

**NCNK Newsletter**  
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Each year The Asia Foundation's *Books for Asia* program sends approximately one million books and other resource to students, teachers, and librarians in 17 countries in Asia. In "Bridges Built of Books," the third National Committee on North Korea Newsletter, Asia Foundation's Korea Representative Edward Reed describes the program in the DPRK, which began in 1998. As is evident in the article, many North Korean students have reached an advanced level of English and English-language texts are an important research tool.

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*The National Committee on North Korea (NCNK) advances, promotes and facilitates principled engagement between citizens of the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. It enables thoughtful dialogue about North Korea among experts from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences in an effort to foster greater understanding in the United States about the DPRK. Views expressed by individual NCNK members and/or contributors to this newsletter are their own and are not necessarily endorsed by NCNK and/or its individual members.*

## **Bridges Built of Books**

### **The Asia Foundation's Books for Asia Program**

**Edward Reed**  
**Korea Representative**  
**The Asia Foundation**

On one of my visits to North Korea as representative of The Asia Foundation I sat in on an English-language class at Pyongyang University of Foreign Studies, the premier institution for training the North's future diplomats and heads of state trading companies. The class was taught by a British teacher sponsored by the U.K. British Council. I was surprised to observe that the topic of discussion in this advanced class was the U.S. banking system. The dialogue so expertly enacted by the students was between a banker and a small-businessman seeking a loan.

We learned from the president of the University that this was an example of their new content-based approach to teaching English which focuses heavily on science and technology and economics. The teachers, all Korean except the British volunteer, developed their own curricula drawing heavily, we were told, on books donated to the University by The Asia Foundation. When we visited the faculty library where the English-language books are shelved I found that almost the whole collection consisted of Asia Foundation-donated books and many of them were worn on the edges from apparent intensive thumbing.

Over the past ten years The Asia Foundation has donated over 120,000 English-language books to a number of educational institutions in North Korea. At least one shipment per year (each consisting of 8,000 to 10,000 volumes) has been shipped via ocean freight containers from the Port of Oakland to Tianjin, China and then on to Pyongyang by train. This effort is part of the Foundation's Books for Asia program serving the entire Asian region since 1954. Interestingly, South Korea was one of the major beneficiaries of this program. Between 1962 and 1995, almost 2 million books and journals were donated to 140 universities and other educational institutions in the South. Now this same program has become the means of opening doors and initiating dialogue in North Korea.

The primary partner for the books program is the Grand People's Study House (GPSH), the truly grand edifice that stands in the center of Pyongyang overlooking Kim Il Sung Square. The GPSH is often referred to as the national library of North Korea and a tour of the massive institution is frequently on the itinerary of visitors. Book shipments are consigned to the GPSH which keeps a large portion of them for its own collection and delivers allocations to various university libraries in Pyongyang and, we are told, outside of Pyongyang. Special collections are packed by the Foundation for delivery to particular institutions such as the Foreign Language University, Kim Chaek University of Science and Technology, Kim Il Sung University and the Academy of Agricultural Sciences. At the Kim Chaek University's new digital library the TAF-donated books are collected in a separate glass-enclosed room with The Asia Foundation's name clearly displayed.

At North Korea's request, the bulk of the donated books are in the fields of science, technology, medicine, economics and English-teaching. However, each shipment includes a generous number of books and materials on almost every imaginable topic, including literature, philosophy, history, political science, law, and even sports and the arts.

Who uses these books? The faculty of the Foreign Studies University, and perhaps many of the advanced students there, certainly use the donated books. Foundation representatives have visited the other major receiving institutions in Pyongyang, usually shortly after the arrival of each shipment. The books are on the shelves and we are always told that faculty and students use them. There is probably little reason to doubt this in the case of the technical topics. Access to the social science texts may be more limited, but we really don't know. Aside from other considerations, these brand new textbooks—some with ROM disks included—are rare in North Korea, and librarians are, no doubt, extra careful about circulating them freely.

The Books program has enabled the Foundation's most consistent contact with our North Korean colleagues. Foundation staff usually visit Pyongyang after the annual book shipments arrive. During these visits there is the opportunity to meet with the heads of academic

institutions and with government counterparts to plan the people-to-people programs that the Foundation has also implemented. These programs include trainings and study trips in the areas of international law, economics, agricultural science and English teaching methodologies. Finally, while most of us now rely heavily on the Internet for research, in North Korea access to the Internet is limited. Books are still the primary vehicle by which new knowledge enters the educational system. The books donated by The Asia Foundation open doors for contact, dialogue and direct programming, but they are also an important contribution in themselves to North Korea's gradual opening to the outside world.

Follow the following link to more information on the Books for Asia program:

<http://www.asiafoundation.org/program/overview/books-for-asia>