



2-2018

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Cheng, Jim (2018) "A Response to the CEAL Debate Question," *Journal of East Asian Libraries*: Vol. 2018 : No. 166 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jeal/vol2018/iss166/5>

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A Response to the CEAL Debate Question

Jim Cheng

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On March 30, 2016, a debate was held at the CEAL Plenary Session between Ellen Hammond, CEAL President, and Jim Cheng, the author of this article and then CEAL Vice-President and President-Elect on the following question:

Resolved: Whenever possible, the various East Asian collection operations in academic libraries should be *functionally integrated* with their corresponding library departments, rather than organizationally *united* as one East Asian Library or Collection.

Ellen spoke first, arguing for the advantages of a centralized system of organization. After her statement, I responded with the following points.

I first responded to Ellen's statement that East Asian Collection directors cannot keep up with the coming changes in the technical service areas.

First, East Asian library directors don't need to keep up with the details of transformations in technical services. That is the job of the Head of Technical Services/CJK Processing, which exists now in both centralized and localized library systems of mid and large-size East Asian Collections in North America. At least for mid and large-size East Asian Collections, the Head of Technical Services specializing in CJK language materials cannot be eliminated to save costs.

Secondly, being a part of an organizationally standalone East Asian Library does not prevent East Asian public service or technical services librarians from collaborating with their colleagues and functional counterparts within the library system. Rather, it encourages them to reach out and collaborate with their counterparts in the library system as well as with partners outside their home institution, nationally and internationally, while ensuring close contact with users and priorities of user services. For example, at Columbia, we have well-organized collaborative projects with Cornell, the University of Toronto, Korean Film Archive, and China Academic Digital Association Library (CADAL). All eventually benefited our users, the faculty and students of Columbia University.

A centralized East Asian collection is less visible and is thus in a less favorable position to raise funds to support collection development, new services including technical services and projects, and staff needs. In the arena of fundraising for East Asian-related projects, whether there is an East Asian library in its own organization makes a significant difference. Furthermore, a centralized East Asian Collection negatively affects the current trend of developing unique collections in East Asian studies, such as archival collections that need physical space for storage, processing, and exhibition, plus technical and financial support, which are much more difficult to get under a centralized system.

A centralized East Asian Collection is often at an administratively lower level reporting to another department head, such as Director of International or Area Studies Collections, which means the East Asian Collection loses its direct access to the Associate University Librarian under the localized system and has to compete with other area studies collections for the resources. This pulls the East Asian library down and weakens it, instead of lifting it up and strengthening it.

Finally, whenever we talk about a **functionally integrated** or centralized system, we are in effect talking about a budget cut in order to achieve a more efficient workflow. Based on our past experience, I believe that a centralized system may reduce costs temporarily, but at the expense of services. Centralization does not really create a more efficient system that serves the users better or builds up better collections. In the end, it is often a short-term saving and long-term loss.

To me, the excellence of an East Asian Collection depends on its excellent services and outstanding collections. An excellent organizational model for East Asian libraries is an organizational structure that enables the library to acquire, manage, and make available its outstanding collections and services to users and fosters a sense of ownership, strong dedication, and creativity in its staff. It is an organizational structure that facilitates close communication and interaction with library users and builds a teaching, learning, research, and cultural community centered around the library. I believe a standalone and fully functioning East Asian library organizational system better supports this goal than does a centralized system.

