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EAST ASIAN LIBRARY PIONEERS: A CONTINUING SERIES

THE ACCIDENTAL MEMOIRS OF AN ACCIDENTAL CATALOGER

Doris Seely

Even though I grew up on the plains of South Dakota, where I was about as far as one could get from any non-English speaking country, somehow I always had the idea that I wanted to study languages. This idea first surfaced when I was maybe thirteen or fourteen and borrowed an English translation of *Les Misérables* from the library. I grew more and more frustrated and annoyed as I read it because every time the text included a bit of poetry or a song or a quotation from the classics, it was not translated but left in the original French or Latin, and I wanted to be able to read those parts of the book too. This was around 1950 and there were no foreign languages taught in the grade schools or high schools in the small towns in my part of South Dakota at the time. The only way I knew to obtain a French textbook was to buy a Berlitz self-teacher from the Sears-Roebuck catalog, so that is what I did, and that is how my language studies accidentally began.

I accidentally decided to go to college one day when I was a senior in high school. I was talking with a neighbor woman and somehow we got to discussing *Les Misérables*. She was me telling about a project she and some of her college classmates had done to translate the entire work into English as a project for an advanced seminar in French. It was in this context that she eventually said, "I can tell from your scores on the standardized achievement tests that are published in the paper that you do pretty well in school and it's a shame you can't go to college, but of course it's out of the question, because you don't have any money." If anyone else had said it, I would have agreed that this was certainly true, but when this particular woman said it so snidely I took exception and said to myself, "Not so, I can go to college if I want to!" and so I did.

I started at Yankton College, a small Congregational college which took its name from the town of Yankton, in the southeast corner of South Dakota. Because it happened that the first-year German class was in the morning when I was free to take it, while first-year French was in the afternoon, when I had to work, I accidentally majored in German, rather than French, as I had planned. Nevertheless I minored in French and took a year of Spanish and graduated in 1958 from the nearby University of South Dakota, (because Yankton no longer offered a German major and I had to transfer for my junior year). I wanted to go on to study a language outside the Indo-European family of languages. My advisor suggested Arabic or Chinese and I picked Chinese, thinking that maybe the Chinese worldview would be more compatible with my own, on the basis of what I knew at the time. Since what I knew at the time was virtually nothing, this was pretty much an accidental choice made because my advisor happened to be pushing Chinese that year.

I had grown up mostly on very isolated farms and was used to being very much on my own, so I had a little trouble adjusting during my first year in college, especially to living in the women's dorm: there were too many other people there and it was too noisy for me to be quite comfortable. Yankton College being a very small school, my professors noticed, and one fine spring day toward end of my freshman year the Dean brought in the Superintendent of the nearby Yankton State Hospital to talk with me. He asked if there was anything in my life that needed changing and I said that I needed to get out of the dorm and also find a better job. He suggested that I work as a night ward attendant at the State Hospital. That way I could work nights and attend classes in the daytime and live in the much smaller and quieter employee dorms on the State Hospital grounds, which were actually quite beautiful--old stone buildings among trees and formal flower beds. That was how I accidentally got the job that allowed me to work my way comfortably through my last three years of college. I was still working there when I graduated and I kept the job for another year, until I saved what was to me the enormous sum of \$1000. With that in hand, I quit in the spring of 1959 and went off to take an intensive summer course in Chinese at the Yale University Institute of Far Eastern Languages (IFEL). I enjoyed this course very much and did quite well in it. Near the end of it, an IFEL teacher/administrator gave some of us women students a ride back to our dorm after classes one afternoon. He asked us all what we intended to do after the course was finished. I said I would like to

stay at IFEL and study more Chinese, but I didn't have any money (my \$1000 was nearly gone). He said that would be no problem, he could give me a job at IFEL and I could study part time and work part time. I accepted the offer, and that was how I accidentally came to stay at Yale, studying Chinese and/or working at IFEL until December of 1965. Some of the Chinese courses I took were at the Yale Graduate School, rather than IFEL. Graduate students in Chinese languages and literatures were required to pass a reading exam in Japanese, which was how I accidentally came to study that language for two years.

For many years one of the main purposes of IFEL had been to teach Chinese to U.S. Airmen, but in 1965 the US Armed Forces consolidated all their language training at the Defense Language Institute (DLI) in Monterey, California, and their Yale programs were shut down. The IFEL program I was working in, with all its teaching materials and the special IFEL teaching techniques and any staff members who wanted to go, was transferred to DLI. I moved with the program and so more or less accidentally found myself living and working in Monterey as of January 1, 1966.

I worked in our transplanted program at DLI for five years, but by the fall of 1970 I was ready to move on. I applied for a job at the Monterey Public Library, but didn't get it. I did make the short list, however, and one of the librarians there, who had been impressed with my language skills, gave my name to the librarian at the Monterey Institute of International Studies (MIIS). She knew that the MIIS library collected in about ten languages—English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Italian, Portuguese and Catalan—and that I should be able to work with all but Russian; she thought that my skills would be better employed there. I didn't know she had done this until one day the MIIS librarian called me at DLI and offered me a job as an acquisitions clerk there. I accepted and so accidentally found myself working in the MIIS library as of January 1971.

Early in June of 1972, the MIIS cataloger quit on two days' notice. Shortly thereafter I asked the new MIIS librarian how she was going to find a cataloger who could work in all the languages MIIS needed. She said she wasn't going to find a cataloger with those language skills but rather make a cataloger of someone already working in the library who had those skills. So, that summer I took the beginning cataloging course and the beginning reference course in the library science summer school at San Jose State University and in the fall of 1972 I began cataloging at MIIS. I went on working full time at MIIS and taking two library courses every semester and two every summer at San Jose State until I earned my MALS in 1976. That is how I accidentally became a cataloger, even though I didn't really know exactly what a cataloger was until the librarian told me that I was about to become one. As it happened, this same librarian had taught cataloging for 20 years before coming to MIIS and she revised all my original cataloging for the entire eight years that I worked for her. This was tantamount to having my own eight-year private cataloging seminar, so I accidentally became not only a cataloger but a very well trained one. I also took two semesters of Russian at MIIS so that I could work with their Slavic materials, thus improving my language skills.

Of course, good language skills and good library training are never enough in themselves to insure good cataloging. A cataloger expected to catalog works in many languages from all around the world should theoretically know everything about everything in order to assign the proper call numbers and subject headings. I never know whether the next work I catalog is going to be a Russian star atlas, a Japanese work on the etymology of the word *tantara*, the name of an ancient Japanese metallurgical technique, or a Korean work on Internet usage. MIIS held only about 1000 Chinese and Japanese titles at the time, but I cataloged all of them, although sometimes very slowly. Especially when it came to the 100-volume set of *Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei*, there were often very long pauses while I read everything I could find about Japanese history or Buddhism or literary genres or art or whatever was required to finish with one particular volume and move on to the next. These pauses have become shorter and less frequent over the years, but throughout my cataloging career I have read and researched and learned everything I could to make the cataloging easier and better.

During the past several years, the most and the longest pauses have come as I have been learning to catalog East Asian films on DVDs. With Korean DVDs, there may be a pause of three or four days while I use the RLIN database as a pronouncing dictionary to look up every Korean word I will need to use in my record. One set of Hong Kong films was an especially interesting challenge. I managed to figure out which cast

members were Japanese and so had their name headings established in that language, and which had names established in Mandarin or Cantonese or in Anglicized versions. I thought I had managed to distinguish properly between two Cantonese actors with the same name who appeared in the same film. But then there was a statement that there were subtitles in Bahasa Indonesia, among other languages. I had never heard of Bahasa Indonesia and had no idea what it was. I wondered if it might be Chinese English of the kind used by the people who had given us packages of Chinese noodles labeled “alimentary paste”—correct perhaps, as far as dictionary definitions go, but not exactly idiomatic. The day after I had been pondering this puzzle was Thanksgiving and I somehow felt compelled to spend it reading Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking*, where I found a sentence that said that Bahasa Indonesia is the language in which all street signs and shop signs in Indonesia are written. So I apologized profusely in my thoughts to the Hong Kong DVD producers—it was my ignorance, not theirs, that had been the stumbling block, and I realized that my catalog records were now complete. The last mystery had been resolved and I felt I had something special to be thankful for that Thanksgiving Day. It is all these kinds of puzzles and the reading and research and learning involved in solving them that has made cataloging such great fun for me and made me realize what a wonderful accident it was for me that the MIIS cataloger quit so suddenly in June of 1972.

In the fall of 1981, although I wasn’t really job hunting, I accidentally came across a posting in *American Libraries* for a cataloger to work half time with East Asian materials and half time with Western language materials at the University of Minnesota. This position seemed tailor-made for me, so I applied and was hired and started work here at Minnesota in July of 1982.

By an accident of timing, I had just over a year to be trained and get settled in at Minnesota before the age of automation arrived for East Asian cataloging. We began cataloging our East Asian materials using the RLIN CJK enhancements in November of 1983, and since I was the only East Asian cataloger here, I became the first Minnesota cataloger to have an RLIN terminal virtually to myself and to do all my cataloging, both CJK and Western, directly on RLIN.

Our East Asian Librarian usually couldn’t attend the RLG East Asian Program meetings so I went in his place and also attended all the RLIN CJK users’ meetings. I often found myself taking minutes at these meetings and then wrote a short position paper on some of the RLIN CJK cataloging problems we were discussing. Karen Smith-Yoshimura noticed this and asked me in the fall of 1986 if I would come to RLG and work for her for a few months starting in January 1987, and in this way I accidentally became the first RLG Visiting Associate. From the beginning I had loved using the special RLIN component input system to create my CJK records directly in RLIN and I was very glad to have the opportunity to become more closely involved with the RLG CJK program. I especially liked helping to implement the online CJK thesaurus, which later became invaluable to me as a CJK pronouncing dictionary, since I could input a character by its component parts and retrieve Chinese, Japanese and Korean readings. For an East Asian cataloger like me, who was not a native speaker of any CJK language, this was really a godsend.

Meanwhile, back at the University of Minnesota, we had done retrospective conversion of all our Western language records in the mid-80s, and by October of 1988 the serials acquisitions staff was doing on-line check in for all Western serials. They wanted to do on-line check-in for East Asian serials too, but there were no on-line records because the vendor who had done our recon project couldn’t handle languages written in non-Roman scripts. I was asked to provide the records. There was no time to do full cataloging and classification in RLIN, count and barcode all the back volumes and record the holdings on-line; that would eventually take me about 3 years, working in the time I could spare from current cataloging. The serials people were thinking more in terms of three weeks, or preferably three days. So I searched all the East Asian serials titles in RLIN and passed any records I found, no matter how skimpy, into our local system. That satisfied serials for the time being, since they could hang check-in and items records on even the briefest of bib records, but having created all these skeleton records in our OPAC accidentally became the incentive for my getting an East Asian serials recon project done in both RLIN and our local system as soon as possible. That took until the end of 1991 and by that time the Libraries were planning to convert to on-line circulation in September of 1992. The East Asian Library was expected to go to on-line circulation at the same time, despite the fact that almost none of their monographs had on-line records and even fewer

of the volumes had barcodes. The Libraries had no plans for an East Asian recon or barcoding project, so I created my own project and worked with 4 students from January through August of 1992 to recon and barcode the East Asian monographs. We derived from any copy we found in RLIN and input our own records from the shelflist cards when there was no copy. Even though there was more and better copy for monographs in RLIN in 1992 than there had been for serials in 1988, this was still a very fast and dirty recon project and there were still about 3000 titles left which we had to do the next summer. Nonetheless, we got the bulk of the collection reconned and barcoded by September 1992 and the East Asian Library was able to go to on-line circulation along with the rest of the University Libraries, and Minnesota accidentally became one of the first East Asian Libraries in North America to get its entire collection on-line.

In 1993 I did mostly recon clean up and played catch up with the current cataloging which had ceased for the duration of the recon project, but there was one interesting and accidental new wrinkle that year. Some other CTS catalogers started a project to catalog materials for our Children's Literature Research Collection (CLRC). When the boxes from CLRC began arriving in CTS, we found they included a number of East Asian books, most of them Japanese—several hundred were in the backlog as it turned out and more keep arriving even today. Once again I was recruited to catalog these East Asian books, and while they are great fun they have also turned out to be a great challenge. When I catalog children's books I have to provide a summary of the plot and that means that I have to read the books. Because the Japanese courses I took were for students preparing to do academic research, I learned the Japanese words for things like history and culture and research institute. But children's books deal with things like tadpoles and crabs and crocodiles and wolves and tables and chairs and doors and windows, and I didn't learn the Japanese for any words like that. Many children's books are written only in kana, or kana with a few kanji. I suppose this makes them easier for Japanese children to read, but it makes them much harder for me, because I don't know any of the vocabulary and with no kanji I get no clues as to the meaning. The kana are often separated into phrases, but not words, so I have trouble telling where one word ends and another begins. Sometimes all I can do is look up the first kana in a dictionary and see if it forms a word by itself; if not, do the first and second kana form a word, and if so, does the word make any sense in a children's book with a picture of a crab on the cover? And then there are diminutive and familiar forms for names and different verb endings when children and animals are involved. After a while I felt as if I was learning an entirely new language. I badly needed a course in Japanese Baby Talk 101 and I didn't know of any school that offered one. At first it took me about three days to puzzle out one 32-page picture book, but after I had cataloged a few dozen I finally got it down to maybe an hour or two and felt that I had acquired another cataloging skill.

Early in 1994 Maureen Donovan, then CEAL President, called and asked if I would run for the newly-created position of CEAL Secretary. I had never been elected to anything and so supposed that I would just be providing her with a candidate who could lose gracefully. I was sure I could do that, so I said yes and then forgot about it, until I went to the CEAL Plenary Session that year and heard the announcement that I had been elected. I could only assume that this had been by way of some very strange accident indeed.

CEAL badly needed a new edition of its directory when I was elected Secretary and we had originally agreed that Sachié Noguchi, who had been elected CEAL Treasurer at the same time would be the editor, but before she could create a new directory she was elected Chair of the Committee on Japanese Materials and resigned as Treasurer, so the job of compiling a new CEAL Directory accidentally fell to me.

Just as I had been too retiring as a college freshmen to feel comfortable in the dorm, I was still too retiring as a cataloger to feel comfortable bothering the cataloger in the next cubicle with a question unless I was really, really stuck. So I felt quite apprehensive when I first took on this assignment. I knew the CEAL Directory included staff listings for about 100 East Asian collections in North America and about 60 others around the world and I wondered how on earth I was going to solicit directory entries from so many institutions. By the time I had finished editing not only the 1996 CEAL Directory but also the 2000 edition, I had found that I could do this through exchanges of snail mail, e-mail, faxes, telephone calls and personal interviews with no problem at all and I very much enjoyed being able to correspond with so many different people. I was surprised at how quickly and cheerfully most people responded to my requests for updates, and I had a lot of fun just noticing the different ways that people answered. Several people sent me

beautiful and flawless mockups of actual pages in the CEAL Directory, as if I had requested camera-ready copy. At the other extreme, some merely marked up their entries from the previous directory with additions and changes in an almost illegible scrawl with long arrows curving and zigzagging around the margins to show where things should be repositioned. Some sent e-mails so compressed and abbreviated as to be almost incomprehensible. I'm not complaining here, just reporting. I thought it was very good of busy administrators at places like the Library of Congress or the University of Chicago to take the time to answer my inquiries themselves, even though they could only afford the time for a hasty note or e-mail. These were just more entertaining puzzles for me to solve.

I was also delighted to receive prompt e-mail responses from several French librarians, even though I was an ignorant American who didn't even know enough to address them properly using "la plus belle langue du monde" (as my French teachers always proclaimed, of course) and even though I was gauche enough to approach them in August, a month when, as everyone knows, all of France should be on vacation. I was also impressed by one French woman--I think she was at the Sorbonne--who replied with a hand-written letter, obviously written with real ink flowing from a real pen onto plain white paper with no letterhead. It had not occurred to me that anyone still corresponded in that fashion. Of course, it could have been just because her laptop had crashed that morning, but I didn't think so.

The CEAL mailing lists which were to be used to produce the directory were in Foxfire, a relational database, but I didn't know how to use it or how to convert the Foxfire file to MS Word, so I started from scratch inputting the information in Word, which was all I had available. The one small problem with that was that I had never used Word, which had just been installed for me, and since I was the first person in our library to get it, no one else here knew how to use it either. To produce camera-ready copy and then mail out the Directory I had to teach myself to do Word tables and columns and page numbers and headers and to put in indexing as I went along, so that Word would automatically generate an index for me when I was finished. Then I had to create mailing lists and print address labels. I think it may have taken me two or three days to input the first page of the main text of the 1996 Directory, but once I had learned on the tables for the Universities of Alberta and Arizona I was pretty much home free with Word tables. The same sort of thing happened with Word columns; it took me about three days create the first one, but once I finally got it right, the rest followed pretty easily; the same with the functions for creating mailing lists and labels.

Page numbers and headers were another matter. After I had completed the entire text and index of the 1996 Directory, it took me three more days just to do the page numbers and headers and the 2000 Directory didn't go much better; I never did learn how to do them properly. I would struggle for half a day to get the page numbers right and then when I tried to do the headers that would mess up the numbers and when I redid the numbers the headers would get fouled up, etc., etc., etc. Aside from the numbers and headers, the 2000 Directory went much more smoothly than the first, or would have, except for the fact that, by popular demand, I was adding East Asian characters for personal names this time. It took me several months to find an IME that would let me use romanization to input Chinese characters, kana and hangul by turn, but I finally did find one and was pleased to have learned another Word skill.

I learned an enormous amount about information gathering and word-processing in the course of producing two CEAL directories, and the CEAL community has always been very appreciative of my efforts. I am very glad to have had the experience, however accidentally it all started.

Back at the University of Minnesota Libraries, another challenging project for me was the cataloging of the Sherlock Holmes Collection. The 15,000 titles included several hundred in East Asian or Slavic languages, mostly Japanese translations of the Holmes stories, with some in Chinese or Korean. Once again the catalogers assigned to the project recruited me to help out. The biggest problem was identifying the stories when the translators had changed the titles and given no clues about the originals. Since this is the kind of puzzle that makes cataloging fun for me, I was delighted to have the chance to get out my magnifying glass and go snooping and sniffing around for the tiniest clues, trying to out-Sherlock Sherlock Holmes in order to identify the stories. I was triumphant every time it worked.

For example, the only clues in one Korean set were pictures of the main characters in each story, captioned with their names in hangul. I input the hangul by their components to search the RLIN CJK thesaurus for their pronunciations. Then I could sound out the hangul for each name and look for those names in the original English stories and so identify the translations. Another set of stories in a script I couldn't read—Korean, or maybe Uzbek—had all the dates mentioned near the beginnings of the stories transcribed in Arabic numerals. I was able to identify the translations by going through the English texts and matching the dates. It turned out that the German word *Gesellschaft* occurs only in *A Scandal in Bohemia*, so it became a marker for that work. If an East-Asian title translated as *Holmes, the Magician*, that was always *The Second Stain*, a story in which Holmes makes a letter magically reappear in an official's dispatch box. And so on.

When I started cataloging these books I had probably never read a Sherlock Holmes story, although I had seen many of the films with Jeremy Brett as Holmes on PBS. By the time I had finished tracking down all the clues, I had probably read each of the 60 Holmes stories at least half a dozen times, as well as many of Conan Doyle's non-Sherlockian works and quite a bit of criticism of Conan Doyle's writings. I had come to love the Holmes stories at least as much as the fanatical Sherlockians who donated their collections to the University of Minnesota Libraries and so involved me with the Holmes stories to begin with.

During the late 80s and all through the 90s, when we did so much East Asian recon and acquired large numbers of gift books and special purchases and I spent a lot of time compiling CEAL directories, I was still the only East Asian cataloger here and worked virtually fulltime on East Asian cataloging because the workload was so great. During the 2000s, East Asian acquisitions has sometimes eased off a little and I have sometimes had some help with East Asian cataloging. That has meant that I can occasionally go back to helping out with Western and Slavic materials for a while. It has been very good to do this, both for the variety and because languages not used are so soon forgotten.

During the last few years we have begun acquiring many East Asian films on DVDs and VCDs and, as I mentioned above, cataloging them has become the most challenging project now and for the foreseeable future. I took a local course in DVD and VCR cataloging in order to deal with them and so am learning yet another cataloging skill. I am beginning to think that by the time I am ready to retire I will actually have become quite employable.

In April of 2006, just after the AAS conference in San Francisco, I happened to be exchanging e-mails with the JEAL editor. Quite by accident, I mentioned that after AAS I had gone to visit a friend in San Francisco who seems to think that she is my mother, even though she is only maybe 78 or 79 and I myself was about to turn 70 in July. Our editor's flattering response was, "Really!? You're 70!? In that case, you must write your memoirs for JEAL, before you retire and lose touch. And so. . . . (Back to top)