

The New York Times Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



January 2, 2012

Queens Libraries Speak the Mother Tongue

By JOSEPH BERGER

The best-selling [biography of Steve Jobs](#) is flying off the shelves at [libraries in Queens](#), which is not surprising. But in many of the borough's 62 branches, the copies being borrowed are in Korean, Chinese or Spanish.

"We knew it was going to be big," said Younshin Kim, who acquires Korean books for the Queens system. "iPhones and iPads are big in Korea."

A library branch in Astoria, responding to its own diverse readership, carries children's books in Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Russian, Portuguese and Gujarati, the official language of a western Indian state. And when branch librarians noticed an influx of yet another group, they acquired the story of "Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves" in Croatian.

Striving to cater to the intensifying globalization of its surrounding streets, the New York neighborhood library speaks your language as never before.

The surge in immigrants patronizing the Queens system has spurred its branches to offer books, DVDs and CDs in 59 languages, more than double the total a decade ago. So important has acquiring foreign-language books become to the Queens Library's mission that Radames Suarez, who supervises the Spanish collection, travels every year to the largest Spanish book fair in the world, in Guadalajara, Mexico. The Queens Library even has a staff demographer.

As with bilingual programs that teach students in their native languages as well as in English, the internationalization of neighborhood libraries has led some to question if making foreign books easily accessible impedes or hastens assimilation. Ms. Kim acknowledged that she worried that many Korean immigrants were "reading only Korean books or watching Korean TV or interacting only with Koreans." Still, she said, in New York "we like to keep our own cultures as well."

And other librarians argue that making books available in native languages draws immigrants into a library where they will in time browse the English texts.

“As a professional, I think everybody has to have opportunities to read whatever they want,” said Vilma Raquel Daza, the manager of the Corona library, where one-fourth of the books for adults are in Spanish, reflecting a neighborhood whose brick and clapboard houses are dense with Ecuadoreans and other Latin Americans.

While local branches have always had small foreign collections, an ever more multilingual city has led public libraries to dedicate more attention and staff to their effort, grounding decisions in census statistics, reports from foreign title distributors and surveys of branch managers about their patrons.

As a result, 39 branches have Spanish collections, and almost one-fourth of Bayside’s collection is in Korean and Chinese.

Languages once obscure to New York libraries are also appearing in the stacks.

The Woodside branch has several shelves in Nepali, while a branch in Flushing has titles in the Afghan languages of Dari and Pashto. The Glen Oaks branch has three shelves in Malayalam, spoken in a slice of southern India but also among many health workers at nearby Long Island Jewish Medical Center.

Of the 6.8 million books, CDs, videos and other items on Queens stacks, 833,000, or 12 percent, are in a language other than English. (Calling them foreign languages does not seem quite accurate in a borough where almost 50 percent of the populace was born abroad.) Chinese and Spanish top the list, but there are large collections of Korean, Russian, French, Hindi, Italian and Bengali as well, said Joanne King, a library spokeswoman.

Logan Ragsdale, who runs the Broadway branch in Astoria, said it was essential that “libraries provide a transition” for newcomers to America. “Most libraries I’ve worked in have realized that to be a bridge where people learn what the library has to offer, it helps to have books, DVDs and music in the native language,” he said.

The [New York Public Library](#), which serves Manhattan, the Bronx and Staten Island, and the Brooklyn Public Library have made similar efforts, with foreign titles making up 8 percent of the New York Public Library’s branch acquisitions and 10 percent of Brooklyn’s. The Van Nest branch near Pelham Parkway in the Bronx, for example, has 1,024 books in Russian and is increasing its holdings in Albanian.

But Queens, because it is one of the most polyglot spots on the planet, seems to be in the vanguard. In 1977, the library system started a New Americans Program to adapt to population shifts resulting from the 1965 [immigration](#) act, which significantly raised immigration from countries outside Europe.

According to Fred J. Gitner, the program's assistant director, branch managers were asked to note uncommon periodicals on sidewalk newsstands or at new ethnic restaurants. They held foreign movie nights to lure newcomers in order to find out what books they might want.

"Our patrons know the library customizes the collection to their neighborhood," said Loida Garcia-Febo, coordinator of the New Americans Program.

To learn what books Koreans might like, Ms. Kim browses the Korean equivalent of Amazon, then divides her annual budget of \$60,000 among branches like Bayside and Flushing. Queens has 63,600 residents who claim Korean ancestry; 48,100 of them are native Koreans.

Ms. Kim buys writers most Americans are not familiar with, preordering several copies of the latest Kyung-sook Shin, whose last best-selling novel in Korea was "[Please Look After Mom](#)." But she also orders lots of John Grisham thrillers and [Stephenie Meyer's vampire romances](#) because, she said, "Korean kids are picking up on what their American friends are reading."

Ms. Kim also buys how-to books on parenting, becoming a citizen, and navigating the college admissions labyrinth.

Meeting the needs of immigrants has also meant teaching English to adult newcomers — many branches have such classes — and recruiting staff members who speak foreign languages. The Queens system has 10 Korean-speaking librarians.

Customers seem to approve of their multilingual branches. Orlando Castillo, 51, a Dominican-born driver at a car rental agency who has been in this country for 30 years, visits the Corona branch several times a week to read classics like "Don Quixote" — in Spanish — or to peruse *El Diario*, the newspaper.

"I'm more comfortable in Spanish; it's my native language," he said. "I'm grateful that the library allows that to happen. It's very kind."

Jean Lee, manager of the Bayside branch, lets readers take out up to 50 books and other items at a time. Chinese patrons, she said, gobble up several short Chinese romances in a day and take out dozens at once.

"We have customers that come with suitcases," she said.

In Corona, the most popular books are by a Mexican writer, Carlos Cuauhtémoc Sánchez, who offers meditations on relationships. Cookbooks, books with religious themes and

how-to guides on topics like repairing televisions are also very popular.

“Fiction, not too many people read,” said Ms. Daza, who was an economist in her native Peru. “They need more time and they need to work and they have big families. This neighborhood is poor.”

Carlos Montoya, 55, who regularly goes to the Corona branch to read histories in Spanish after work as a machine operator, said being conversant in languages and cultures other than English could expand opportunities. “Now the world is not a small orange,” he said. “It’s open to different people, and you have to accept different minds. Now the world is like a big papaya.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: January 5, 2012

An article on Tuesday about library branches in Queens that offer their services in dozens of languages misstated the surname of the head librarian at the Broadway branch in Astoria. He is Logan Ragsdale, not Ragland.