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Scholars in the Stacks: East Asian Library Users

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In a poem entitled "To a Scholar in the Stacks," Howard Nemerov presents the library as the Minotaur's cave, and the scholar's endeavor—of seeking knowledge, or even wisdom, rather than information—as the search of Theseus on his daunting expedition:

A heart less bold would have refused to start,
A mind less ignorant would have stayed home.¹

There is no reference in the poem to those of us who would serve as guides, and who share in the endeavor. And yet this collaboration is one that both we and the scholars cannot afford to overlook, since it is essential to our work. It also seems important to pay attention to the ways in which both the structure of our particular caves, and the composition of our seekers after knowledge, have changed.

When I enrolled in graduate school at Columbia University twenty years ago to begin the study of Japanese literature, my heart was perhaps bold—it was certainly eager—but there is no doubt that my ignorance was profound. The library was then, as now, a haven for the ignorant who were eager to learn. But it was clearly different: less heavily used, and by fewer people, although by the time I began my studies, it had grown to a substantial size. A few years later, there were 353,212 volumes in the collection (about 58 percent of the current holdings), and the yearly circulation statistics showed usage at about 34,400 volumes a year. There were about the same number of full-time staff members, some of whom served as valued and knowledgeable guides.²

The guides were necessary because it was a complex system to navigate. There were five different classification systems: Harvard-Yenching for Chinese books; Nippon Decimal for Japanese; Korean Decimal for Korean; Dewey for the older western-language books, which then as now included many of the classics in the field; and the Library of Congress classification system for newer western-language books. Each collection was shelved separately. Then, as now, there was not quite enough shelf space for all the volumes, and where there were empty spaces on walls, the walls were lined with books shelved on the floor.

Learning the systems and locating the necessary materials did feel like a quest, intimately connected to the quests in the classrooms on the floors above. It was a beautiful setting for seekers: lofty ceiling above, with expansive windows for light, broad wood tables to spread out on—and it was a quiet enough place to leave materials spread out for days on end—and the cozy, cave-like stacks below to search. There were special moments of enlightenment: a librarian lead me through the complexities of Japanese Buddhist funerary rites, a
professor explained the calendrical systems and the sources to use to solve scholarly puzzles. The strong sense of community among the seekers who were graduate students, learning languages and cultures as well as libraries, made the quest feel like an adventure rather than a trial. I for one thought I had come to understand.

A decade earlier, when the first Newsletter of the Committee on East Asian Libraries was published in 1963, Columbia's East Asian Collection had recently moved from a small section of Low Library to its current home, the former Law School Library. Materials were moved beforehand, but "the East Asian Library closed its Low Memorial Library doors at the usual time on Friday afternoon, July 13, 1962, and reopened in Kent Hall on Monday morning, July 16, ready for business." In contrast to the previous location, in which library holdings were "crowded into five inadequately lighted and poorly ventilated stack areas, only two of which were contiguous and which had long since reached 100% occupancy," staff and users alike exulted in the "four tiers of stacks directly below the reading room and ... the West Annex, all air-conditioned, excellently lighted, and contiguous to one another ..." The move had repercussions: "Recorded attendance soared from 23,113 last year [1961-62] to 43,816, representing an increase of 88% and more [than] doubling the attendance of ten years ago (19,005)." Of course, such an increase also reflected the growth of East Asian studies at Columbia.

Amid this growth and change, however, users were apparently served — and served well — primarily by the acquisition and provision of materials. Neither the statistics offered nor the "Aids to Readers" section of the Annual Report mention bibliographic instruction sessions, orientations, or reference consultations. Certainly all those things went on as part of the daily functioning of the Library, but they were taken for granted.

As the CEAL Newsletter grew from an initial publication of a few pages to a regular journal, so have our libraries grown, in holdings and in usage. In the three decades, holdings have grown to over 600,000 volumes. The gloriously contiguous stacks filled up, were expanded in a renovation in 1981-82, filled up again, and yet once more. Books are again shelved on the floors, or worse, not shelved at all, because the shelves are full. The collection is currently housed inconveniently in four different locations, not all readily accessible.

While this was happening, usage has increased even more dramatically. In 1991-92 we had a total attendance for the year of 186,446, an increase of more than 425 percent over three decades earlier. The general circulation totalled 47,236 volumes, and reserve circulation, 32,105. As was the case thirty years ago, this increase reflects the increase in East Asian studies as a whole, both in scholarship and in general education. With the introduction, for example, of a "Major Cultures" requirement at Columbia College in 1988-89, enrollments in courses in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures doubled and tripled in a year, and maintained the higher levels. In the early 1960s, use by students in graduate faculties and professional schools far outnumbered undergraduate use; currently it is undergraduate use that has increased dramatically. Frequently all seats at the broad wood tables in the reading room, and the newer carrels in the stacks, are filled.
The more things change, perhaps, the more they stay the same. Plans are underway to
address the recurrent problem of inadequate space with a new, consolidated off-site facility.
The vaunted air-conditioning is malfunctioning and outmoded and is currently being
replaced. And the dauntless seekers of knowledge continue to stream in.

Our "aids" to our readers have changed: as holdings and users expanded, automated
bibliographic control of materials flourished as well, to make the vast volume of materials
more easily accessible to the expanded assembly of patrons. We are serving up rich
acronym soup: OPACs, RLIN, OCLC, CD-ROMs, MARC records in various formats. It
is no longer enough to be able to navigate four or five card catalogs and classification
systems, shelved in five separate areas; users must learn at least one on-line catalog system,
preferably more, and negotiate shelves in five separate groupings spread around four
different sites. And that is to find materials held by only one institution.

Voluminous as those holdings may be, they are not enough. The burgeoning of publications
from China, the cost of materials from Japan, the growth of Korean studies and acquisitions,
means that no library, large or small, can acquire everything its users need. Even if we
could afford to buy it all, we would have no place to put it. So our patrons have to navigate
not only our own tricky waters, but those of other institutions as well. It may seem that we
are making it harder, rather than easier, for the scholars in the stacks to find what they
need.

A recent editorial in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* was entitled, "Library of Congress
Poses New Threats to Scholarship." The Library of Congress, planning to deal on a large
scale with problems faced by all research libraries – such as providing appropriate means
of access to more and more materials; inadequate funding for staff to keep facilities open;
the theft or mutilation of materials – is looking toward the future in ways, in the eyes of at
least one scholar, that imperil scholarship of the present and past. "Scholarly work," the
scholar, Grace Palladino, wrote, "is only as good as its sources." Our work as librarians is
similarly dependent upon scholarly use of our resources and scholars' and students' success
in negotiating our various and changing means of access.

The past few decades of intense involvement with automation has required that librarians
develop technological expertise at a level beyond that of our patrons. It is perhaps as part
of that process that we have seemed to have less in common. Yet the shared endeavor in
which we are involved requires us to pay increasing attention to our common concerns and
goals. While we will have no better success than any other kind of institution, I imagine,
in pleasing all of the people all of the time, there are dramatic changes in the nature of our
planning that require us to incorporate scholars as fully as possible into the process and
educate them as thoroughly as possible in our systems. When we are balancing access
versus ownership; when we are moving thousands or tens of thousands of volumes to off-site
locations; when we are exploring ever newer technologies; when we are mounting expanding
and new databases; when we are trying to buy and do more with less, we must meet those
bold-hearted seekers who explore our "caves" in person or on line, and join together in our common quests.

NOTES


