university also has departments for smaller, less frequently taught languages, including the Hungarian Department. Students can choose from a total of 28 language courses, in which they can not only learn the language itself, but also acquire interpreting skills. From conversations with Hungarian language students, it quickly became clear that they are learning our language with great enthusiasm and perseverance, while also showing an extraordinary interest in Hungarian culture and his-

tory. According to their reports, their goal as upper-classmen is to continue their studies in Hungary at the Confucius Institute in Debrecen. Their big dream is to personally discover the iconic Hungarian sites they read about during their studies and to enjoy authentic gastronomic experiences.

TFSU, as its name suggests, specializes primarily in teaching foreign languages, international relations, and cultural studies, so its library's collection and services are also specialized in these areas. Compared to the libraries presented in the first two parts, here we encountered much more intimate, human-scale spaces. The reading rooms are not designed to accommodate thousands of students, but rather offer a calm, friendly environment for study. This scale also allows the library to develop a more personal relationship with students and respond flexibly to the needs of a relatively small but diverse user community.

The international profile is also evident in the collection. The shelves contain dictionaries, language books, literary and scientific publications in many world languages – English, French, German, Spanish, Russian – and, of course, Hungarian. The library's collection development activities rely heavily on international exchange relationships, which give students access to the latest professional and literary works. During our visit, we also arrived with a “suitcase full of books”, including various publications from the national library and a selection of books from the Confucius Institute in Debrecen.

As there are many foreign students studying at the institution, special attention is paid to foreign-language information materials. Among the services offered, digital tools supporting language learning play an important role, including online databases, e-book packages, and audiovisual (AV) teaching materials. Although the technical infrastructure is more modest than at larger universities, students still have access to a user-friendly environment, and self-service use is encouraged through a number of tools.

This library provided us with a serious insight into the tools used in library back-office work. The tools used for cataloguing and document delivery were also impressive in terms of their technological standard, adapting to global trends and following the latest standards in all areas of library work processes. In their integrated system, AI supports both library work processes and the referencing needs of students.

The TFSU Library also has soundproof pods (for phone calls, study, and karaoke – Fig. 8), and there is a book and paper restoration workshop for particu-



FIG. 8 TELEPHONE, STUDY, AND KARAOKE PODS

larly vulnerable documents. Another interesting feature is that library visitors can view certain steps of the restoration process through plexiglass at a restoration workstation set up in one of the reading rooms. We found one of the library's innovative student programs particularly interesting. Students can volunteer to help digitize the institution's collection. They can register for available slots and times in an online system and earn points during the process, which also allows them to compete with their peers. This initiative not only helps to digitize and publish the library's holdings online, but also encourages library use in a playful and motivating way by involving students, while at the same time giving them practical experience in document management and digitization.

For us, one of the most important lessons of the visit was that the key to a library's success is not necessarily its size or infrastructure. Rather, it is how well it is able to adapt to the needs of its own user community. The TFSU Library is a good example of how even a smaller institution can become the heart of cultural and academic life if it tailors its services to the real needs of its students.

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF CHINA⁵

The final stop on our trip was Beijing, which is best reached from Tianjin by high-speed train. The two cities are located approximately the same distance apart as Budapest and Bratislava, but the journey time is only 32 minutes. Located in the Haidian district of the capital, the National Library of China (NLC) is the largest library in Asia and the third largest in the world, impressing every visitor with its impressive size and rich collection. The library was founded in 1909 as the Imperial Peking Library and, after several

name changes and administrative reorganizations, was given its current name in 1999. The institution holds more than 40 million volumes, including manuscripts of unparalleled value, old prints, classical Chinese texts, and rarities.

Our delegation was welcomed at the National Museum of Classic Books, which is part of the National Library, where Chen Ying, Deputy Director of the NLC, gave a presentation entitled *Exchange between National Libraries of China and Hungary: Review and Outlook*. It is interesting to note that Deputy Director **Chen Ying** is also the president of the Library Society of China, similar to the head of the Hungarian delegation, **Judit Gerencsér**, who represented both the Hungarian National Library and the Association of the Hungarian Librarians.

The museum's impressive collection took us on a real journey through time. Wandering among the

various animal bones, turtle shells, bamboo, and wooden boards with handwritten and printed classical documents, we were given a glimpse into the history of Chinese writing. Among the works on display, we found unique copies of documents dating back to before our era, calligraphic manuscripts, and historical documents reflecting the development of Chinese literature and science. We were particularly impressed by the ornate decoration of the books, the parchments, the delicate paper textures, and the richness of the colorful illustrations.

The exhibition also presented pre-Christian written records and the history of Chinese writing with impressive modern museum installation tools. For example, we could see the changes in the snake character displayed with light effects – in the spirit of the Year of the Snake.

After the museum section, our visit continued in the largest wing of the library, the so-called North Complex. The building complex is modern and spacious, offering separate research rooms, a children's library, and, of course, digital services in addition to public reading rooms.

In one of the library's corridors, we were greeted by a playful installation: a large counter that registers every new visitor on that day. When we pressed the red button, the display read: "I am the 26,308th reader." It was a good feeling to see that we had become part of a huge community that provides a reading experience to tens of thousands of people every day. The inscription also encourages us to be loyal readers of the library.

During the visit, members of our delegation also had the opportunity to register at the library, so we could experience firsthand how one of the world's largest collections works. We were also particularly

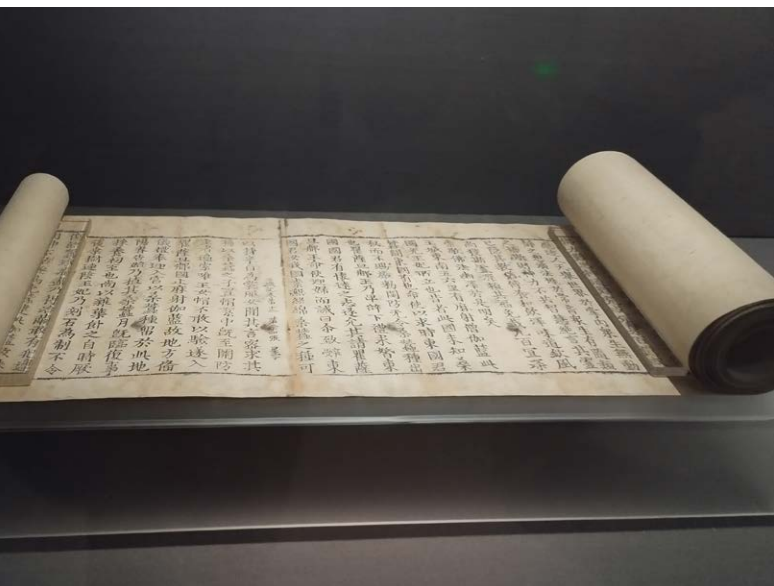


FIG. 9 NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CLASSICAL BOOKS



FIG. 10 NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CLASSICAL BOOKS

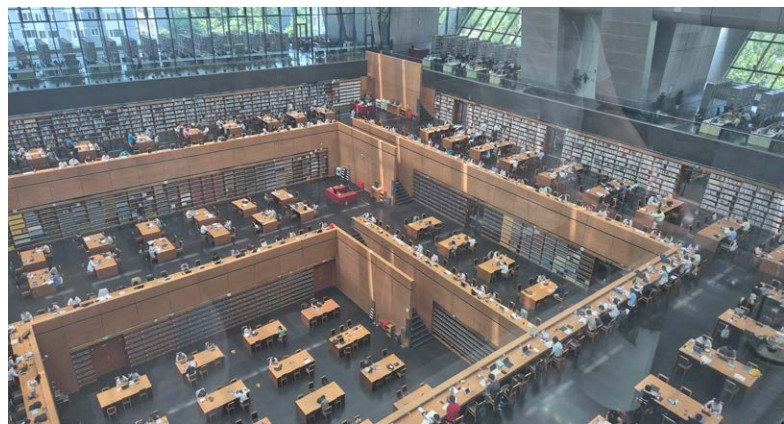


FIG. 11 THE READING ROOM OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF CHINA

pleased to find a book by one of our delegation members, **Dr. Pál Csontos**, director of the Confucius Institute at the University of Debrecen, in the library's catalog. It was a touching and proud moment to see that Hungarian academic works on Chinese culture are also accessible to Chinese readers.

During our visit, it was clear that the library functions both as a national memorial institution and a modern knowledge centre. In addition to providing a peaceful and inspiring environment for readers and researchers, it also serves as a community space, hosting conferences, exhibitions, and cultural programs that make the library a vibrant intellectual centre. However, behind the monumental dimensions of the library lie human-scale experiences; in the reading rooms, we experienced both the quiet atmosphere of study and the possibilities offered by modern technology.

Our experiences during our visits to Chinese libraries show that, although geographically very distant from each other, our libraries are seeking answers to very similar questions worldwide: how to preserve our cultural heritage, how to serve the knowledge needs of our societies, and how to be defining spaces for community life in the 21st century.

During our trip, we discovered four major Chinese libraries, and everywhere we went, we found new inspiration and formed new professional relationships. We are confident that our joint work will continue to create value in the long term and contribute to the deepening of cultural relations.



FIG. 12 HUNGARIAN LIBRARIANS' DELEGATION
(JUDIT GERENCSÉR)

Between October 19 and 22, 2025 the National Széchényi Library hosted the 4th *China-CEEC (Central and Eastern European Countries) Curators' Forum of Libraries Union*⁶, where we were able to meet again with colleagues we had gotten to know over the summer and launch our new joint projects. The central theme of the conference was *Connection, Creation, Interaction, Inspiration – The Future of Libraries*, which provided a worthy framework for discussing current and future issues in the library field. Among other things, the topics of AI, digital preservation, public relations, and library marketing were on the agenda during the conference. The professional program was also complemented by cultural events, giving participants the opportunity to discover Budapest's rich cultural heritage.

NOTES

- ¹ *Nankai University Library*. [s. a.]. Online. Available at: <https://enlib.nankai.edu.cn/mainm.htm>. [displayed 2025-12-04].
- ² *CeLISr: Central European Library and Information Science Review*. [s. a.]. Online. Available at: <https://journals.bme.hu/celistr> [displayed 2025-12-04].
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