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Beyond Technology

Eugene W. Wu

BEYOND TECHNOLOGY[1]

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We are here to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the OCLC CJK Service, and that brings me back to the pre-computer days when we did everything manually. When I was in library school more than fifty years ago, we never heard of computers. It was not easy to give up the old typewriter to make room for a computer, and learning how to use one took a while. But I learned, and also acquired rudimentary knowledge about automation, proving that you CAN teach old dogs new tricks! And life was never the same again.

East Asian libraries were late comers to automation. As recently as the late 1970s, when research libraries had already begun introducing new technology in their daily operations, we were still approaching our problems traditionally without reference to technology. For instance, when officers of the Committee on East Asian Libraries (CEAL) initiated talks with the Ford Foundation in March 1975 to discuss East Asian library support, the proposals made were all along traditional lines, and it was on the basis of these proposals, contained in a document entitled "Priorities for the Development and Funding of Library Programs in Support of East Asian Studies," that the Ford Foundation later on that year provided funds to the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) to appoint a Steering Committee for a Study of the Problems of East Asian Libraries. It was a significant undertaking with a committee that included two East Asian faculty members, two East Asian librarians, one university library director, one library educator, and two university provosts. Following a two-year study the committee submitted, in 1977, its report with recommendations, covering three major areas of concern: bibliographical control, collection development and access, and technical and personnel matters. The report was "the first systematic and analytical presentation of the extraordinary growth and subsequent retrenchment in the development of America's East Asian collections in the decades following World War II." [2] In the Steering Committee's report titled *East Asian Libraries: Problems and Prospects*, scant attention was paid to the role technology could play in solving some of the problems the Steering Committee had identified, except the general statement that "it is essential that East Asian libraries become involved in the various ongoing and proposed automated programs in order to become part of the mainstream of American library development."[3]

A successor committee, The Joint Advisory Committee to the East Asian Library Program, was appointed in 1978 by The American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) together with the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) to "review the Steering Committee's report, particularly in the light of comments received from the field since its publication, and to oversee the implementation of such modified recommendations as then seemed appropriate."[4] Witnessing the great strides research libraries were making in automation, the Joint Advisory Committee changed its emphasis and charted a new course for East Asian libraries. In its report issued in 1981 the Advisory Committee recommended that in view of the "growing information volume and perpetually limited resources," East Asian libraries should "share work, materials, and access, and should rely on automation as a principal

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[1] This talk was originally delivered at the OCLC CJK Users Group Meeting celebrating the 20th anniversary of the OCLC CJK Service, April 8, 2006, in San Francisco, California.

[2] *Automation, Cooperation and Scholarship: East Asian Libraries in the 1980's. Final Report of the Joint Committee to the East Asian Library Program.* [New York]: The American Council of Learned Societies, 1981. p.1.

[3] *East Asian Libraries: Problems and Prospects: A Report and Recommendations.* Prepared by the Steering Committee for a Study of East Asian Libraries. [New York]: The American Council of Learned Societies, 1977, p. 40.

[4] See note 2. The make-up of the Joint Advisory Committee was new but similar to the Steering Committee, with two East Asian faculty members, two East Asian librarians (one also served on the Steering Committee), and two university library directors. The director of the East Asian Library Program served as an ex-officio member.

planning and management tool. The keystone is the capability to input, manage, store, and transmit, display and output bibliographical records containing East Asian vernacular characters in exactly the same automated systems already created to perform similar functions for Western language material and general research libraries."[5] The first step was thus taken to introduce new technology into the operation of East Asian libraries. Subsequently, in 1983, the Research Libraries Group (RLG) introduced a CJK system on its Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN), with funds provided by the Ford Foundation. Three years later, in 1986, OCLC launched its CJK Service, whose twentieth anniversary we are celebrating today.

The OCLC CJK Service began slowly. But progress has been rapid since. As we celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Service, the total number of East Asian records in its database has reached over 2.9 million, by far the largest such database in the country, and libraries around the world are now its users. The credit for this great achievement goes to the OCLC technical staff. It is they who have been working tirelessly over the years to include CJK functionality in the programs OCLC designed for all languages, including the recent introduction of the Connexion client platform. Meanwhile, OCLC has also helped East Asian libraries in other areas, particularly in retrospective conversion. The work OCLC has done and is still doing in this area has been significant for the libraries involved, and it has also helped the expansion of WorldCat by adding hundreds of thousands of East Asian records to this database for the benefit of scholarship.

On its way to providing more and better services to the East Asian library community, OCLC has been extremely accommodating. When the East Asian library users of the OCLC CJK Service thought there should be some mechanism through which they could better communicate their needs to OCLC, I discussed the creation of an OCLC CJK Users Group, along the lines of other OCLC users groups already in existence, with Andrew Wang. Andrew was immediately receptive to the idea, promising that if we could organize such a group, OCLC would gladly support it. Karl Lo helped draft a set of by-laws, and after consulting with Andrew, the OCLC CJK Users Group was officially established at a meeting on April 10, 1991 in New Orleans. The rest, of course, is history. As we celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the OCLC CJK Service, we salute OCLC for its leadership, vision, and contributions to the East Asian library community for the last twenty years. If I may, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Andrew publicly for the invaluable and generous assistance he, together with Hisako, has given to us. Thank you, Andrew and Hisako!

Revolutionizing bibliographical control is not the only gift new technology has given to libraries. Other equally revolutionary innovations are now at our disposal for other areas of library work, such as ordering and public service. Technology also has altered the form of publications libraries collect. Many genres of books and other materials have been rapidly migrating to digital form. Because of these unprecedented developments, there has emerged a new generation of librarians who are technologically savvy, having been trained in library and information schools where library technology and information management have been given heavy emphasis in their curriculum. This phenomenon is natural, as technology has defined and will continue to define the way we live, work, and study, including of course how libraries will be managed in the future. The centrality of technology in library work notwithstanding, it might be instructive to pause and ask: Will technology alone help us achieve the purposes for which libraries exist?

I don't think anyone would disagree that the heart of the library is its collections. I have quoted John K. Fairbank elsewhere that: "Great universities all have great libraries. Without a great library there would be no great university." By "great libraries" he meant libraries with great collections. The question I want to pose here is that in the process of applying technology to provide better and more effective library service, are we in the meantime paying enough attention to the most important mission of libraries: that is, collection building? In the East Asian library community the nature of the discourse among colleagues these days revolves mostly around technical issues. The postings on Eastlib and the discussions that have taken place at the meetings of CEAL's language committees are a good indication of that. It is not that technical issues are unimportant. Certainly, they are important, but is there something missing in our

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[5] *Automation, Cooperation and Scholarship,* op. cit., p.18.

discussion? Do we not need to pay equal attention to the question of how to maintain the vitality and health of our collections, built over many decades by our predecessors, that have made America's East Asian libraries the best in the Western world? It's worth noting that most, if not all, of the books and other materials that have migrated or are migrating to the digital form, or being reprinted, are not recent acquisitions but collections that were built long ago. Should we not follow in the footsteps of our predecessors to keep our collections strong and viable so that East Asian libraries can continue to play a key role in the development of East Asian studies in this country?

The key consideration here has to be personnel. The reason East Asian libraries are doing so well in the use of technology is that there is available to them a sufficiently large group of library school graduates trained in technology who also know the languages. It seems to me that there is an equal need in our East Asian libraries of well-trained subject specialists who are well versed in the cultures and civilizations of East Asia to serve as collection builders. We need scholar-librarians in addition to business managers and computer specialists. We know from experience that knowledge of the language alone is insufficient to get the job done in East Asian libraries. It takes much more than the ability to speak, read, and write the language. Unfortunately, an impression has been left with the powers that be in some quarters that one needs only to know the language to qualify as an East Asian studies librarian; subject knowledge is immaterial. This is nowhere more clearly and sadly demonstrated than in the recent case of the School of African and Oriental Studies replacing their Chinese studies and Japanese studies librarians with Chinese and Japanese-speaking clerks and declaring the librarians' positions "redundant." Fortunately, SOAS was eventually forced to rescind its decision and reinstated its Chinese and Japanese studies librarians. There is a lesson to be learned from this sad affair, which is that East Asian libraries, while preoccupied with management and technology, must not forget to give equal due to their scholarly function so that they will not leave themselves vulnerable to uninformed and unacceptable decisions such as that made at SOAS. East Asian librarians have the burden to prove they deserve the respect due to learned professionals.

I cannot emphasize enough the marvelous things technology has done and will continue to do for libraries. The benefit that has accrued to librarians and library users alike has been tremendous. With the help of organizations such as OCLC we are now able to do things that could not be imagined ten or fifteen years ago. But we would be remiss if our reliance on technology made us forget that technology is the means and not the end. Looking beyond technology is not to deny the importance of technology, but to remind ourselves that if we are committed to building or maintaining great collections there are other considerations we must also take into account.

The author invites comments on his views about libraries expressed above. Please write to him at Ewwu@aol.com.