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REALITY CHECK:
THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE EAST ASIAN STUDIES LIBRARIAN IN NORTH AMERICA*

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Introduction

This study attempts to address the collective changing role of East Asian studies librarians and librarianship in North America. These librarians include those who are in the East Asian studies library profession but are not ethnically East Asian; therefore, the name "East Asian Studies Librarian" is more appropriate than "East Asian Librarian."

In the past decade we witnessed a dramatic reform in information packaging, moving from print to electronic media. We also experienced a paradigm shift of service emphasis, from collection-based to access-based. These developments along with budgetary constraints have caused librarians to re-examine their role in the information service profession. A quick survey of library literature retrieves a number of articles offering both theoretical and practical analyses of the role and responsibility changes in the 1990's and beyond for different areas of librarianship, but little about East Asian studies librarianship specifically. This dearth of literature on the subject does not mean the East Asian studies librarians are immune from these changes. East Asian studies librarians in North America are also facing a new reality in the present environment: that is, the advancement of technology; the new ways that information is being created, stored and delivered; and the impact of a global economy. All of these affect the adequacy of budgets. This new reality has forced East Asian studies librarians to rethink their way of providing their services and conducting their business.

Phyllis Wang, East Asian Studies Librarian of the University of California at Davis, alerted East Asian studies librarians in 1994 to the "need to go beyond the traditional physical and subject boundaries to carry out [their] responsibilities." She pointed out some of the undercurrents that

*This article is a revised and updated version of the paper presented at the special conference "The Evolving Research Library and East Asian Studies" on August 28, 1996, which was held in conjunction with the 1996 IFLA Conference, in Beijing, China.
had changed their roles as East Asian studies librarians. Among these undercurrents were the proliferation of information through electronic means, the technological support needed for accessing this information, and the emphasis on cultural diversity or multiculturalism in the current environment.

Amy Tsiang, Acting Head of the Richard C. Rudolph East Asian Library at the University of California at Los Angeles, also challenged us in 1994 with this wake-up call:

> One of the changing roles facing East Asian [studies] librarians is that they can no longer dwell on traditional methods in providing services. Advanced technology and superhighway networking will forever change the East Asian [studies] librarianship. East Asian [studies] librarians will have to become more technology-oriented librarians with technical skills in accessing electronic resources to East Asian research materials.²

**Information Provider**

Traditionally East Asian studies librarians have provided information by using printed material. With more and more information either being published only in electronic form or being made retrievable more effectively in an electronic version, they are pressured to provide access to electronic resources in addition to print. The amount of information in Chinese, Japanese and Korean languages available electronically has also increased by leaps and bounds in the past several years.

Peter Zhou, Head of the University of Pittsburgh's East Asian Library, in his report to the Subcommittee on Chinese Materials of the Committee on East Asian Libraries of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) at its annual meeting in the spring of 1995, stated that there were more than 80 select electronic resources for Chinese studies alone that were housed and used regularly by major academic libraries in North America and Asia. The full details of his study were later published in the June issue of the Committee's official journal in 1995.³ Yeen-mei Wu, Assistant Head of the University of Washington's East Asian Library, wrote about the increasing number of electronic databases available worldwide and how her library had implemented a program to make many of them accessible to its users by providing a uniform graphic interface at the library.⁴ During their presentations at the panel entitled “Sinology by Computer” which was given at the annual conference of AAS in April, 1996, in Honolulu, Thomas Hahn, then of Heidelberg University, Ching-chun Hsieh of the Academia Sinica (Taiwan), and Yeen-mei Wu together briefed the audience about further developments in the field of technology for Chinese studies. Among them were an ambitious digitalization project of Chinese gazetteers in China and major undertakings of computerizing Chinese classical works, Buddhist and Taoist scriptures in Taiwan. Many characters in ancient Chinese classics and Buddhist canons are still missing from the character code sets that we now use; until they are added, a full-fledged digitalization for these works cannot be satisfactorily accomplished. As also reported at the “Workshop on the Global Information Infrastructure for Asian Studies” held at the same conference, many events
have also occurred in Japan and Korea in the area of electronic information network and management.

Surrounded by these happenings, East Asian studies librarians not only need to keep abreast of what information is available in North America and overseas, but also they have to be knowledgeable about the necessary hard- and soft-ware requirements and licensing agreements to access it. Since electronic resources are much more expensive to acquire and those in East Asian languages are more complicated to use, usually involving a special configuration on a personal computer workstation, the abilities and skills of East Asian studies librarians to convince their libraries to purchase these materials and their periodic updates on a continuing basis are often tested. In addition they will need critical technical support. How can they persuade those in authority, who are usually unfamiliar with the languages and texts needed by their East Asian studies users, to approve such purchases? Such requests are forced to compete with all other needs in the library. What additional justification do they need to come up with to make these happen? In the words of Maria Otero-Boisvert, “the skillful application of traits such as salesmanship, interpersonal relations, political savvy and technical expertise” that challenge this century's collection development librarians could also be applied to this century's East Asian studies librarians.

East Asian studies librarians also have to be effective mediators between their users and their administrators. As mediators, they present the relevant facts including the information needs of their users objectively, collect and manage the information without personal prejudices, and facilitate the access to this information. Through means of library instruction and reference intermediation, they help their users become information literate and equipped with the ability to find answers for questions by themselves.

Some electronic information is being made available free of charge on the Internet worldwide. Their ability to link their users to this is critical. Through development and construction of home pages embedded with many hot links to available East Asian studies resources in the World Wide Web (the web), they provide their users with access to information which has not been in the past obtainable in print nor within physical reach. Several East Asian studies librarians have risen to this challenge by designing and making available several home pages of this kind. The home pages of the Asia Library of the University of Michigan and that of the East Asian Library of University of California at Berkeley are but two impressive examples. They provide links not only to the home page of the Council on East Asian Libraries, which also offers linkages to libraries and information databases in Asia and available softwares to read CJK language texts, but also to full-text databases of scholarly works and other original texts of creative writings in East Asian languages.

An East Asian studies librarian who also catalogs can provide links between the bibliographic records of research material to any related works on the web by including the hypertext addresses, URLs, of these works in the bibliographic records.
Kristina Troost of Duke University further suggested that “we East Asian [studies] librarians are ... at a fifth stage in our relationship with the World Wide Web ... We organized or classified these links, creating a hierarchy of knowledge.” East Asian studies librarians as area studies librarians are meeting the challenge of “making unique resources available nationally.” Resource files, such as those for Japanese studies at Duke University, include bibliographies for East Asian studies and information for writing grant applications, subscribing to listservs, and teaching research methods. Examples of digitization of original East Asian texts and scanning of unique resources are those electronic texts done by the University of Virginia and the University of Pittsburgh, and the union list databases on web created by the Committee on Chinese Materials and the Committee on Japanese Materials of the Council on East Asian Libraries.

Gatekeeper of Multiculturalism

Traditionally East Asian studies librarians who work in an academic setting have developed collections and designed services by first responding to the needs of the East Asian studies programs on campus. However, by responding to the needs of East Asian studies program, they have indeed developed a multicultural collection. The increasingly strong presence of multiculturalism in the campus environment has called for an institutional endorsement and implementation of many multicultural programs on campus. The effect of this is the inclusion of material and information for current awareness and recreational purposes in their collection and library services for users whose mother tongues are Chinese, Japanese and Korean and whose areas of study may not necessarily be in the East Asian studies. More and more library orientation tours, written guides and handouts are requested, prepared and rendered in East Asian languages for these users and campus visitors. The impact on the services of East Asian studies librarians is increased even more considerably when no public library in the neighborhood is equipped to take on this responsibility or tries to meet this need.

Community outreach activities and exhibits for special occasions and events continue to be a part of the responsibilities of East Asian studies librarians' positions.

Language Interpreter

Quick translation is yet another service East Asian studies librarians have traditionally performed. The number of requests for this service has increased each year owing to the growing global economy and international exchanges between North America and Asia. As pointed out by Wang, the accelerating number of citations in the East Asian languages appearing in the online and CD-ROM databases nowadays also has contributed to the increased number of requests for this type of service. As a result, there is a growing demand by users to read journals not typical of East Asian studies and those journals not usually found in an East Asian studies collection.

Involvement in Mainstream Librarianship

Responding to calls for continual improvement and meeting the challenges of the 21st century in
library services while faced with greater economic constraints, more and more libraries in North America have taken steps to reorganize their existing structures into a team-based management. This restructuring has also affected a few number of East Asian studies collections. In the course of the reorganization, the duties of some East Asian studies librarians have been shuffled and changed. Some of these librarians have been persuaded to take on an extra workload at the general reference area, while still maintaining their services to their primary clientele of East Asian studies. Some have been allowed to continue to execute their primary services to their East Asian studies faculty and students, but in order for them to participate in team meetings auxiliary services such as shelving and current periodical check-in of East Asian language material have been removed from their care. Such a reorganization has had a positive side by offering the East Asian studies librarians an opportunity to be assimilated into the mainstream of librarianship and to participate in serving the general library users outside of the East Asian studies arena. They no longer work in isolation.

The negative aspect of this arrangement is the reduction of time available for the librarian to give quality service to the East Asian library users and its constituency. Shizuko Radbill, then of the University of Arizona, reported such an experience at her institution during her presentation at the Western Conference of AAS in 1994. Even in a traditional library organization of hierarchical structure, East Asian studies librarians cannot afford to be non-participants in general library affairs and strategic planning. It is critically important for East Asian studies librarians to participate actively in library-wide committee work and other library activities or projects, because many of the decisions made in these forums will also have an effect on setting the direction of the library's East Asian studies program and ultimately changing the course of their services for the users of the East Asian studies collection. Those empowered with decision-making authority can change or shape the future direction of the library which includes the East Asian studies collection.

The involvement of East Asian studies librarians should be expanded to include the library profession as a whole, since many of the things occurring at a profession-wide level also affect East Asian studies librarianship. Intellectual freedom and cataloging rule revisions are but two such examples.

East Asian studies librarians in North America need to be more assertive in articulating what they must have to meet the needs of their users. A squeaky door gets attention! Although it might not be successful on the first try, the door is opened a bit wider each succeeding time as East Asian studies librarians advocate their needs. Traditionally, East Asian studies librarians are modest and accommodating in their approach to things since the majority of these East Asian studies librarians came originally from an East Asian cultural background. They are often patient and long-suffering which may not be as effective in today's environment where changes are sprouting like weeds after a spring rain and competition is as stiff as running for the gold medal in the Olympics. This they need to learn from their colleagues in the mainstream as well as other specialized areas of librarianship.
Another area where East Asian studies librarians need to make changes is to become proactive in their professional lives. By doing so, they will be able to direct and shape the wave of change to fit their needs. A case in point is outsourcing. Outsourcing began as a possible way to reduce the costs of library operations in times of budgetary constraints. At that point administrators began to question the importance or necessity of maintaining cataloging staff and having cataloging done in house. With business-minded corporations aided by new and advanced technology targeting service organizations such as libraries as their customers, it may not be long before this leads to the questioning of the value of having acquisitions librarians and bibliographers as well. The announcement of the availability of OCLC's Asialink a few years ago marked the beginning for a major bibliographic utility to market outsourcing of total East Asian and Southeast Asian studies library services. While Asialink is geared primarily toward more public libraries' needs right now, who can predict how it will affect academic and research library programs in the future?

What should be the response of East Asian studies librarians in this case? They should become proactive and voice their concerns in the strongest terms; they need to help their administrators and colleagues see the danger of following such a fad as a way of dealing with budget problems. They must emphasize the disadvantages of using this kind of service, which will ultimately reduce the quality of their collection and diminish the quality or usefulness of their catalog. No external commercial service can replace knowledgeable staff in residence to support the East Asian collection. Outsourcing represents the kind of venture that is good only for those libraries that do not already have the staff to do a quality job in those particular areas. A cost study may prove that the cataloging cost per East Asian title in house is no more costly, and possibly even cheaper, than what is being offered by an outside bidder. If the unit cost is indeed higher than that being offered outside, it is time that East Asian studies librarians re-examine the way they do things and start doing them more cost effectively.

Another way for being proactive is to investigate innovative ways of handling special needs of East Asian studies library users. This is demonstrated in the development by Karl Lo (Head of the Graduate School of International Relations and Pacific Studies Library of the University of California, San Diego) of pinyin/Wade-Giles conversion software to facilitate the retrievability of bibliographic data in either pinyin or Wade-Giles romanization. East Asian studies librarians also need to disseminate more of their findings by publishing them in the mainstream professional literature; this will help bring about a broader public awareness in the library profession of their accomplishments in the East Asian studies librarianship.

**Initiator and Participant in Cooperative and Exchange Programs**

Today's information technology has opened a whole new way of cooperation and exchange between libraries across continents. Correspondence by E-mail, electronic ordering of materials from databases in East Asian countries, and online discussion with colleagues across geographic boundaries are no longer a novelty nowadays. It used to be only a privileged few could enjoy the benefits of the connectivity necessary to participate in this new technology. Not anymore! The world is wide open for us to explore and discover new information electronically and
instantaneously, develop and form new contacts, engage in valuable discussions, and exchange ideas and experiences, without restriction in most cases. For example, the increasing growth of a market economy has led to many revolutionary changes in business dealings and the opening of scholarly pursuits in China. Institutions of higher education in China welcome new challenges to adopt innovations for their library management and services. Who else but East Asian studies librarians are in a better position to initiate and develop exchange programs with the libraries of these institutions?

Another area of possible cooperation being explored is interlibrary lending and document delivery between libraries in East Asian countries and the North America. If a reciprocal agreement which eliminates unwieldy fee structures could be reached, it would permit speedier and freer flow of information and scholarly exchanges. The “Gateway Service Center of Chinese Academic Journal Publications” funded by the Federal Institute of Museum and Library Services and administered by the University of Pittsburgh's East Asian Library has opened up a new way of document delivery to provide free of charge copies of academic journal articles in Chinese from East Asia which are not available in the United States libraries.

Facilitating the exchange of librarians on both sides of the Pacific is yet another area where East Asian studies librarians in North America can exert their influence and perhaps play a larger role than they do at present. There is a great need for librarians in the East Asian countries to observe and learn the service philosophy and management of North American libraries; and there is an equal need for the American East Asian studies librarians to observe what is available overseas. Working together can prove mutually advantageous to staff members in all countries involved, with the strengths of each being tapped to enhance service and scholarship in all East Asian collections.

Qualification Requirements in Changing Environment

After examining the qualifications required in the 45 professional vacancy announcements posted on the Eastlib listserv and published in the Committee on East Asian Libraries Bulletin and its successor, Journal of East Asian Libraries, for the past nine years from 1991 to June 1999,11 I discovered that 35 advertisements stressed “verbal and written communication skills in English”. Additional qualifications were: an American Library Association (ALA) accredited Master of Library Science (MLS) degree or equivalent; language knowledge of one or more of the East Asian languages; knowledge of publishing industry and book trade (in the case of a bibliographer); and, knowledge of the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules second edition (AACR2), backgrounds in LC subject headings and classification, and familiarity with OCLC CJK or RLIN CJK system (in the case of a cataloger). A second advanced degree in a relevant subject discipline was listed as either required or preferred in 14 of the 27 job advertisements for either a head or a bibliographer position of an East Asian studies collection. I was surprised to find that computer skills and knowledge of computerized information sources were listed as qualifications required or preferred in only 13 of the 45 job advertisements reviewed.
Job announcements that did not list a command of English as part of the requirements were, for example, those for the head position at the Asia Collection of the University of Hawai'i's Library, both the chief librarian and cataloger positions at the Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA Library in Washington, D.C., the cataloger position at San Francisco Public Library, the bibliographer position at Harvard Law School Library, and both the Assistant Librarian for Cataloging Services and the Public Services Librarian/Coordinator of Reference Services positions at Harvard-Yenching Library. This omission in listing, I am certain, was not intended by the listing institutions to mean that this requirement was not considered necessary; rather, it should be taken to mean that this requirement was a “given” and therefore did not need to be mentioned.

I was pleased to notice that the ability to work effectively in a multicultural and changing environment was included in seven announcements: for the Coordinator of Cataloging and Japanese Cataloger position at the University of Washington's East Asia Library, the Head and the Chinese Cataloger/Selector positions at the University of Pittsburgh's East Asian Library, the Japanese Studies Librarian position at the University of California-San-Diego, the Korean Studies Librarian position at the University of Southern California, the Curator of Japanese Collection position at the University of Michigan, and the Public Services Librarian/Coordinator of Reference Services position at Harvard-Yenching Library. This qualification along with the computer use and electronic information resources skills, should be a regular, standing requirement of an East Asian studies librarian's job in the present environment.

Conclusion

The role of the East Asian studies librarian in North America is changing into one of a skillful information provider of both traditional materials and electronic resources unlimited by geographical and cultural boundaries. East Asian studies librarians must be assertive, proactive, service-oriented, technology-minded, and multiculture-sensitive, and also continue to render quick translation assistance on the spot. They actively participate in mainstream librarianship, and become strong advocates for meaningful cooperative and exchange programs between North American and East Asian libraries. A primary, significant goal should be to make a difference in the way East Asian studies library services are provided in this age and times in North America.

A change of mind set from a culture of solidity to a culture of resilience, as addressed in Johan van Reenen's assessment of our new roles as librarians, is urgently needed. Van Reenen challenges us to be "designers of excellence" in this changing environment. We need to continue to manage the so-called "knowledge abilities: availability, findability, accessibility, understandability, and usability of information to acquire knowledge, or to transform information into useful knowledge ... [forming] a continuum that has always existed at the root of librarianship." It is not easy for many of us to adapt to the changing role, but we must have the willingness to adopt and sometimes even initiate changes as necessitated by the emerging information industry. By refreshing and equipping ourselves with new attitude and skills, we can then meet the challenge constructively and be responsive to the changes around us to continue to provide the best possible library service to our users.
NOTES

1. Phyllis T. Wang, "WCAAS Panel Discussion--At Time Like This" (Paper delivered at the library panel, "At Time Like This: Organizational Restructures at East Asian Libraries," at the Western Conference of the Association for Asian Studies, Claremont, California, 21 October 1994): [2].

2. Amy Tsiang, "At Time Like This: Organizational Restructures at East Asian Libraries" (Paper delivered at the library panel of the same title, at the Western Conference of the Association for Asian Studies, Claremont, California, 21 October 1994): [2].


7. Ibid., 23.

8. Phyllis T. Wang, "WCAAS Panel Discussion--At Time Like This" (Paper delivered at the library panel, "At Time Like This: Organizational Restructures at East Asian Libraries," at the Western Conference of the Association for Asian Studies, Claremont, California, 21 October 1994): [2].

9. Phyllis T. Wang, "WCAAS Panel Discussion--At Time Like This" (Paper delivered at the library panel, "At Time Like This: Organizational Restructures at East Asian Libraries," at the Western Conference of the Association for Asian Studies, Claremont, California, 21 October 1994): [1].


11. Both the OCLC's vacancy announcement of a CJK User Services Specialist position and the RLG's of an Associate East Asian Program Officer position were excluded in my examination, with the consideration that these positions were not housed in a North American library where the East Asian studies librarians work and come in contact with their library users on daily basis.

13. Ibid., 191.