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THE STATE OF THE FIELD OF EAST ASIAN LIBRARIANSHIP¹

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This paper addresses changes within the field of East Asian Studies librarians in North America rather than the field as practiced in China, Japan or Korea.² The topic is an important one, not just because any field must take stock periodically, but also because the current economic crisis has led many academic libraries to evaluate all aspects of their operations and how they contribute to their ability to serve their patrons.³

The Past 20 Years

Assessment or evaluation of the field as it is now presupposes a comparison with the past, an ideal state, or with similar fields. My frame of reference is approximately that of twenty years ago when I entered the profession. In this interval, both librarianship in general and librarianship in East Asian Studies have changed significantly. A vibrant community of knowledgeable and technologically adept East Asian Studies librarians has emerged whose skills differ little from librarians in the main library. We have become leaders within our libraries and our view of librarianship is widely shared by our peers who are not in area studies.

Demographically, the field is not markedly different from twenty years ago—it remains a mix of people born in East Asia and people born in the United States and Europe trained in East Asian Studies. There is a mix of people who have been in the field for 20-40 years, newcomers, and people in-between. Most have library degrees, usually from US universities, but some have trained elsewhere, and there are several with PhDs who have learned librarianship on the job. The one significant demographic difference is that the generation which came of age under Japanese colonialism and hence were bilingual in Japanese and Korean or Chinese has retired. And, if it is a difference, the preponderance of Chinese Studies librarians now come from the PRC not Taiwan.

But socially and professionally, the field has changed dramatically. Twenty years ago, East Asian Studies librarians were often sequestered in branch libraries and their methods of acquisitions, cataloging and user services (reference and instruction) were not those of their mainstream colleagues. When I joined the field, over half of the Japanese Studies librarians attending the Hoover conference did not use email, and many librarians were not computer literate; much of the computerization of ordering, receiving, and paying invoices occurring in the main libraries had by-passed East Asian collections. But change was coming.

Thanks to RLG, methods had been devised to catalog and display non-roman characters online and online cataloging had begun, even if the records were not loaded into university online public catalogs. Debates about pinyin—used almost universally by students and scholars, as well as the United States government—foretold the shift a decade later to its use in cataloging. Discussions of Unicode intimated that a solution to the display of non-roman characters was in our future. Relations among staff were hierarchical, based on seniority and status, including that of the library where they worked, but this too was about to change as the field embraced many new librarians not reared in prewar China, Japan or Korea and less willing to defer for the sake of deferring.

¹ This paper has been adapted from a presentation given at a symposium in honor of Amy Heinrich, Director of the C.V. Starr East Asian Library, Columbia University, December 8, 2008.

² I use studies, as in Chinese Studies librarian, to refer to people who work in the field and nationality + librarian to refer to people of East Asian ancestry.

³ See, for example, Harvard's working paper authored by Dan Hazen, "Rethinking Collections in the Harvard College Library: A Policy Framework for Straightened Times, and beyond." Discussion Paper and Action Plan, June 2009.

How did we get from 1990 to now?

Training and cooperation have been key. The NCC (the North American Coordinating Council on Japanese Library Resources) and CEAL (the Council on East Asian Libraries) have trained librarians in Chinese, Japanese and Korean studies librarianship. The workshops that they have organized have taught not only specialized knowledge of area studies librarianship but also widely used skills in information literacy, creation of digital resources, grant writing and cataloging.

Cooperation, too, has been central to the development of the field. Whether between funding agencies and librarians, faculty and librarians, or amongst librarians, these joint efforts have produced the current librarians and contributed to their credibility on campus.

The Present Situation

So to turn to the topic at hand, what does the profession look like now: what is the state of the field? In 1991, at the National Planning Conference that led to the foundation of the NCC, one of the chief concerns was the impending retirement of many senior librarians whose subject knowledge and experience had laid the foundation for the strong collections in our libraries today. Contrary to the concerns at the time, well-educated and well-trained librarians were found to replace the librarians who retired. Once again, the field faces the impending retirements of many of its leaders, but I have little doubt that librarians will be found to succeed them. They will not be the same, but as long as libraries value subject expertise, leadership skills, and creative thinking, there will be excellent librarians who will make their own mark in the world.

East Asian Librarians

What are the qualities that are sought after, that our current librarians exemplify, that characterize the field?

First and foremost is, I think, an unwavering desire to learn. No librarian I know does not try to learn something new every day, whether it be something about publishing, a subject they collect on, or how to format an excel worksheet. Librarians go to lectures, talk to their fellow librarians, and read. They seek to be continually challenged; the reference question from hell is an opportunity to learn; the easy reference question is a chance to figure out better ways to share knowledge with students and faculty, to make them better researchers when help is not available.

The second characteristic derives from the first; it is subject expertise. Whether it has been gained through years on the job cataloging books or answering reference questions, through training sessions conducted by CEAL committees, the NCC, the National Diet Library, one's university or the Association of Research Libraries, or through research on Saitō Mokichi, medieval villagers or the Shōwakan, the acquired knowledge is brought to everything done—every selection decision, every book cataloged, every reference question answered. Knowing that Koreans do not refer to the war in Korea between 1950 and 1953 as the “Korean war” improves the answer to a reference question. The selection of books is influenced by subject expertise and knowledge of the organization of publishing. Knowing how people search for books or websites influences the choice of subject terms when cataloging them. Understanding the structure of information found in online catalogs, databases, and books makes for effective search strategies.

Third, librarians work well with others. They routinely cooperate with others in their libraries, on campus, nationally and internationally. They share their knowledge or make special arrangements to provide material that may not circulate or might be too cumbersome to lend. As East Asian Studies librarians, most have posted queries to the listserv, Eastlib, or emailed other librarians with a difficult reference question. I routinely pick other people's brains because they will say something I have not thought about and I will also gain from their reactions when I share my ideas.

East Asian Studies librarians are also technologically skilled and up-to-date. Like their main library peers, they know how to create web pages and YouTube videos, understand the critical issues in scholarly communication, and have a basic familiarity with not only US copyright law but also Chinese, Japanese or

Korean law. Even if the main library is responsible for signing off on the license, they have worked with vendors and publishers to get acceptable license terms before involving the main library. They provide bibliographic instruction for undergraduate and graduate classes for resources in English or an East Asian language. They may sit on the executive committees for their campus centers; they serve on national committees.

Looking Ahead

Are there challenges out there? One that is frequently raised is the increasing prevalence of interdisciplinary, border-crossing work. As Area Studies librarians are inherently interdisciplinary in their collecting focus, supporting interdisciplinary research and teaching is not problematic. The ability to support border-crossing work depends on knowledge of research trends, and communication, sometimes between physically separate libraries, and can be problematic.

How do libraries budget for interdisciplinary research when collections and budgeting are geographically based? How do librarians in one field know about the changing research interests of faculty who may have begun their lives in one but are now working in a different field? A topic may not be central to one field, but essential to someone else. By seeing our job broadly as one of promoting research and teaching, we can overcome any parochialism about budgetary lines. Contacts with faculty and graduate students and attendance at talks and conferences keep librarians abreast of research trends. Sharing this knowledge with fellow librarians makes it possible to ensure things do not fall through the cracks. Librarians at Duke University recently held a meeting to discuss Diaspora; everyone encounters a need to collect it, whether it is Jews in Poland or Japanese in Peru, and we shared our knowledge of the research interests of the faculty and our approach to collecting. Such an exchange ensures that traditional geographical boundaries do not circumscribe library collections.

The Duke library recently hosted a forum with a few faculty members to discuss the Ithaka report that came out in August 2008⁴ which reported on surveys of librarian and faculty views about the library's role and which role they viewed as most important—purchaser, archive or gateway.⁵ The report does not discuss the role of instruction. Not too surprisingly, faculty valued procurement of materials most highly, while the role of the library as gateway, in this era of Google, was not highly valued.⁶

The faculty at Duke, however, highlighted the importance of the services provided by subject librarians, especially instruction but also reference, defined broadly, that is, not just assistance in response to queries but also helpful information not in response to a request. The best examples came from a professor in English literature, who was unequivocal about the need for instruction: “It is a very confusing world and the students need guidance finding and evaluating material.” He also singled out other services provided by our librarian for literature that had made a significant difference to his research and teaching, such as introductions to two librarians at UT-Austin before he went to use the Ransom collection and information about an interview on Fresh Air of David Sedaris singing advertising jingles while imitating Billy Holliday relevant to a book he was using in his freshman class.⁷

⁴ *Ithaka's 2006 Studies of Key Stakeholders in the Digital Transformation in Higher Education.*

<http://www.ithaka.org/research/Ithakas%202006%20Studies%20of%20Key%20Stakeholders%20in%20the%20Digital%20Transformation%20in%20Higher%20Education.pdf>; accessed August 31, 2009.

⁵ The purchaser role was described in the survey by the statement “the library pays for resources I need, from academic journals to books to electronic databases,” the archive role by “the library serves as a repository of resources - in other words, it archives, preserves, and keeps track of resources,” and the gateway role by “the library is a starting point or ‘gateway’ for locating information for my research.”

⁶ The Ithaka report also notes “On the positive side, the vast majority of faculty view the role that librarians play as just as important as it has been in the past. This view is held relatively equally across different sized of institutions, except among faculty at the largest institutions, where it is somewhat less strongly supported (60% of faculty at very large institutions see the librarians’ role as just as important as it was in the past, compared to 70% of faculty overall). But these responses vary by discipline. Humanities faculty generally see the librarian’s role as having greater continuing importance than do social scientists, who in turn are more optimistic than scientists.”

⁷ The chapter by Sedaris discusses his desire to sing advertising jingles while imitating Billy Holliday and the ensuing recognition that he was gay. The interview on Fresh Air, which featured Sedaris singing these jingles, was much more

Such praise for a subject librarian exemplifies the way our services and our expertise are fundamental to a library's ability to fill its mission. In this increasingly complex world of information, there is more need for subject as well as language expertise rather than less.

In sum, East Asian Studies librarians, like many subject librarians, offer much in the way of customer service, interaction and relationships with students and faculty, a strong user-conscious perspective, knowledge built over time of faculty needs and concerns, intimate knowledge of resources on a wide range of subjects, instructional skills as well as experience with web page design, licensing and the creation of metadata for digital resources. Our jobs provide an opportunity to learn on a daily basis and keep us vital. We work cooperatively and learn from each other. As a result, the field can be characterized as engaged, dynamic and thoughtful. Although I did not train for my adopted profession, there is no other profession I would want to choose.

powerful than reading him discussing wanting to sing them. The class was reading a book which includes a chapter by Sedaris.