Bringing a Backlog Under Control: How We Did It At BYU

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Some degree of a cataloging backlog is usually regarded as acceptable, or even desirable, in order to be able to maintain a steady workflow even when books are slow in arriving. Many thousands of books all at once, though, can create definite problems. What do you do when more books are waiting than your cataloging staff can handle? That’s the problem we faced in the Asian Collection of the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University. How did we find ourselves in this situation?

It wasn’t just thousands of donated books. There were other factors beginning from 1999 that gradually resulted in a large backlog of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean books. First of all, our Asian cataloger retired, and it took some time to choose a replacement; then, we changed library systems, from Notis to Sirsi, and there were consequent problems in the interface with RLIN that took some months to resolve. These two factors meant that no cataloging of Asian books was done at all for about a year. Then, starting in the fall of 2000, we received an unusual influx of new books: major donations of Chinese and Korean materials, plus the purchase at the request of a new faculty member of a large set in Chinese totaling thousands of individual titles. Altogether about 12,000 volumes outside of regular purchases were received in the Asian Collection from 2000-2002.

We considered outsourcing but in the end decided that we preferred to handle the cataloging in-house. Outsourcing is an added expense of both money and time: the cost per title, besides checking and revising returned records. Gradually, with time and cooperation among all concerned, plus hiring of student and paraprofessional staff, the Asian Collection backlog is now under control. This was accomplished in several steps summarized below.

A. Major Donations and Acquisitions

1. In November of 2000 Professor Lin Tien-wai, now retired in Vancouver, British Columbia, donated to the BYU Asian Collection his personal research library consisting of approximately 4000 items dealing mainly with local history of South China and published primarily in the 1950s and 1960s. In order to make accessible this large number of items as soon as possible, all titles were entered as brief records (Author, title, publisher) into our local online catalog (the records were not sent to RLIN) and given numbers beginning with CLin0001 and running sequentially through CLin3800. A BYU student was hired and trained by Erminia Chao, the Asian cataloger, to work for 20 hours a week on this project. By late May of 2002, when an acknowledgement ceremony was held, they had input records for all of the items. The Lin collection is shelved as a unit temporarily pending full cataloging and integration into the Chinese section of the Asian Collection. Any individual title that is checked out is cataloged upon return.

2. The Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China donated 2000 volumes of Chinese language teaching textbooks and reference works in September of 2001. This donation was given immediate full cataloging by the Asian cataloger after it was received.
3. Kyobo Insurance through its subsidiary Kyobo Book Store donated 2259 Korean books in October of 2001. All of these books were given full cataloging by the Asian cataloger and housed on separate shelves as a unit until a formal ceremony acknowledging the gift was held in December 2002. Over the summer of 2003 the books were all integrated into the regular call number sequence of the Korean section of the Asian Collection.

4. A new faculty member requested purchase of the major set, Congshu jicheng chubian 叢書集成初編 in the summer of 2001. After being received the 4000 volume set was shelved in volume order on shelves in the Asian Collection workroom. The faculty member who requested it was shown the shelves and had the chance to look at the books. When he wants to check out any volume it will be cataloged on demand.

B. Continuing Acquisitions Backlog

While the above projects were going on, regular purchases of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean materials continued, and a donation of about 600 volumes of Japanese reference materials was received. These books were stored in the Asian Collection workroom until time to catalog them could be found or a plan to deal with them was determined. By fall 2003, a backlog of about 4000 books had built up (Chinese, 2500 volumes, Korean 750 volumes, and Japanese 750 volumes).

Bringing this backlog under control was a continuing concern during the academic year 2002-2003, but little progress was made because of the pressure to finish the other Asian cataloging projects. By the end of August 2003, the Asian Collection workroom was, if anything, even fuller than the previous year at that time. There were books on bookshelves, books on carts, and books in boxes. The backlog problem was not just a question of books sitting waiting where no one could use them. It was also a problem of bibliographic control.

C. Our Solution

The latter part of September 2003 a meeting to discuss the Asian backlog was held, attended by appropriate library administrators, the Asian cataloger, and the Asian Collection Curator, Gail King. At the meeting, the idea of a circulating Asian In-process collection was adopted as a way of bringing the backlog under control, both to give patrons access to Chinese, Japanese, and Korean books while they were waiting for full cataloging, and also to gain bibliographic control over these books. In the following weeks we implemented the system. Originally we intended to begin with Chinese and then go on to set up Japanese and Korean In-process collections as well, but as it has turned out, we only set up a Chinese In-process collection. Without the need to catalog all the Chinese books immediately, Erminia Chao was able to turn her attention to the Korean backlog. Online copy was found for nearly all of the Korean books that had accumulated, and in the months since then, almost all have been cataloged. Following approval of the position and a search, a full-time staff person to handle Japanese books was hired and began work the first of May, 2004. Once trained, he began steadily and systematically working through and cataloging the accumulated Japanese acquisitions.

How the In-process collection works: A student trained and supervised by the Asian cataloger inputs brief Romanized Author-Title records into our local catalog and attaches a sticker with a sequential number beginning with CH03- to each book. The initial clearing out of the Chinese backlog ran the number up to CH03-2275. Since then, each time a new shipment of Chinese books
are received, they are added to the In-process collection, except for Reference books, which are
given immediate full cataloging, as are any other books designated for immediate cataloging by the
Asian Collection Curator. Any book requested for purchase or fast cataloging by a teaching faculty
member is given immediate cataloging upon receipt. Any book checked out of the Chinese In-
process collection is cataloged as soon as it is returned. From November 2003 through August 2004,
309 books were checked out of the In-process collection and given full cataloging when checked in.
All Asian Collection books are cataloged according to full cataloging standard.

So, through a combination of a variety of methods, emphasis on standards and training, help from
new people, plus—most important—determined cooperative effort, the BYU Asian backlog is under
control and diminishing.