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YELLOW FLAKES IN EAST ASIAN LIBRARIES:
SOME REFLECTIONS ON A NATIONAL PRESERVATION PROGRAM
OF EAST ASIAN PUBLICATIONS

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East Asian Libraries can indeed pride themselves on their achievements during the last few decades. They have, through individual and collective efforts, built up collections of East Asian publications, the combined strength of which is unrivalled anywhere outside of East Asia today, and is likely to remain so in the future. But success has also brought with it problems. This brief paper is a preliminary attempt at examining one of these problems, namely, preservation, and to suggest a way in which a national approach to the problem can be attempted.

As is generally known, East Asian materials published during the first half of this century are rapidly deteriorating on libraries' shelves everywhere due to the high acid content of the paper on which they are printed. The deterioration process of these publications has further been accelerated over the years through use, and in many cases also by the lack of adequate climatic control in the stack areas in which they have been housed. It is not uncommon to see publications of all types - books, newspapers, and periodicals - published during this period rendered unserviceable in our libraries because the deterioration process has gone too far, and the pages as a result have become too brittle to be turned without irreparable damage being done to them. In such cases, the next use of the publication in question will also most likely be its last. Many libraries have taken to microfilming some of these publications for preservation purposes. The Asian Division of the Library of Congress, the C.V. Starr East Asian Library at Columbia, the East Asiatic Library at the University of California, Berkeley, the Hoover Institution, and the Harvard-Yenching Library at Harvard are chief among them. Commercial publishers in East Asia and Europe have also in recent years undertaken to issue micro-editions of some of these materials. The Japan Microfilm Service Company and Yushodo in Tokyo are probably the most prominent among these publishers; the Inter Documentation Center in Leiden, Holland, has also been increasingly active in the East Asian field; the China National Microforms Import and Export Corporation and the New China Microfilm Company, both in Peking, and the Transmission's Microforms Company in Taipei are the latest to join the ranks. The Utah Genealogical Society in Salt Lake City also has in recent years received permission from East Asian libraries in the United States such as Columbia and Harvard to have their collections of Chinese and Korean genealogies as well as certain Chinese local gazetteers microfilmed for preservation purposes. The Center for Chinese Research Materials (CCRM) of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), as we all know, has been successfully engaged in reproducing important Chinese research materials in response to scholars' needs. However, all such efforts, invaluable as they are, have not relieved the East Asian libraries of their preservation worries.

The reasons for this are several: In the first place, none of the efforts made so far are of a permanent nature. This has made systematic planning and implementation over time impossible. With the exception of the newspaper microfilming project at the Library of Congress, all university preservation programs have been temporary in nature, subject entirely to the availability of funds which have not been plentiful. In the latter case, inter-institutional coordination has also left

something to be desired due to a shortage of manpower and reference tools. Some duplication of effort has thus been unavoidable, and libraries have often opted for putting incomplete sets of books, periodicals, and newspapers from their own collections on microfilm, without attempting to make sure whether what is being preserved can be made more complete through interlibrary borrowing. Secondly, not all the programs we have seen to date are exclusively designed for preservation purposes. CCRM has significantly contributed to our preservation efforts, but its main objective is in reproduction work.

Thirdly, some of the projects have been limited in scope and have concentrated only on certain types of publications. The Utah Genealogical Society's program is a good case in point. Finally, commercial reprinters, being profit-oriented, are guided solely by considerations of sales and not by considerations of preservation. Thus, in spite of all that has been done in the past, the preservation problem is still very much with us. We have no coordinated program on the national level for the preservation of East Asian publications. It seems therefore that the time has come for us to consider a concerted national effort which would provide the necessary planning, coordination, staffing, and funding of the preservation of East Asian publications in service of our needs. Such a national program, as with all national programs, would not be easy to organize, nor can it be expected to be an overnight success. But a start must be made now while the task is still of a manageable size. If and when our problem approaches the magnitude of what is now facing the general research libraries with their millions and millions of pages crumbling on their shelves, it may very well be too late and too expensive for us to do anything about it.

Central to this national approach would be an organization which would be responsible for the planning, coordination, fund-raising, and implementation of programs. This organization must be responsive to the needs of libraries. It must provide the necessary leadership for management with a qualified and trained staff. It must also have the trust and support of the East Asian Studies community. However, the prospect of creating such an organization at a time of financial stringency such as we are experiencing is not encouraging, requiring as it does a sizeable initial capital outlay for physical facilities and personnel, and funds for continuing projects. Fortunately, there is already in place an organization which could conceivably be asked to serve as such a national agency. I am referring to the Center for Chinese Research Materials of the Association of Research Libraries.

As is generally known, the purpose of CCRM is to identify, reproduce, and distribute Chinese research materials needed by scholars, particularly with regard to the study of the 20th century. For fifteen years since its founding in 1968, CCRM has been eminently successful in its mission, and by so doing has become an internationally known organization supplying reprints in book- and micro-form of important research materials for the study of modern China. As an adjunct of the Center's well-known reprint program, a great many titles, including deteriorating newspapers, periodicals, and monographic publications have also been preserved. This preservation function, however, was not the rationale for the founding of the Center, and CCRM's primary purpose remains that of reproducing materials in response to scholarly needs. Given the record of the Center's admirable accomplishments, its contact with East Asian libraries here and abroad, its experience in reproduction work, and the support

of the Association of Research Libraries, it stands to reason that it would be the ideal organization to take responsibility for developing and implementing a national program for the preservation of East Asian materials. Assuming such a responsibility would most likely call for a change in CCRM's mandate - from reproduction to preservation - as well as in CCRM's organization as it is presently structured. Both changes would of course have to have the prior approval of ARL and the Center's Advisory Committee. But a strong case can be made to ARL by East Asian libraries if we agree on the wisdom and desirability of such a move and pledge our wholehearted support to it.

Should our endorsement and ARL's approval be forthcoming, it is envisioned that CCRM would first undertake to make certain organizational changes, including the renaming of the Center to something more appropriate to its new mission, such as "The National Center for the Preservation of East Asian Materials," and expanding the membership on its current Advisory Committee to include all the major East Asian libraries. The new Committee might be designated as a Managing Committee with decision-making powers and oversight responsibilities. It should decide what specific programs and in what order and fashion (microfilming, xeroxing, deacidification, etc.) the National Center's projects should be carried out. The Managing Committee together with ARL could at the same time mount a major fund-drive with the endorsement of CEAL in order to carry out its new mission.

As a prerequisite to implementing programs, the National Center would first of all proceed to create a bibliographical file which would contain all available information on existing master negatives in East Asian libraries in this country and abroad. It should also inform itself on reprint editions of East Asian publications that have been issued by commercial publishers, and on their current and future reproduction plans. By so doing, it will not only have at its disposal information it needs to carry out its own work in order to avoid duplication of effort, but it could also serve as a clearing-house of such information from which all East Asian libraries should benefit.

It goes without saying that the National Center, when and if established, cannot carry out all the preservation work that may be deemed necessary in a given library. A certain amount of preservation, especially in the area of restoration, will still have to be done locally. But the Managing Committee would be expected to establish priorities through discussions and agreements. There are a myriad of other details that would have to be worked out before effective implementation could take place. Suffice it to say here that the success of this venture, as in all cooperative schemes, depends on the cooperation and support of all of its participants. This will indeed be a challenge. I think we should face it squarely as the alternative is the prolongation of our agony as we stand by and witness greater numbers of the books in our libraries ever-increasingly reduced to piles of yellow flakes.