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Inside the World's Major East Asian Collections: One Belt, One Road and Beyond - A Review

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Inside the World's Major East Asian Collections: One Belt, One Road and Beyond

Allan Cho, Patrick Lo, and Dickson. K. W. Chu, eds. Chandos Publishing, Cambridge, Mass. 2017, 439 pps.

The subtitle of this collection of interviews with caretakers of important East Asian collections alludes to the PRC financed and controlled trade routes it hopes to build across central and Southeast Asia, and gives the impression, on first glance, that this will book will examine some of the PRC's great collections. According to the authors, for political reasons, there are no interviews with PRC curators and therefore the alternate subtitle, *Conversations with the World's Leading Libraries, Archivists and Curators*, which the authors use in the introduction, would have been less ambiguous. The monograph consists of transcribed interviews with librarians, curators and other LAM (Libraries, Archive and Museum) professionals from diverse collections ranging from the textual, the visual, ethnographic and disciplinary. These are LAM professionals interviewing other LAM professionals and the monograph's contents reflect this predisposition.

The authors have made eclectic choices, perhaps based on their research interests although this is not stated explicitly. There are the typical choices of the British Museum, the Vatican collections, the Bibliothèque nationale de France, and the atypical, such as collections dedicated to martial arts, Chinese film (one author, Cho wrote his dissertation on Hong Kong *wuxia* films), foundations to the memory of Bruce Lee, curators on collections as diverse as traditional Chinese medicine and contemporary Chinese art, and an avant-garde curator who seeks to "unbalance in order to rebalance." (p.370)

Each chapter consists of an interview which serves both as an introduction to the collection as well as the individuals' reflections on the training and career paths that brought them to their jobs. The authors ask their interviewees about their educations, their career choices, how the job of curating and caring for these collections has changed, and what they see as the rewards of their choice of profession. The interviews are often conversational, taking in the daily tasks of a LAM professional and the interviewees are often quite forthcoming about the negative and positive aspects of their work. Not surprisingly, there is a general complaint concerning underfunding. The questions vary from interview to interview, and the answers are occasionally brief and not very illuminating. Had the editors enforced a standard set of questions and had pushed the respondents for fuller answers, or have edited out the brief responses, the volume would have a more professional appearance and less a collection of conversations

This is a book concerning LAM professionals and will be of greatest interest to fellow members of this discipline as well as students hoping to work in the field. I am an historian dealing primarily with text sources and am not a library or archive professional, therefore my comments on the usefulness of this text to LAM professionals should be read in that context. Fellow East Asian librarians and archivists should read this volume for a greater understanding of how their colleagues cope with the multilingual texts under their supervision, the problems and rewards of this branch of curatorial work, and the evolution of Asian collection management. Students in LAM professional programs should read this to understand the training needed for this specialized field and the varied career paths, often

beginning with an advanced degree in a field of Asian history or literature that can lead to such a curatorial position. The book presents for both established professionals and students a glimpse of these varied collections, different managerial styles and changing perceptions of what is deemed worthy of preservation, collection and display. For example the final chapters on collections devoted to the martial arts, traditional Chinese medicine and Hong Kong post 1949 film are fascinating and certainly expand the idea of what can and could constitute a curated East Asian collection.

Professional researchers, looking for a comprehensive introduction to the various collections, would be best served by first going directly to those collections' websites but this volume serves as a useful secondary introduction. For researchers like myself it was fascinating to see familiar faces expand on their work and see these collections from the curator's side of the desk, giving us an added appreciation the day-to-day cutting edge work involved. For academic researchers dealing primarily in texts it is equally interesting to read about the technological changes that are coming to these collections, as well as how the questions researchers ask of the material have changed over the years.

There are a few unexplained omissions. Why, for instance, is a librarian from the Taipei National Palace Museum Library interviewed but there are no interviews from Taiwan's ROC National Library, with its Center for Chinese Studies and the Marco Polo Collection? The great university research libraries and collections in the United States are underrepresented. There is a librarian from the Lyon Pubic library but no interview with staff of the L'Institut Franco-Chinois de Lyon, an interwar Chinese university in France and whose library best represents the reading interests of the pre-1949 Chinese intelligentsia. Why nothing from the Russians in Hawai'i and the Pacific collections at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa? Six institutions from Hong Kong are represented but only one from Japan. No institutions from Korea or those with primarily Korean content are found here. Like the "One Belt, One Road" PRC-controlled transportation system named in the book's subtitle, this volume, with its predominance of "Chinese" cultural and language content, has China in the driver's seat. Because it is for curatorial professionals the volume is heavy on professional terms and acronyms and could have used a more thorough copy editing for typos and style before going to press. Nevertheless, if you are a student hoping to have a career in this field or an East Asian LAM professional looking to catch up on changes to the profession this monograph will be very useful.

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