

The Goethe-Institut Library

An Interview with Gabriele Sander
Head of Library and Information Service at the
Goethe-Institut Hongkong

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Introduction

In Hong Kong, there are three major non-profit European cultural organizations specializing in the fostering of international educational and cultural opportunities, namely, The British Council, Alliance française, and the Goethe-Institut.

Amongst these three institutions, the Goethe-Institut Hongkong is the most active organization in the promotion of knowledge and cultural exchange. Currently, there are totally 149 Goethe-Institutes throughout the world. Founded in the early 1960s, the Goethe-Institut Hongkong aims at promoting the German language and cultural as well as academic cooperation with different partner organizations throughout the Pearl River Delta in South China.

In addition to offering German language courses and organizing a great variety of cultural programmes, exhibitions, workshops, seminars, and conferences, the Goethe-Institut Hongkong is also equipped with a small library, with the aim of meeting the German-related information needs of the local users. Gabriele Sander is currently serving as the Head of Library and Information Service at the Goethe-Institut in Hong Kong. In the following interview, Gabriele Sander discusses her joy of being a librarian who gets to travel around the world, as well as the challenges of her dual roles: being the Head of a small German-language library and a cultural ambassador of Germany.

The following interview with Gabriele Sander,
Head of Library & Information Service, Goethe-Institut Hongkong
was conducted on 20th March, 2013

Patrick LO (PL): *Could you begin this interview by introducing yourself and your roles at the Goethe-Institut Library?*

Gabriele Sander (GS): My name is Gabriele Sander. I am the Head of the Library and Information Department¹ of Goethe-Institut Hongkong.² I am a professionally

¹ Library of the Goethe-Institut Hongkong – <http://www.goethe.de/ins/cn/hon/wis/bib/enindex.htm>

trained librarian. I graduated from the Cologne University of Applied Sciences³, where I earned my diploma in library science, specializing in the management of public libraries. I started my library career as a public librarian in a small branch library of the public library of Bochum, Germany. A couple of years later, I switched and became a librarian at the Goethe-Institut employed by the Head Office located in Munich. Working as the Goethe-Institut Librarian would mean that I would be posted at different Goethe-Instituts in different countries every 5 to 6 years, as well as (maybe) being stationed at the Head Office in Munich. I have been working for the Goethe-Institut in Hong Kong since the beginning of 2007. The Library Department at the Goethe-Institut in Hong Kong has 2.5 positions, divided amongst 4 different people. As the Head of the Department, I am the only person who is working full-time at this Library. The other 3 colleagues are all part-time librarians. We are all professional, one staff member holds a master's degrees in library science. For the other local staff from Hong Kong, one of them is trained in the German language. She studied German and public administration at the university in Hong Kong. And one other younger team member is still a student at the University of Hong Kong, and is only working part-time here.

PL: Could you tell me more about the Goethe-Institut? What is Goethe-Institut? What exactly does it do?

GE: First of all, I think we have to explain what the Goethe-Institut is. In addition to teaching the German language, the Goethe-Institut also functions as a German cultural centre. Which means we also organize a great variety of German-related cultural activities, such as exhibitions, film festivals, creating different opportunities for exchanging ideas on music, films, theatre, and literature or whatever creative or cultural ideas that one can think of. Inside the Goethe-Institut, we also have the Library Information Centre⁴, which is open to the general public. Of course, we are also a school for anyone who is interested in learning the German language. And people can attend German language courses at different levels. We also offer German language examinations, which are internationally recognized.

PL: Could you tell me how many Goethe-Instituts there are in total throughout the world?

GE: There are overall 149 Goethe-Instituts throughout the world, including the Head Office located in Munich in Germany.

PL: Is every single Goethe-Institut also equipped with a library, regardless of where they are located?

GE: No, we have Goethe-Instituts of different sizes, located in different parts of the world, with different facilities and functions catering for clients with different demands. Sometimes, they [Goethe-Instituts] could be very small and just function as

² Goethe-Institut Hongkong –http://www.goethe.de/ins/cn/hon/enindex.htm?wt_sc=hongkong

³ Cologne University of Applied Sciences –<http://www.verwaltung.fh-koeln.de/organisation/dezernatesg/dezernat3/sg32/service/english/index.php>

⁴ Goethe-Institut Hongkong Library –<http://www.goethe.de/ins/cn/hon/wis/bib/enindex.htm>

coordination offices, and are therefore not equipped with any language departments or library facilities at all. A 'proper' Goethe-Institut usually consists of the following 3 departments: the Library, the Cultural Department, and the Language Department. However, there are Goethe-Instituts that put more focus on the teaching of the German language, and they might also come with a library; meanwhile they do not invest so many resources into organizing cultural activities or it could be just the other way around. So it really depends on where the individual Goethe-Instituts are located and what the local demands are.

PL: Can you tell me about the brief history of the Goethe-Institute in Hong Kong? When was the Goethe-Institut first established in Hong Kong?

GE: It was first established in Hong Kong exactly 50 years ago [in 1963].

PL: When the Goethe-Institut was first established in Hong Kong, was there already a Library built inside the Institut?

Actually, I don't know, because I was not there, but I seriously doubt it. When a Goethe-Institut is first established, there is usually just a small team of 2 or 3 people. They will then gradually negotiate for additional manpower and resources as they expand. Normally, when a Goethe-Institut is first established, they would organize just a few small-scale cultural activities, by outsourcing most parts of their activities to various local venues or organizations.

Setting up the Language Department would be the second step. Normally, the Language Department is responsible for training the German language teachers to meet a certain standard, before they can start teaching at the Goethe-Institut. After training the teachers, they may begin offering language courses at different levels. In addition, a library is usually required to support the teaching and learning needs of both the language teachers and students. As a result, it is never everything [all 3 departments: the Library, the Cultural Department, the Language Department] there at one single stage. The whole Goethe-Institut is usually set up over a period of time in different phases.

PL: Can you tell me how the Library supports the overall operations of the Goethe-Institut?

GE: One of the main tasks of the Goethe-Institut Library is to set up a basic collection according to our users' needs. In other words, the books, the periodicals, the DVDs, the CDs are selected / bought according to the profiles of the individual Goethe-Instituts – all depending on the different local demands. For example, here in Hong Kong, we certainly have a lot of materials for supporting the learning of the German language. On top of that, our Library also puts a lot of emphasis on materials related to fine arts, graphic design, and photography. In fact, library materials related to all such visual arts disciplines are in high demand at the Goethe-Institut in Hong Kong. Most of the materials available in this Library are either bilingual [in both German and English] or in English, so that even for people who do not know any German, they could still make good use of our library collection.

By comparison, this is something very different from a Goethe-Institut set up in Poland or in other central European cities, where the knowledge of German language is usually very high. Because in these neighbouring countries of Germany, people already start learning German at school, and the knowledge of the German language amongst the general public is quite proficient, and people there are already able to read in German. In contrast, at the Goethe-Institut Library in Hong Kong, we only have a small selection of books and modern literature in the original German language. And we try as much as possible to find the translated works in either English or Chinese, or sometimes in both languages, instead of presenting the original German version to them. So this I would say is the major difference.

PL: For this Library, in addition to providing materials for supporting the teaching and learning of the German language, do you also acquire other visual arts books, e.g., books by German artists, or designers or books on fine-art photography, architecture, etc. - to encourage the other non-German-learning people to come and use the Library.

GE: Yes, we do. One of the reasons for our rich collection of fine arts books is because we are located inside the Hong Kong Arts Centre.⁵ So we are in the middle of the 'arts scene' in Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, we certainly want to encourage more people to just come in, and get more ideas about what is going on in the fields of visual arts and design in Germany. But different Goethe-Instituts in different countries tend to do things quite differently. Different cities maybe have different subject focuses: some overseas Goethe-Institut Libraries may focus more on international or European politics, while the others might emphasize more on environmental issues.

PL: In addition to providing the basic library services, the Goethe-Institut Library in Hong Kong also organizes many other services, such as academic lectures, cultural seminars or traveling exhibitions. Can you give us some examples or highlights?

GE: Via the Library, we are also trying to establish a professional network – to connect ourselves with the other libraries in different countries. By doing so, we could establish dialogues between the librarians in Hong Kong and the librarians in Germany, with the aim of facilitating exchanges of creative ideas and knowledge, and hopefully we could we learn from each other. In our case, we are not just dealing with the librarians in Hong Kong, but also with the library community around the whole Pearl River Delta in Mainland China. So we regularly organize different events with our library partners in different places for different audiences.

In terms of knowledge exchange, when we invite library experts from Germany to give lectures or seminars in Asia, it is very important for these German experts to really 'get in touch' with the Chinese library colleagues – that means to create opportunities for allowing deep-level discussions between the two parties. You can imagine that it is almost impossible for 300 librarians from Guangzhou, China to travel all the way to Germany to attend seminars or workshops, or to just take part in library visits in Germany. So we try to bring these German experts to China to give

⁵ Hong Kong Arts Centre <http://www.hkac.org.hk/en/index.php>

seminars or workshops on specific topics instead. We hope that this way, a lot more people could benefit from them.

In other words, [our objective] is not just for the German experts to come all the way to give a few lectures in China, and return immediately to Europe. For the German library experts, they are always telling me how much they have learnt from their visits to China. It is equally important [for our objectives] for these German experts to take these experiences back home, and share them with their colleagues in Germany as well.

To give you a few examples of what we are doing--one major event we did in 2006 / 2007 was organizing lectures and workshops on reading promotion for the public libraries in South China. At that time, there was a huge demand for reading promotion activities, especially for the very young children in big cities in China. Currently, we are focusing mostly on projects related to the restoration and conservation of old European documents. This project was first started in Guangzhou with the Sun Yat-Sen University⁶ Library; and then the National Library of China⁷ also became a member of our project. This is something which I think is very interesting and valuable for all of us.

PL: When you are organizing such seminars, workshops or traveling exhibitions, you usually start them in Hong Kong; afterwards, when you bring the same events to Mainland China, do you see any major differences in terms of the audiences' responses?

GE: Yes, there are definitely differences. Obviously, not every single programme is suitable for both regions [Hong Kong and China]. The demands in Hong Kong are very different from the demands in Mainland China! For example, workshops on document restoration and conservation are indeed very new for the librarians in Mainland China. Certainly, they also have restoration and conservation techniques for their own Asian materials, which are no doubt excellent; nevertheless, the Chinese library colleagues would still come and ask me, "Please! Can you help provide some training workshops on the conservation for our Western books?"

But people from Hong Kong have a totally different level of knowledge, skills, resources and expectations for conserving these old Western documents. Because for the Hong Kong people, many of them already received their training in Great Britain; certainly, some people in Hong Kong also want to undertake these workshops to refresh their training, but it is nothing new for them.

Another example I could give you is that Hong Kong has very different government structures and a completely different set of regulations and legislations. If you are dealing with the Hong Kong Government, it might take much longer time, because there are many governmental procedures that one must follow. Whereas for Mainland China, it is sometimes much faster and easier, because they 'just do it', and there are not so many steps or procedures to observe. But it all depends on the

⁶ Sun Yat-Sen University <http://www.sysu.edu.cn/2012/en/>

⁷ National Library of China <http://www.nlc.gov.cn/old/old/english.htm>

situations, the timing, and also on the 'contents'. Certainly, people in Mainland China are very different, the librarians there are also different in terms of both the way they think, the way they work, their needs and also their expectations.

Another difference is that because there are many more possibilities and options in Hong Kong, people here tend to be more critical. On the other hand, in South China, people tend to just love everything what we offer them. A lot has to do with their different backgrounds, different education received, and also because of the different exposures. It is indeed very interesting for us to observe all these big and small differences. It is nice to be working in Hong Kong, because China is very close. We could easily cross the border and witness and compare all these differences—which I think absolutely fascinating as well as challenging!

PL: For the programmes organized in Mainland China by the Goethe-Institut, does censorship create any major problems for you?

GE: No, we do not have that many difficulties because we are a non-profit organization, which makes everything much easier for us. When doing exhibitions in Hong Kong, we are always working with a local partner such as the Hong Kong public libraries. If they are happy with your proposed exhibitions or events, we would just need to go through the 'normal procedures', i.e., just fill out a form and that is all. In Hong Kong, there are not so many restrictions in terms of the 'contents' or the 'themes' of your exhibitions. Certainly, for Mainland China, it is a totally different story. If you have an exhibition, it must go through censorship. It is just a very normal part of the procedure, but we [Goethe-Institut colleagues] are not dealing with that. For tasks related to negotiating and dealing with the local Chinese Government, we usually delegate them to our local partners in China. Via such a partnership, the burden of handling the different regulations and censorship is shifted or shared with the local organizations. Undoubtedly, the local partners are far more experienced and knowledgeable in handling such local regulations, legislations and censorship than the Goethe-Institut Librarian.

On the other hand, finding the right persons from Germany to give lectures in Asia is definitely my specialty. For my work, every year, I try to attend different library conferences, and I also need to visit different public, state or national libraries in Germany to look around and see who might be the next suitable group of speakers for China and Hong Kong. Not every expert, regardless how excellent, is suitable to give lectures in China because we need to provide translations. Sometimes if the speakers speak too fast, real-time interpretation would simply not be possible.

PL: When you are doing the exhibitions in China, you have to go through censorship reviews. Has there been any occasion that after the censorship review, the Chinese Government simply said "NO" to your proposed activities, or did any of your exhibitions or activities need to go through some slight modifications in order to satisfy the censorship review in Mainland China?

GE: No, not in our case. We have never experienced that in South China, and I do not know about the Northern part of China. I think our Goethe colleagues always know what they are doing, and we know how to deal with the different situations—to avoid

certain things or issues that are sensitive to the Chinese Government. For example, a recent exhibition titled *The Most Beautiful German Books Exhibition* was launched by the Goethe-Institut. This Exhibition was held concurrently with another exhibition in China entitled *The Most Beautiful Books of China*, and they were both very well received, as the audience could see and compare the differences in book production between the two countries. As for such dual exhibitions, we did not receive any complaints from the provincial government in China. Certainly, it could happen, but it really depends on the situations, timing, and definitely on the contents of the books. But since the very beginning of the planning stage, the local partners would already begin negotiating with the local governments. If it turned out to be critical period, we would then simply say to ourselves, "Okay! Maybe we will just wait, because now is not a good time to do this theme, and we will try it again in 2 to 3 years."

On the other hand, I think the Chinese Government already knows the Goethe-Institut very well, because we as foreigners working for foreign companies, or foreign organizations, are always under close observations by their officials. And they know us and they know what we are doing.

Even for Hong Kong, when the Goethe-Institut brings in German-language movies from Europe for the different film festivals, all these foreign movies also need to go through the Hong Kong motion picture rating system⁸, before they could be released to the public. As you can see, such 'censorship issues' do not only apply to Mainland China, they also apply to Hong Kong. But it does not really interfere with our work, and we are also learning to deal with it.

PL: Before you came to Hong Kong, did you also work for another Goethe-Institut located in another Asian country?

GE: Yes, before coming to Hong Kong, I worked for the Goethe-Institut located in Uzbekistan in Central Asia; and I have also worked for the Goethe-Instituts in both Vietnam and India, and also in a few other non-Asian countries.

PL: Comparing your previous Asian experiences, what makes Hong Kong unique, in terms of the people's responses and participations in the activities launched by the Goethe-Institut? In addition, in terms of your work as a librarian, how are the users' demands and information needs in Hong Kong different from the users in other Asian countries?

GE: There are major differences. In Hong Kong, it is very important for us to be very well connected with the local libraries via the Hong Kong Library Association.⁹ Because once they recognize me as the Librarian from the Goethe-Institut, and not just a regular librarian, they would begin to see me as a partner, with the possibilities of co-hosting various events and functions, etc. The Goethe-Institut Library itself is just a very normal library, in terms of its functions and services. Hong Kong is an

⁸ Hong Kong motion picture rating system:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hong_Kong_motion_picture_rating_system

⁹ Hong Kong Library Association
http://www.hkcla.org/component/option,com_frontpage/Itemid,1/lang,english/

extremely busy city, and as a librarian, you cannot afford to get lazy. You have to be constantly rethinking about your work, e.g., making the whole library environment more attractive for your users. People in Hong Kong are very selective, and they always know what they want. Which is something very different when you compare it against places like Vietnam or Uzbekistan, where they are so used to having 'nothing'. In those places, if you could just offer the library materials let's say in a tent, people would still want to come. Whereas for Hong Kong, you have to do a lot more to satisfy their needs or and expectations. People in Hong Kong have high demands, because they have so many other possibilities or options. If they want to learn or read something, they could always order their own materials via online, or from a bookstore, because they have the money to do so. In places like India or Vietnam, by comparison people are simply less resourceful in this regard.

PL: In term of the cultural activities and exhibitions provided by the Goethe-Institut, are there events that you would only do in Hong Kong but not in the other Asian countries, e.g., India and Vietnam, etc.?

GE: Definitely! Definitely! For example, when I worked in Uzbekistan in Central Asia, there was a very high demand from the Academy of Culture. Because at the Academy of Culture, they were training the librarians, and they wanted to learn about the structure of the university education in Germany, e.g., how everything was organized, the different academic courses and the syllabuses, for future librarians. In Uzbekistan, we helped to implement the ISBN [International Standard Book Number], something they did not have before. By comparison, "how to implement ISBN" is certainly something that you cannot offer in Hong Kong or Mainland China, because there is simply no need for that kind of information, and these are the major differences.

But in Hong Kong and China, we could do workshops and seminars on topics such as library quality management, staff development, change management, etc. Whereas for Uzbekistan, where I worked as a Goethe Librarian until 2007, they simply had a completely different set of problems to deal with. Their library had structural problems and they did not have any money for libraries, hence, they simply had to make the best out of very limited resources and funding.

PL: In your job as a Goethe Librarian, you would get posted in a different country every 3 to 4 years. As soon as you get posted in a different country, what is the first thing you need to do? Because the user demands, the cultural and political climates are obviously different in each country, so how would you go about to find out what is going on in each country?

GE: After arriving in a new country, the first thing I would do is to visit the different libraries, get in touch with local library associations, and have a look at the local bookstores, to see how things are organized and what is going on there. In addition, talking to the local librarians is very important—not just visiting and looking, but actually talking to them—and meeting with the professors who are teaching library and information science to find out what is going on there. These are all the important things that one needs to do at the beginning stage, but could literally take up a few months of your time.

PL: All the constant moving around from one country to another – does it bother you at all? Because it obviously takes a long time for anyone to get used to a new country, but once you have just settled down; once you have just set up the library collection; once you have established the local networks, the Goethe-Institut Headquarter would tell you that you need to move to another foreign country.

GE: I think it is interesting. I think I am a very lucky person. I am working for a very nice institution which has branch offices all over the world. I think I am in a sort of secured environment with my Institute. I am safe and I am working with nice people, some are locals and some are from Germany. And I have always been working as a librarian, so I know the principles of my work very well. And moving to a different location also means that I have a chance to refresh both myself and my work—dealing with different ideas and challenges and how to accommodate different information needs amongst the locals—a combination of all these elements does make my work much more interesting.

PL: As the Goethe-Institut Librarian, which part of your work do you find most challenging?

GE: When you move to a completely new country or to a new Goethe-Institute, the first thing you need to do is to form good relationships with your colleagues. Because before your arrival, most of your Goethe-Institut colleagues would already have been working there for a couple of years, so you are always an ‘outsider’ to them. Also in your library, first you have to deal with your colleagues, and they are not always German. The colleagues working at the Goethe-Institut Library, apart from the Head Librarian, are usually locals, and not from Germany. In other words, you are in a completely new environment, and you have to get used to it. In order to make it work, you have to be flexible, accommodating, observant and also sensitive towards the people working around you or working for you. Because different countries have different cultural characteristics, and their ethnic and religious backgrounds are also different. As a result, you have to take all these into serious consideration and try to fit in as a boss, under this ‘Goethe-Institut Logo’.

Then you have to settle down your family, start looking for an apartment in a new city; look for schools for your children, and then you may begin to familiarize yourself with the library community in the city, and maybe even outside of the city eventually; and all these could take up quite a lot of time.

But normally, after 6 months, things will gradually turn out to be fine. By that time, you may have already created some sort of professional network. It would then be an appropriate time to bring in your own experiences to these new countries. I myself definitely enjoy this part of my work. Most of the Goethe-Institut Libraries are never very big. You can imagine yourself working in a small special library like the Goethe-Institut Library, with a collection that has no more than 10,000 volumes of books. If you need to spend 40 years working in the same place, things could get a bit boring after a while. As a result, you always need to create something new [maybe a new service or new programme] for yourself and for the Library. However, it might still a bit too small to stay at the same Goethe Library forever. Unlike working for a large university library or a city library where you could always switch around, trying out

different positions or departments. If you work in different departments, you can continue to develop yourself in a different way. Whereas for me, if the library is too small, you would not have the chance to try anything else, and options would simply be too limited, which would not be satisfying for me. So being able to get posted at different Goethe-Instituts around the world—this is obviously something very nice for me.

PL: Would you agree that it would take a person with special qualities to take up the job as a Goethe-Institut librarian, because you are being posted around the world. In addition, one has to constantly deal with different cultural climates, different working environments, different people. Maybe you could help describe some of these unique personality traits needed for becoming a Goethe-Institut Librarian?

GE: Yes, I think you are right. First of all, you have to be quite curious—curious in a sense that you want to know about the different lifestyles, different countries, different possibilities around the world. And you have to be very open-minded, because if you are just sticking to your own way of living or own way of thinking, then you will be hopelessly unhappy. As a Goethe-Institut Librarian, you also have to be very flexible, and you have to have the willingness to try different things. You can never say or even think that “the German way is the only way!” or “the German way is the best way!” In addition, when you are moving from one country to another, certainly, you have your books, your family and your furniture with you; but for your apartment, it is totally different every time. It is certainly not like living in an apartment which you see in a magazine that you could spend a long time furnishing because you knew that you would be staying there for a very long time.

On the contrary, in our case, you have to be happy with the idea that you are constantly leaving things out. You always have to ‘improvise’ your own living environment. There are just always some big boxes which you need to push into storage for the next country or the next city. And you have to think about if you like that particular city or if you don’t like it at all. Lots of people, after a couple of years, they become sick of it, because they want to stay in one place. Or maybe the children are growing up and they do not want to move around anymore. Or maybe your wife or your husband cannot find work because they are not allowed to work there. These are the things that a Goethe Librarian has to deal with, and are indeed part of our daily lives. But I personally love it and we have not regretted it since I began.

PL: What do you find most satisfying about your job compared to working as a public librarian in Germany?

GE: There are major differences. When I first started as the Librarian at the Goethe-Institut, I remembered that I was still very young and it was my first time to work in a foreign country. I had to go to meet with the director or head librarian of the national library, or to talk face-to-face with the Deputy Minister of Education in Vietnam. As a manager of a small city library in Germany, this is something that one would never get to do. Being able to get in touch with the people of different cultures or backgrounds—something that I never thought of in the beginning—are definitely valuable experiences. In the beginning, when I was still very young and

inexperienced, having to talk to someone of that high status was definitely a very frightening experience for me. But since the Goethe-Institut Librarian is also a representative of Germany, even though I felt very frightened, I just had to deal with the situation. But now, I am so used to it and I see it as a very routine part of my work. But for a young and inexperienced librarian, it was definitely 'some experience'!

PL: Would you agree that the Goethe-Institut Librarian is serving dual roles: on top of being a librarian, one is also serving as a cultural ambassador for Germany? If that is the case, do you feel that people are actually seeing Germany through you?

GE: Yes, that is right. For the other non-Germans, we Germans represent 'quality' to them. With this 'quality image', they always expect that we have something 'good' or 'of high quality' to offer, and their expectations are usually very high. When the different national library directors come and ask me, "Can you please have a look at our library systems? Or "Can you do something for our country or for our cities with your knowledge or expertise?" Then, I will have to do it to the best of my ability, and make it as good as possible so that they will not be disappointed. I always have to bring the most appropriate and the best people from Germany, and in our case now, to China. Because of such high expectations, it would sometimes be very demanding and could become a burden for us. On the other hand, it could be equally satisfying if what you have done turns out to be really successful. Then, we could make ourselves proud, because I am representing my own country, and what I have presented to them or doing for them is something they find meaningful and valuable.

PL: Have there also been any situations that people come to the Goethe-Institut, knock on your door and ask, "Could you please do something for us"? instead of going to the British Council or to the Alliance française in Hong Kong to seek for the same support or advice?

GE: Yes, for example, the workshop on restoration of Western books carried out in China. People did not go seek help from the British Council or the Alliance Française, but they came to the Goethe-Institut instead. Because they knew that Germany and Holland are the leading countries on book restoration, and we had some of the most valuable and culturally-significant books in Europe restored. We are just well-known for that sort of thing.

PL: Do you have any strategic plans worked out for the development of your Goethe-Institut Library for the next two or three years?

GE: Yes, we are planning to do more in the field of book design. We have already conducted one workshop on book-cover design, and that turned out to be quite successful. The colleagues, the students and the professors in Hong Kong were quite happy with the results of that workshop. Obviously, it was quite different for them—both the designs and illustrations were very different from what they are teaching at the universities here in Hong Kong—so this would be the idea that we want to focus on. For the Library, we would like to provide more translated works in both English and Chinese for our German literature collection.

PL: There are three to four major European cultural institutes in Hong Kong, namely the Goethe-Institut, the British Council¹⁰, the Alliance Française¹¹, the Italian Cultural Institute¹². Are there any differences in terms of the activities and services provided amongst these institutions?

GE: The Goethe-Institut, at the moment, is the only one dealing a bit more with knowledge exchange; this is also what the Americans are doing as well. The others are not doing it at all. The Alliance Française mainly maintains a very small library for supporting the teaching and learning needs of their Language Department. The British Council has no library at all, although they used to have one. The British Council focuses more on providing information materials on studying in Great Britain.

PL: Compared with the other institutions, why do you think the Germans tend to put much more emphasis on knowledge and cultural exchanges with the other countries? For the Germans, why do you think it is so important for them to help the other nations to understand and appreciate Germany? As you understand, unlike business trading, it is very difficult to bring immediate financial rewards through culture and knowledge exchanges. Even if they do, it would take a long time before the benefits become evident. I would like to know what is your opinion on this.

GS: I think it started after the World War II, maybe around the early 1950s as a soft diplomatic thing. That Germany carried an extremely negative image after the War was certainly the main reason. Via the Goethe-Institut, we are trying to create a positive image of our nation, with the hope that we Germans could form better and easier friendships with the other nations. This tradition has kind of survived and I think it is a very nice tradition. Via the Goethe-Institut, we are trying to create something more realistic and to create more possibilities and opportunities for knowledge and cultural exchange in order to allow other people or nations to judge Germany by themselves.

PL: Anything else you want to add to close this interview? It was a joy talking to you.

I am very happy that we could share ideas and I could tell a little bit more about what we are doing. Currently, we are doing a lot of activities outside of the Library. In both Hong Kong and China, we are very active in terms of outreaching to our users. Different Goethe-Institut Libraries are also outreaching to their users in different ways.

But for the Goethe-Institut, I can say that starting with the fall of the Berlin Wall in

¹⁰ British Council Hong Kong Homepage. Available at: <http://www.britishcouncil.org/hongkong.htm>

¹¹ Alliance française de Hong Kong - Homepage. Available at: <http://www.alliancefrancaise.org.hk/content/alliance-fran%C3%A7aise-de-hong-kong>

¹² Italian Cultural Institute of Hong Kong – Homepage. Available at: http://www.iichongkong.esteri.it/IIC_HongKong

1989, there was a huge demand for libraries, especially in Eastern Europe, and a large number of Goethe Instituts were founded in Middle or Eastern Europe during that time. During the initial setup stage, it was very important for the librarians to get in touch with the other colleagues for the sake of sharing resources and experiences, and most importantly trying to learn from each other. During that time, very often the small Goethe-Institut Libraries would serve as models for the other library colleagues in Eastern Europe. They even had to come to look at our Goethe-Library furniture, because in Germany, we have special companies which specialize in manufacturing library furniture. And then these librarians would try to create their own little model libraries, and the experts from Germany would come to give lectures. The concept of Goethe-Institut Libraries outreaching to different user groups already started a long time ago; but certainly like everywhere else, budget is always a problem. This is the reason why we librarians must collaborate and do what we can to help out each other.

PL: Thank you very much! It has been most interesting and culturally enlightening.

Photo 1. Library of the Goethe-Institutes Hong Kong



Photo 2. Poster of seminar organized by the Goethe-Institut Hongkong

