

# A Roundabout Route to Minnesota

HER FIRST STUDIES WERE IN GERMAN LITERATURE, BUT THEN SHE FELL IN LOVE WITH LIBRARIES.

BY FORREST GLENN SPENCER

**N**ot many experienced library catalogers in St. Paul, Minnesota, started their lives in the flat, low-lying plains of Jiangsu, a province in

eastern China. Qin Tang is one.

Her life is the stuff movies are sometimes made of: the young woman whose thirst for knowledge takes her on a personal and professional journey across the globe; first to Germany to

study, to fall in love and marry; and then, finally, to the U.S. to build a family and a career.

Tang's story is one that could only happen at a special time in history when the world shifted its political and economic boundaries, and when an opportunity came to go beyond the limitations she knew; it's a personal tale about two cultures and how one woman took an extraordinary journey to secure an ordinary life.

Qin Tang is technical services librarian at the Minnesota Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT). It's a demanding job but one at which she is proficient and experienced. Tang has worked very hard to reach this point in life.

When she came to the U.S. in 1991 at the age of 27, her knowledge and comprehension of the English language was nominal, but the one institution that changed her life was the public library. Her desire for knowledge and to master English to access the available information in our own education helped her fuel her choice

## Qin Tang

**Joined SLA:** 2000

**Job:** Technical Services Librarian,  
Minnesota Dept. of Transportation

**Experience:** 13 years

**Education:** MLS, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1994; MA, German Literature and Linguistics, University of Heidelberg, Germany, 1991; BA, German Literature and Linguistics, Beijing Foreign Studies University, China, 1985

**First job:** Library Page at Madison Public Library, Madison, Wisconsin

**Biggest challenge:** "Personally, it's juggling work and family life with two children and finding time to do the things I enjoy doing the most, reading and writing. Professionally, it's working with the rest of the library staff in constantly justifying to management the need for quality cataloging and communicating the value of the library in the organization."

**To View Her Columns:** [www.spiritoflifebiblechurch.org/On\\_My\\_Mind\\_by\\_Qin\\_Tang\\_f93553912.html](http://www.spiritoflifebiblechurch.org/On_My_Mind_by_Qin_Tang_f93553912.html)



“I had never been a library user before in China. Like the idea of working with books and being surrounded by books. I started enjoying reading and going to the library regularly before I went to work at the library. So I thought going to library school, getting a degree is the way to go.”

communicate more effectively. Before long, she found a job at the Madison Public Library, checking in books.

“I had never been a library user before in China,” Tang said. “I like the idea of working with books and being surrounded by books. I started enjoying reading and going to the library regularly before I went to work at the library. So I thought going to library school, getting a degree is the way to go.” Tang pursued her MLS in the summer of 1993.

Three years after arriving in the U.S., Tang had an MLS from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. At the university, she was employed part-time as a library services assistant, working on a retrospective conversion project and cataloging life sciences materials in German and English.

After she earned her MLS, she got a job as an assistant catalog librarian at the Loyola University of Chicago Law School library. Later, she was hired by the law firm Ross & Hardies in Chicago as a technical services librarian, responsible for acquisitions,

to enter the information profession. Libraries were not a natural part of her life in China. Tang recalls the Cultural Revolution more than 30 years ago when use of a public library was limited to a few adults with special permission. But China started to change from an enclosed society to one that was to be integrated with the world through commerce and language, a crucial element for the Chinese to do business globally.

“I went to the Beijing Foreign Studies University,” Tang said. “It was the best of its kind—mainly a university where people learn foreign languages like Romanian, Arabic, all sorts. The biggest departments were the English and European languages. I graduated with a BA in German literature and linguistics in July 1985.

“At the time, China had started opening more to the world and people started wanting to study foreign languages. The Chinese Central Television (CCTV) network started offering English, French, and Japanese language programs. They wanted to offer a German language course. I then got a permanent job at CCTV, but one year later I was offered a government scholarship to study in Germany.”

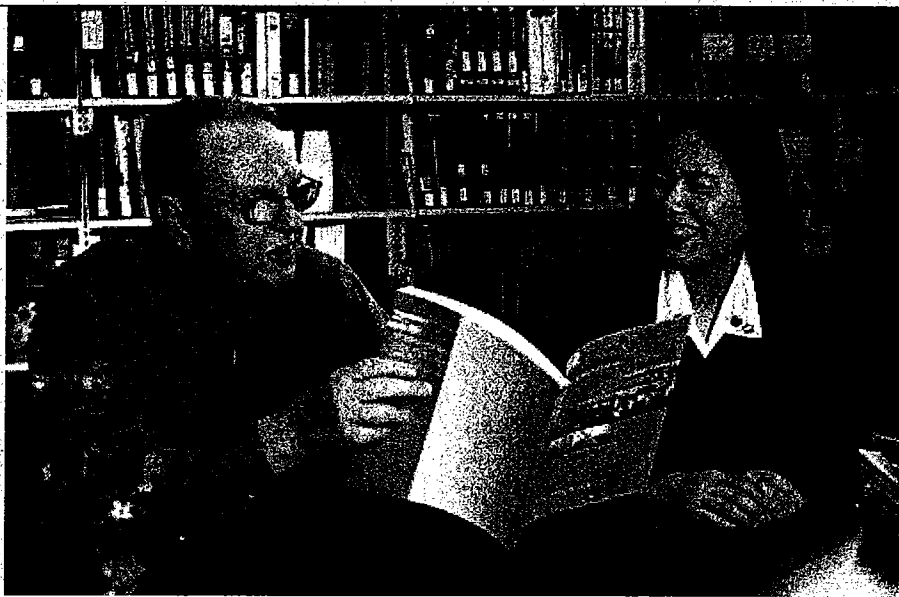
The scholarship was part of a German academic exchange that allowed her to live and study in Germany. She left China for Heidelberg in 1986. Tang was supposed to return to CCTV after a year of studies, but her scholarship was renewed and she stayed longer to finish the master’s degree, which she did in 1991, a master’s in

German literature and linguistics from the University of Heidelberg.

It was there she met the man who later became her husband, a Chinese native who was also at the same school. In 1991, he had an opportunity for work at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, so they moved to the U.S. It was in Madison that she began going to the public library to refresh her English, a language she had learned in high school but had all but forgotten after years studying German. After a year of hard effort, Tang was able to



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Qin Tang and her Mn/DOT supervisor, SLA member Jerry Baldwin.

350 CDs and DVDs. Through her job at Mn/DOT, she became a member of SLA and of the Transportation Division; she became connected with the transportation information professional community through her supervisor, SLA member Jerry Baldwin.

"I first met Qin when she was a contract cataloger for our local OCLC affiliate, MINITEX, doing some arrearage cataloging of our materials under a grant," Baldwin said. "I was very impressed with her insightful questions while working on the materials. Her zeal to learn all she could about what was to her a completely new field convinced me she was the only person to fill the job when our previous technical services librarian resigned. We're very lucky to have someone with her intelligence and talent."

Tang's job at the library includes original and copy cataloging, processing, and updating serial holdings, maintaining databases, and reference service. She's part of a staff of seven; a centralized library in a department of nearly 5,000 employees with a state road network that includes more than 132,000 miles of public roads, 12,000 road bridges, and nearly 1,000 miles of Interstate highway. Tang joined SLA in 2000, at the encouragement of Baldwin, one of the leaders in the transportation community.

"He's encouraging and supportive," Tang said, referring to Baldwin. "Our transportation librarian community is a

classification, and cataloging of the law library materials and serials and database maintenance.

In July 1999, Tang's family moved to Minnesota. After her second child was born at the end of that year, she started to look for an opportunity to go back to work as an information professional.

"MINITEX—a regional library information network—was looking for a contract cataloger. MINITEX provides services for libraries in Minnesota, South Dakota, and North Dakota, and at the time, they had a cataloging contract with Mn/DOT Library. So I was hired by MINITEX to work on the Mn/DOT Library project. I worked at MINITEX for a few months and I was hired full time later by Mn/DOT in May 2000."

### Library Services

The Mn/DOT library provides services to transportation professionals in state and local government agencies, as well as the public. Questions handled by reference staff at the library run

from simple statistical requests—such as how many miles of roads are there in a specific county—to requests for comprehensive information the use of retrofitted dowel bars to rehabilitate concrete pavements, or the effect of freeze-thaw cycles on soils and aggregates.

The 5,500-square foot library has 18,000 cataloged books and reports, 30,000 microfiche reports, 400 periodical titles, 1,000 videotapes, and

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## SLA MEMBER PROFILE

small community and the people know each other. He is always supportive. I have benefited from his knowledge and leadership."

She has given a presentation to the SLA Transportation Division on cataloging electronic documents, attend-

she would like to base her cataloging style on the records we contribute to the OCLC database. She didn't need my permission for this, but I was impressed by her professional courtesy and flattered that she so admired our work. Qin developed very fast into

China. In her first column, she wrote that she still has a deep connection to her native country but considers herself very much a resident of Woodbury, Minnesota, and a citizen of the world.

"When I came to the U.S. in 1991, I had to learn English," she began, "which was my first foreign language in high school. But after studying German for almost 10 years, I forgot all my English. I had to read children's and preschool books in the beginning to refresh my English skills. Now 15 years later, English feels like a native language to me."

For Tang, the power of language and the value of information has become the core of her work ethic and a passion. She has come to love her adopted country with its relatively free and easy access to information and the knowledge contained within the books, maps, and gigabytes of documents available to those who seek it out.

And for those entering the profession she has one piece of advice: "Do what you love. If you pick a profession, you have to love it to stay at it. Sometimes people do things they don't really like; you have to love what you do." It's a passion that can take you from the east coast of China to the upper Midwest of America, with a happy ending. **SLA**

**"Libraries were once thought of as buildings with physical collections but now libraries have evolved into a decentralized network, providing services and resources not limited to what we have."**

ed local and regional conferences, and contributes to the TRANLIB discussion list. "It's a multi-collaborative effort," she added about the Transportation Division.

"Libraries change mainly due to the changes in technologies," Tang said. "Libraries were once thought of as buildings with physical collections but now libraries have evolved into a decentralized network, providing services and resources not limited to what we have. We have access to a network of databases so we can provide services that are not limited by our own collection. It's still full service but with some self service. People who are computer savvy may be able to do things on their own; but sometimes, there's so much on the Internet that it's overwhelming: how to do find the right information; retrieve the documents you want; how do you identify the resources you need that are increasingly electronic and how do you preserve that information?"

John Gallwey, a technical services and outreach librarian at the Harmer E. Davis Transportation Library, University of California, Berkeley, remembers his introduction to Tang in 2000. "She introduced herself by e-mail shortly after joining Minnesota DOT. She was then a novice cataloger and said that

one of the best transportation catalogers in the country—and there's just a handful—and I have learned from her work. What more could a proxy-teacher want?"

Gallwey said that when he comes across a record created by her in OCLC he rejoices because he knows it'll be just about perfect. "In fact my only complaint is that with all her other duties, she doesn't get to do more cataloging."

Tang continues to expand her professional pursuits in other venues. Last year she began writing a column in her community newspaper, the *Woodbury Bulletin*. She said that as a devoted public library user and an information professional, one of her main goals for the newspaper column is to promote library use in the community, to become an advocate for education and reading and learning, and to promote

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