Creating an East Asiatic Library

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Early in 1989, the University of Colorado at Boulder approved the establishment of an East Asiatic library and, on June 1, 1989, Jim Williams, dean of the university libraries, appointed me as head of this new library. I started with a floor plan drawn by our associate director. Within one year the library had a collection of more than 20,000 volumes with an emphasis on Chinese and Japanese literature and humanities. Watching an empty space gradually fill up with books, I constantly experienced joy and hardship. I hereby would like to share some of this experience with my colleagues.

I. Physical Plan

The library's floor plan was designed to provide as much shelving space as possible but at the same time to create the feeling of open space. We have installed 1,134 shelves, each of which can accommodate an average of 27 volumes; the library can thus house at least 30,000 volumes. A twenty-one-by-nine-foot reading space, adjacent to the library office and between the two entrances to the library, holds two six-by-four-foot reading tables. The library looks compact but feels relatively open.

During the process of installing the shelves, several unexpected problems cost the administration extra dollars and forced us to alter the floor plan.

1. Uneven ceiling height:

Nobody would have expected that the ceiling height in the same building could differ from section to section

Shelf installation started from the sides of the Library and moved smoothly to the center. There the shelves were assembled and lined up with the others. The middle three rows of stacks, however, would not fit in. The frames and panels had to be shortened by two or three inches. The shelves were taken apart and extra tools were purchased to cut the frames and panels.

2. Insufficient lighting:

One could hardly tell a brown book from a black book on some of the shelves.

After all the shelves were in place, we discovered that some of the stacks in the central section of the library were not getting any light because the space be-
tween the light fixture was too wide. We called the university electrician who estimated the cost of adding light fixtures between aisles at five hundred dollars, but who very kindly recommended that instead of adding lighting we simply change the orientation of the shelves.

In the original floor plan, the shelving area was divided into three sections. The two side sections were east-west oriented while the central section was south-north oriented. Orienting the central section the same way as the other two sections would make it easier for users to look for materials. With the aisles lined up, they could walk straight from one section to the next. Since the light fixtures were south-north oriented, the east-west-oriented shelves would cross the lights providing sufficient lighting for each aisle. The electrician's suggestion appeared to be such a good idea that all the shelves in the central section were taken apart, rearranged, and put together again. This operation involved shortening additional frames and panels because of the uneven ceiling height.

After the frames and panels were shortened and the shelves were reassembled, the stacks were shaky because the floor was uneven in this part of the library. If the shelves on one side of the stacks were loaded with books and those on the other side were empty, the whole stack might suddenly tip over. To prevent that from happening, we had to bolt all the stacks to each other at their tops.

3. Narrow aisles:

Farsighted patrons could not read the spines of books shelved at eye level.

The standard width of aisles between shelves in the university's main library (Norlin Library) is twenty-seven inches. Because of space constraints in the East Asiatic Library, each aisle is only twenty-three inches wide. One day a senior professor told me that he could not read the characters or call numbers on book spines if he stood facing the shelves; he had to crouch down at least one foot to increase his viewing distance. This is very inconvenient but there is not much the library can do to improve the situation other than provide more assistance in locating materials.

In the process of arranging the Library's facilities, there was one near-disaster involving dust. When a technician from the university telecommunications service came to install the telephone line in the library office, he said that the process would be very dusty and suggested that we leave the office. He also volunteered to take care of everything, including covering two computers and printers, before he started to drill a hole in the ceiling. Two hours later I came back to find floor, cabinets, and shelves all covered with dust. One piece of newspaper lay on top of the computer monitors and another piece on the printers. Dust was on and under the newspapers. I called the library's computer specialist who suggested we do not touch the computers until all the dust had been vacuumed because it might cause great internal damage. I was happy that I had asked an expert's opinion before acting.
II. Operations plan

1. Collection policy

The university libraries used to intershelve materials in East Asian languages with materials in other languages. Humanities and social science materials were in the main library while those on other subjects were in the appropriate branch libraries, e.g., business materials in the business library. Nobody knew exactly how many titles or volumes were East Asian. I had rough guidelines as to what type of materials should be included in the new East Asian collection:

"The East Asiatic Library will contain a reference collection and monograph collection in Chinese and Japanese. Journals in these disciplines will continue to be housed in the Norlin Periodicals Room."

How should I start to gather the dispersed East Asian materials? The first option was to send students out to the stacks and branch libraries, going through each stack to select books. This would be the most effective procedure, but there was not enough money to hire enough students who could read East Asian languages. The second option was to work by classification numbers, i.e., to select the number range containing East Asian materials and pull materials from those sections. This option was out because the collection was aimed at assembling materials in East Asian languages, not on East Asian subjects. Finally, I decided to start by gathering information from the shelflist. One student assistant was trained to copy cards that appeared to represent materials in East Asian languages from the libraries' union shelflist drawers.

The time needed to go through each drawer varied, depending on the number of cards copied. If no cards were copied, one drawer took about five to ten minutes. (For unskilled workers, it can take twenty to thirty minutes.) Copying one hundred cards--four cards to one sheet of letter-size paper--took an average of thirty-five minutes. This included taking the cards out, arranging them on the copy machine, making a copy, and refiling them. One drawer from which 340 cards had to be copied took an hour and forty minutes.

By the end of July we had collected two drawerfuls of shelflist cards. Library work is usually slow in the summer, so this was a good time to start shifting the collection. Three students were assigned to pull books from the stacks. One of them was responsible for checking to see whether any inappropriate materials had been brought down. The guidelines handed to me by the library administration stated generally that the East Asiatic Library should, for the most part, house monographs in East Asian languages. But what about monographs in multiple languages, one of which was East Asian? What about reference works? Could they be serials or in languages other than East Asian? And what about format? Must the item be printed or could it be audiovisual, on computer disk, or on CD-ROM? All these questions required the development of a more comprehensive collection policy. After discussions with both the head of Technical Services and the head of Public Services for the university libraries, both of whom gave me some very useful suggestions, I wrote a new collection policy and sent it to the library administration.

cabinet for approval. Meanwhile, I was able to continue the book-pulling project with
the consent of my supervisor, David Kohl.

2. Remarking
To avoid having what were now East Asiatic Library items reshelved to their original
locations, we had to remark them immediately. The temporary but most efficient way
to indicate the new location of a item is to color-code the spine with either paint or ad­
hesive stickers. Since it was summer and the marking unit had some extra helpers, we
decided on the hard but permanent solution. The new location was typed on top of the
call numbers on spines and inside the books before the books were shelved in the li­
brary. Remark a truckful of books that held an average 250 items took three to four
hours.

The remarking went very slowly; by the end of August it was only half done. All the
available manpower was now gone, and school would start at the beginning of Septem­
ber. It was time to put the collection together for the new semester. Within one week
all the remaining East Asian materials were color-coded with adhesive labels and
shelved into the new library. The project was expected to continue on a smaller scale.
After some negotiation, the Marking Unit agreed to integrate the remarking of East
Asian materials into its work flow, assigning them a priority before other remarking but
after new marking.

3. Location conversion and item conversion
It took a little while to figure out the best way to convert the location listings given in
the Public Access Catalog (PAC). First, we considered a global conversion according to
language codes by our local system vendor, the Colorado Alliance of Research Li­
braries (CARL). But global conversion was not feasible because not all materials with
East Asian language codes had been shifted into the new library. Item conversion is
usually done in the Marking Unit which first marks each item, assigns an item number
to it, and then links the item number to its bibliographic record. The Circulation De­
partment also does some conversion, mainly for items cataloged before library automa­
tion took place or items which have been transferred to different locations after cata­
loging. The Circulation staff input a short circulation record when they assign an item
number. Many of the East Asian materials in this library were cataloged before au­
tomation and needed a brief description in addition to an item number. To avoid pro­
cessing each item twice, we therefore asked the Circulation Department to do the item
conversion as well as changing the bibliographic record in PAC to show the new loca­
tion. Susan Lowenberg, head of the Circulation Department, generously assigned her
staff to start the conversion right away. They helped not only with the conversion pro­
ject but with setting up shelves, shifting books, and organizing the whole collection.
They did a marvelous job.

4. CJK records as displayed in the PAC data base
The library purchased an Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) Chinese Japanese
Korean (CJK) terminal for cataloging materials in East Asian languages. It has worked
out very well. However, when the first batch of records showed up on the PAC terminal
screens, I was shocked to see the screen dotted with unreadable symbols and repetitions
of the number, "880". While the system cannot display the vernacular characters, it does
not suppress them either. Instead, it shows them as unreadable symbols. In addition, it prefixes each romanization field on the screen with "880," the OCLC MARC field which links the romanization field and the vernacular character field. The resulting gobbledygook not only confuses the reader, it also creates a severe access problem. Library users can no longer search any CJK item by title because the "880" appears in front of every title field to block the searchable romanized title. In the CARL system, title searching usually yields the most precise results and many users, therefore, choose the title as their first search strategy. If the title cannot be found, they may give up before trying an author or key word search. These problems have been reported to CARL but have not yet been solved.

III. Conclusion

To establish a library, even a small one, takes a lot of thought and effort. From the physical layout to the collection development policy, from the facilities to personnel, and from cataloging to access, a thorough plan and clear thinking are the keys to success, although there will always be surprises along the way. Following are some tips derived from my experience in building a new East Asian library.

1. It is always a good idea to arrange book stacks in the same orientation.

2. Observe the building structure as carefully as possible before installing anything. If possible, measure everything, especially in old buildings. Do not take it for granted that the floors and the ceilings are even, walls plumb, etc. As carpenters say, "Measure twice, cut once."

3. An open reading area increases the attractiveness of the library. This area is best placed away from heavy traffic but close to the reference desk.

4. Most East Asian libraries in this country still provide card catalogs because, so far, no local automation system can display vernacular characters yet. An OCLC CJK workstation with a Toshiba printer produces beautiful vernacular catalog cards.

5. Work closely with concerned personnel. It is the best way to discover problems early and thus fix them soon.

6. Think through the collection policy ahead of time in as much detail as possible, but also allow time for resolving unanticipated questions as the books are gathered.