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Xiuying Zou

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INTEGRATION OF CHINESE DIGITAL RESOURCES IN AN ENGLISH ENVIRONMENT:
STATUS-QUO AND PROSPECT

Xiuying Zou
University of Pittsburgh

Introduction

It is very important to integrate Chinese digital resources into a library’s English platform, resources and services. The reason is self-evident: since users demand one search for all relevant resources, regardless the languages, the so-called one stop shopping, then the library has an obligation to fulfill that demand.

On the other hand, integration of Chinese digital resource into a library’s English platform is not an easy task because it is full of uncertainties and circumstances beyond the control of East Asian libraries. Integration depends on the policy of the central library and its plan to purchase or develop such a system capacity. Currently there are two kinds of integration mechanisms for resources: federated search engines for journal articles, and next generation OPACs that combine book and article search into one platform. Both are software/applications as well as services that are provided by third parties other than libraries themselves.

At the Summer Institute for Chinese Studies Librarianship held at the University of Washington from July 19 to August 1 2009, three sessions were devoted to developing electronic Chinese collections and services in the academic library, and one session was devoted to user services for Chinese digital resources and integration of digital resources. Dr. Xiao Long’s lectures discussed three types of resource integrations: 1. Subject navigation (学科导航), in which resources under the same subject area are integrated into one search platform; 2. Metadata / bibliographic integration in which metadata of various resources, formats and languages are integrated into the local OPAC; 3. Cross-platform integration that enables users to simultaneously search databases and platforms of different systems. The theories and practices introduced by Dr. Xiao have proven successful in Chinese academic libraries. What is the situation in American academic libraries? Will practices in China apply with equal success in an English environment? In this paper I will examine the status quo of all three types of resource integration in American academic libraries, using as case studies the federated search engine (WebFeat) and major Chinese studies electronic resources available through the University of Pittsburgh Library System.

Subject Navigation

Subject Navigation is a popular method for subject resource integration in Chinese academic libraries. It provides one single search box for all available resources for the same subject, which means users can simultaneously search multiple databases for the same subject. See below for a screen shot of the Subject Navigation page of Peking University Libraries.
In American academic libraries, subject resource pages are similar to, but not as sophisticated as those in Chinese academic libraries. American subject resource pages are usually of two types. In the first case, only lists of databases under the same subject area are available. There is no search platform for users to search across these databases. In other cases where a federated search engine is available, a subject specific search platform exists, as is shown by the Zoom function available at the University of Pittsburgh Library System website, which is provided by WebFeat. A screenshot of the federated search page of Chinese Studies databases at the University of Pittsburgh library is shown below.⁴
From the screenshot, we can see that major Chinese electronic resources such as APABI e-books, Chinamaxx (SuperStar e-books), China Academic Journals, and China Data Online are listed, but some of them are grayed out, which according to the explanation from library system analysts, is due to the search engine’s lack of a translator for search terms in native languages. Because of this a federated search is not possible. However, even for non-grayed out resources, such as China Academic Journals, a search by the term “Chinese history” did not retrieve any results. All results are from English databases such as JSTOR and Academic Search Premier.

Bibliographic / Metadata Integration

This phenomenon leads to the second issue in resource integration: bibliographic / metadata integration. In an English environment where the searching language for most users is English, and where the system’s capability to handle non-English languages is limited by many technical factors, it is imperative that Chinese electronic resources contain access points in English, such as English keywords at the bibliographic metadata level for e-books, and English abstracts for journal articles. To accommodate the lack of a translator on the part of federated search software, transliteration (Pinyin in the case of Chinese electronic resources) is also necessary. For instance, there are not any English keywords in metadata descriptions in APABI and SuperStar E-book databases, which make it almost impossible for users using English search terms to find relevant Chinese e-books on federated search engine. For China Academic Journals, although there are some English keywords and abstracts, there were no results at the article level. This is probably due to the lack of Open URLs and other technical standards in Chinese databases. This leads me to the third type of resource integration: cross-platform integration.
System Inter-operability

Cross-platform integration depends on Chinese e-resources’ system interoperability with the English platform; that is, whether the Chinese system supports relevant international standards, such as OpenURL, Z39.50, SUR/SRW, and NISO standards; whether it provides an open system with Web Services and application programmer interfaces (API), whether it opens access to search engines and social networking applications; and whether it adopts the same information retrieval algorithm. Among Chinese e-resource system providers, WanFang Data has done a good job in developing OpenURLs to make its contents searchable by web engines such as Google Scholar. China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) has done a good job in developing such value-added features as citation manager and RSS feeds that have become more and more indispensable for our users in an interconnected online research environment. CNKI has also now realized the importance of integration and system interoperability. During the two-day pre-institute symposium on CNKI standards and Chinese e-publishing, various presentations by CNKI representatives reiterated the company’s aim of building an e-resource publishing platform that is centered on users and resources, open to connections by other systems, and compatible with existing international and national standards.

Prospects

As mentioned above, the integration of Chinese electronic resources is important, but it is easier said than done. In addition to the current limitations in standards and information retrieval conventions of the Chinese databases themselves, there are other difficulties such as cultural and language barriers in communicating the importance and needs of integration to the library system and limitations on staff time and expertise, as well as financial and human resources. Ways we can work to change the situation include effective communication with library system and administration to obtain their full support and understanding of the unique issues facing East Asian library and its users, active involvement in the library system’s decision-making regarding library service initiatives, communication with vendors on the performance and feedback of their products, collaboration with vendors in their efforts to develop better products based on international standards, and collaboration and sharing experiences with library colleagues in China. Where there is a will, there is a way. With consistent efforts from all sides, we can make integration into a reality.

NOTES

1 This paper is based on the final project the author conducted at the Summer Institute for Chinese Studies held July-August 2008 at the University of Washington, Seattle, 2008. The author wishes to acknowledge the discussions with group members and instructors for their ideas and insights.


