International Conference Explores Future of Book; e-Books, Chinese Book Market Receive Attention

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In the capital of China, there was brilliant sunshine and fine early autumn weather for the Second International Conference on the Future of the Book, held at the Beijing Friendship Hotel on 29-31 August 2004. About 80 people took part in the conference. They came from the United States, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere. The conference included six plenary sessions, eight sets of paper presentations and workshops, and five scenario cafes (subgroup discussions based on scenarios). Participants analyzed trends in book publishing from various disciplinary and other perspectives and speculated on future developments. Of particular note at the conference were the diverse communication methods, including presentation, discussion, and music.

Topics of particular attention included e-books (electronic books). Among the

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many aspects addressed were future technology and economic considerations. Questions that were considered included the following: What is the future of the book? How should the quality of e-books be controlled? How do we create sustainable business models?

Participants considered the development of the e-book thus far and looked to the future. e-books have already come quietly into our lives. They have many advantages. For example, they cost less than conventional books, take less space and are easy to carry, are easy to transfer, are of high quality, can be published fast, are better for the environment, and last a long time. e-books, and other e-communications, play important roles in distance learning.

How to prepare a good e-book deserves serious consideration. No matter what new technology may offer to the editor-author relationship, technology cannot substitute for imagination, good taste, and skillful use of language and illustrative materials in making a good book. Those are not technical skills, nor do they depend on technology, either hardware or software.

Editors had well-established skills and practices long before computers entered the picture. Although new technology can facilitate rapid communication among editor, author, and publisher, it cannot judge quality of language and illustrations. So far, no computer can replace an editor.

Some people at the conference said that e-books in English are the future of the book. I can't agree with that view. I think the world is multicultural. English cannot express a diversified world perfectly. Many professors at the conference analyzed the present and future of the book market in China. They told us that there is great potential in China. Chen-chung CHEN, a participant from Loughborough University in the United Kingdom, said that Japan and Korea have plans for extension into the Chinese market. According to statistical reports, the book market in China has been of great importance to China's economy for several years. The Chinese government supports research and development of software and hardware for publishing. Therefore, I believe that the e-book may be the future of the book but that the languages will vary. ●