2-1-2015

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EAST ASIAN LIBRARY PIONEERS: A CONTINUING SERIES

With Gratitude for a Wonderful Career

Maureen Donovan

As I move ever closer to my retirement date of May 31, 2015, I am cleaning out files and reflecting back on more than four decades as an East Asian Studies librarian. Here are a few thoughts and memories that I want to share with you as I prepare for my new phase of life.

I will forever be grateful to James Shih-kang Tung (童世綱), Curator of Princeton University’s Gest Oriental Library and East Asian Collections 1952-1977, who hired me as East Asian Reference Librarian in 1974. Offering reference services for an East Asian collection was a pioneering idea at the time and I was excited to participate in Mr. Tung’s experiment. If you have a chance, please read what I wrote about him in the CEAL Bulletin (Vol. 53. (1977): 57-59) at the time of his retirement to get a sense of what it was like to work with Mr. Tung. His vision and dreams remain compelling even today!

Fortunately I had taken Professor David G. Johnson’s course on Chinese historical bibliography in addition to Chinese and Japanese language courses at Columbia University as preparation for a master’s degree in East Asian Languages and Cultures, so had basic qualifications for the position. Johnson is now Professor Emeritus at University of California, Berkeley, but at that time he taught this required course at Columbia. The course gave an in-depth understanding of primary sources for research in Chinese studies from prehistory to the modern period. At Princeton I was fortunate to extend my knowledge of Chinese bibliography through work with Professors Frederick W. Mote, James T. C. Liu, Andrew Plaks, Willard J. Peterson, Hai-tao Tang and their graduate students, as well as a special course on rare books taught by Qu Wanli, who was a visiting scholar during my years at Princeton. I expanded into Japanese bibliography too with help from Professors Marius Jansen and Martin Collcutt, as well as visiting professor Tsurumi Kazuko and others. At Ohio State the library administration brought Shizue Matsuda (Indiana U) in to teach me the rudiments of Japanese studies librarianship, as my position expanded from half-time Japanese cataloger (1978) to Japanese Studies Librarian (1981).

My whole approach to building the Japanese studies collections at Ohio State grew out of what I learned about primary research resources from Professor Johnson. For example, when I observed the flourishing of manga publishing in Tokyo during my sabbatical as a Japan Foundation Research Fellow at Keio University in 1995-96, I immediately realized that these materials would become primary sources for scholars in the future and undertook to collect them in cooperation with Ohio State's Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum. I gained confidence in collecting for popular culture research that year through conversations with Makino Mamoru, whose Japanese film collection is now at Columbia, thanks to introductions from Markus Nornes (now at U Michigan) and Aaron Gerow (now at Yale) whom I know from involvement in Kinema Club. I still think that
training in historical bibliography is fundamental for academic librarians, but realize that it is being neglected as people embrace trendier topics.

James S.K. Tung was a committed librarian and an inspiring boss. I learned many lessons under his tutelage that have stayed with me throughout my career. Whenever Mr. Tung visited other libraries he looked for ideas that he could bring back and implement at Princeton, so we were always innovating, never standing still. This prepared me well for all the challenges of my career.

Mr. Tung was devoted to CEAL and initiated me into CEAL’s critical importance for our field. Actually I attended my first CEAL meeting in March 1972 at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York, while still a student in the East Asian Languages and Cultures program, before I even entered Columbia’s School of Library Service for my second Master’s degree. I was wondering what it would be like to work as a librarian in this field, so took advantage of the AAS meeting in New York to attend the CEAL meeting. The Association for Asian Studies was a much smaller organization and CEAL met for one day in a rather small conference room, which was packed with about 80 attendees. I got an impression of CEAL as an organization that was engaged at the cutting edge of issues facing academic libraries, with members who were actively taking steps at their own institutions, sharing their experiences and supporting each other in the process. Every year as I have participated in CEAL, this impression has been reinforced. Attending that meeting helped me reach a decision to pursue a library career. The minutes are in CEAL Newsletter No. 37), online at: https://ojs.lib.byu.edu/spc/index.php/JEAL/article/viewFile/2454/2286.

Mr. Tung, who had been Chairperson of CEAL, introduced me to the institutional side of CEAL and the value of participation. He stressed that all the members bring strengths and expertise that complement each other, just as we did within the Gest Library. His leadership and that of other early chairs shaped CEAL into an organization that allows us to support each other, so that collectively we can make a difference on a national and international scale. When I had the honor to serve CEAL as its Chairperson during 1991-94 my primary, overarching goal was to continue and advance this legacy.

I took the lessons and experiences gained at Princeton with me in 1978 when I moved to Ohio State, where Mr. Tung’s friend, Wen-yu Yen, had been the first East Asian Studies librarian. Actually, Mr. Tung invited me to lunch with Mr. Yen when he visited Princeton, just by chance. So I felt a strong sense of continuity when moving to OSU, despite its being a public mega-university in contrast to Princeton’s elite private university atmosphere. Whatever the setting, from a liberal arts college to a comprehensive research university, East Asian studies librarians face similar issues. CEAL creates a community feeling that cuts across institutional differences.

Soon after arriving at Ohio State I received a committee assignment on the “Committee for an Online Catalog,” aimed at converting OSU’s pioneering circulation system into a public catalog. During the 1980s and 1990s Ohio State proved to be a great environment for exploring innovation in services to support researchers, as technology advanced from FAX to Gopher to the World Wide Web. In late Fall 1993 my first web site went up and
I presented "Possible Uses of World-Wide Web in East Asian Collections" at the CEAL Subcommittee on Library Technology in Boston in March 1994. At that time few librarians were exploring the web. Then, as ever, CEAL was a place where we learned from each other about the latest developments in technologies and services. Our field has often been in the forefront of developments; whenever I return from CEAL meetings my head is spinning with new ideas.

Over the years, I have been fortunate to have opportunities to explore the many roles that academic librarians play, including researcher and teacher. In 2003-04 I was invited to be a Visiting Research Scholar at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto, where I investigated manga publishing in the twentieth century. That research enabled me to deepen and broaden the scope of OSU’s manga collection. Originally I went into librarianship because I never thought I could develop the expertise I envisioned as necessary to become a professor. However, I found that I love teaching. In addition to classroom presentations about databases and collections, I developed a freshman seminar (“Analyzing the Appeal of Manga”) and a required course for Globalization Studies (“Understanding the Global Information Society”), teaching them over the past 15 years.

Thinking back on my days working with Mr. Tung, I began to imagine what would happen if he could visit my library today. What would he think? I would hope that he could find one or two things to take back or at least something to prompt a robust discussion over tea. To all of you, please enjoy your membership in CEAL and continue to learn from and support each other! All best wishes for continued successes!