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Strategies for Strengthening East Asian Research Collections

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In the 1990s North American East Asian research libraries are confronting unprecedented challenges to their historic mission of collecting, preserving, and disseminating research materials from China, Japan, and Korea. This article reviews issues in ensuring availability of East Asian information and research resources and explores new initiatives for strengthening East Asian research collections. It focuses special attention on the efforts by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) to gain a better understanding of needs in foreign acquisitions and to fashion collaborative strategies for addressing the foreign materials needs of scholars.

Challenge Facing East Asian Research Collections

The challenges are diverse but interrelated. Most importantly, East Asian research collections face dramatic increases in the volume and costs of acquiring scholarly information. The publishing explosion in East Asian countries has put pressure on libraries to acquire a growing volume of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean publications. The region in the 1980s witnessed enormous growth in publishing output. During the past decade the most significant growth in worldwide publications occurred in China, and the second largest increase in book production was in Korea. Book production in Japan has reached a steady level at more than 40,000 volumes per year in the commercial sector alone. Overall, the three countries are among the ten largest book producers in the world.

The increase of book production is but one dimension of the dramatic impact of economic and demographic forces in the region. Today, China is the world's most populous nation, and Japan has become a major economic leader with increasing influence in the world. Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong are rising rapidly in the world economy. A related factor is the rise of East Asian educational institutions and scholars. There is significant research support in Japan and China and a resultant explosion of publications. Both corporate and government support for research have expanded substantially, and all indicators point to continued growth in research publications.

The second challenge faced by East Asian research libraries is the difficulty of maintaining current acquisition levels in the face of declining dollar values and rising publications cost. In the late 1980s the value of the U.S. dollar declined against most currencies, with one of the deepest declines occurring against the Japanese yen. In addition to the dollar devaluation, publication costs rose rapidly in the region. The most severe price increases was in Korean materials, where the average price of academic books increased by almost 40 percent over the past five years. During the same period price increases for Japanese
materials averaged close to 30 percent. When combined with the fiscal constraints evident in many libraries, the cost increases have limited the ability of libraries to maintain needed growth levels.

Research libraries have made significant investments in building East Asian collections, but today's economic forces are threatening the strengths of these collections. The most significant growth in East Asian collections occurred in the decade of the 1960s, which also witnessed the proliferation of East Asian collections. The number of academic East Asian library collections in North America with at least 100,000 volumes currently stands at thirty – by comparison sixteen institutions reported holdings above 100,000 in 1975. East Asian libraries and collections in North America have expanded building specialized East Asian vernacular language collections, the total holdings of which are now estimated at over twelve million volumes.

The growth patterns of the past decades carried with them a momentum and expectations that East Asian libraries today find increasingly difficult to maintain. Over the past decade East Asian research libraries have witnessed enormous growth in book production, yet they have been able to acquire a declining percentage of that output. A case in point is the fact that the Library of Congress Asian Division acquired no more than 17.4 percent of new Japanese monographs, and even the largest academic collections acquire only about 8 percent of the Japanese output. This gap between research materials that should be available to researchers in North America and current levels of acquisitions will widen.

A third challenge is responding to new user demands. Traditionally, East Asian collections have emphasized research materials in literature, religion, and philosophy. Internationalization of the curriculum has resulted in concomitant changes in the study and teaching of East Asian studies. Interdependence among interdisciplinary fields transcends the collection boundaries of East Asian collections. The traditional area-driven model of building collections is being challenged by issue-oriented, problem-driven research with concurrent volatility in user demand. Greater diversity of user needs translates into a broader array of required materials. It also means that limited resources are spread more and more thinly.

The late 1980s and 1990s have been difficult times for all research libraries. The decline of the dollar and budget cuts at many universities have dramatically reduced the support for foreign acquisitions. Research libraries have been forced to reduce their commitment to foreign acquisitions at a time when international research materials are becoming increasingly important. East Asian collections have not been spared the library-wide budget cuts and have experienced retrenchment in the 1990s. This is a time of tension and transition for East Asian collections.

New Initiatives

Much is being done to meet the problems facing East Asian collections at the local, regional, and national level. East Asian research libraries are mounting multiple responses
to these challenges. East Asian librarians have gathered their forces and have strengthened mechanisms for planning and cooperation. The Conference on National Planning for Japanese Libraries held in November 1991 was a landmark event that brought into sharp focus the needs of Japanese studies libraries. Since then, the formation of the National Coordinating Committee on Japanese Resources (NCC) in late 1991 has been the catalyst for exploration of approaches for strengthening cooperative collection development programs. In October 1992 a conference was held at the Library of Congress on "Enhancing Korean Studies; Scholarship and Libraries," which made recommendations concerning the future needs of Korean libraries. A planning conference focused on the needs of Chinese collections is under consideration.

The Association of Research Libraries has played and is playing an important role in addressing the crisis in foreign acquisitions. ARL's interest in foreign acquisitions is longstanding. ARL was instrumental in launching, in cooperation with the Library of Congress, the Farmington Plan in the late 1940s, which for nearly three decades provided extensive support for building foreign area studies collections. ARL has identified improving the nation's research collections of foreign materials as a paramount priority for the 1990s. In 1991 ARL launched a multiyear project, "Scholarship, Research Libraries, and Foreign Publishing in the 1990s." Funding support is provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The project's intent is to mobilize major segments of the higher education community, including research libraries, in developing effective strategies and the resources needed to address scholars' foreign information needs. The project aims to review the state of research library collections in each of eight world areas, to highlight the problems and needs of different regions, and to develop strategies for strengthening support for foreign acquisitions.

1. Articulation of Needs

One central focus is to analyze publishing output and research libraries' acquisition and delivery of foreign imprint collections by broad world area. The intent is to develop a series of joint projects that synthesize available information and analyze data on publishing, acquisition trends, and shifts in research and collecting patterns. ARL is currently working with the Association for Asian Studies Committee on East Asian Libraries (CEAL) in carrying out this general investigation. Coordinated by Maureen Donovan, the current CEAL chair, a working group of East Asian librarians is preparing a statistical report assessing acquisition trends in research materials from China, Japan, and Korea.

2. Definition of Area-Specific Priorities

One essential component of the current ARL Foreign Acquisitions Project phase is to focus on specific countries or a geographic area where there is a severe problem of maintaining needed levels of acquisitions in U.S. research libraries. Under the aegis of the Committee on East Asian Libraries of the Association for Asian Studies, two special task forces were appointed.
The ARL Foreign Acquisitions Project Task Force on Japanese Materials was established in May 1992. Its members included: Yasuko Matsudo, Chair, Asia Library, University of Michigan; Toshiyuki Aoki, Harvard-Yenching Library; Tsuneharu Gonnami, Asian Studies Library, Asian Centre, University of British Columbia; Hideo Kaneko, East Asian Collection, Yale University; Sachie Noguchi, East Asian Library, University of Pittsburgh; and Eiji Yutani, IR/PS Library, University of California, San Diego. The Task Force built on the extensive information from recent studies on Japanese collections. The Task Force also distributed a vendor questionnaire to four major book dealers in Japan to obtain information on how much is published and on price trends. The Task Force further distributed a questionnaire to bibliographers at ARL libraries with holdings of 10,000 volumes or more in Japanese research materials. The intent was to map collection strengths, identify gaps and collecting patterns, and determine priorities for ensuring effective access to Japanese research materials. The Task Force’s report, completed in February 1993, shows that Japanese libraries in North America “have not been able to keep up with the fastest growing interests in social sciences.” Regional documentation, serial holdings, newspaper backfiles, and electronic resources were also identified as priorities for strengthening Japanese collections.

The second effort, the work of the ARL Foreign Acquisitions Project for Chinese Materials, is still underway. Mr. Tai-loi Ma, Curator, East Asian Library, University of Chicago, serves as chair. The other members are: Min-chih Chou, Head, East Asia Library, University of Washington; Maureen Donovan, (ex officio as CEAL chair) Ohio State University; Anna U, Head, Cheng Yu Tung East Asian Library, University of Toronto; and Chi Wang, Head, Chinese Section, Library of Congress.

The task force is currently developing a questionnaire to be mailed out to the twenty largest Chinese collections as well as the Center for Research Libraries. The task force is also analyzing information on publishing trends and assessing the impact of information technologies. It is anticipated that the report will be completed in early 1994.

**Building Bridges to the Scholarly Community**

Central to the success of the ARL Foreign Acquisitions Project is close involvement of the scholarly and higher education community in shaping strategies for providing access to foreign materials. During the past year, ARL staff has worked with the American Academy of Arts and Sciences Midwest Center to bring together scholars and foreign area bibliographers to assist in determining priority needs and strategies for improving access to foreign materials. The first meeting was held at the University of Chicago in late April 1992. The second meeting was held in Cambridge, Massachusetts in mid-November 1992.

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The two meetings provided an opportunity to explore issues in foreign acquisitions. In enumerating problems, scholars noted the lack of bibliographic sources in most foreign countries; inadequate access to foreign newspapers, government documents, and gray literature; difficulty of identifying ephemera; and unevenness of coverage of foreign materials. Both scholars and librarians drew attention to the need for additional funding to strengthen collections.

Another key step is the establishment by the Association of American Universities (AAU) working with ARL of a special task force. The AAU Acquisition and Distribution of Foreign Language and Area Studies Materials Task Force provides AAU and ARL a unique opportunity to initiate new cooperative programs to strengthen acquisitions of foreign materials and support scholarship in foreign area study programs throughout the United States and Canada. The Task Force is currently exploring five areas: existing cooperative collection development systems; scholarly needs for foreign materials; the articulation of a network-based, distributed model for coordinated development of foreign imprints; and the implications of such a system for users and individual institutions.

Implications of Information Technologies

The dominant theme underlying these efforts is that without organized cooperation among East Asian collections and the scholars they serve, long-term solutions are not possible. Technology will enable the transition from locally self-sufficient and independently comprehensive collections to a nationwide system of interdependence. The rapid development of new technologies and the availability of electronic resources will transform East Asian collections. Information technologies will make it possible to make the contents of remote collections accessible to local scholars when needed. The development of new methods of document delivery and new access services will support new resource sharing systems. Although it will become progressively easier to connect scholars to the growing variety of electronic resources, an array of issues remain to be addressed. Fortunately, there has been considerable progress on problems of information sharing via electronic means. A number of Japanese studies collections are mounting pilot projects. In May 1993 the Japan-United States Friendship Commission awarded ARL and NCC a joint planning grant to examine the impact of information technologies on Japanese studies collections and to test different approaches to electronic information access and provision.

Technology will shape the future of East Asian collections. Much has been done to strengthen cooperative collection development programs, and East Asian research libraries have taken the critical steps toward building a nationwide system of distributed access to information and research resources from East Asia.