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## A BRANCH APART: EAST ASIAN COLLECTIONS IN A RESEARCH LIBRARY CONTEXT

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### Introduction

Much has been written in library literature of late about access and ownership and how libraries should respond organizationally to the new role libraries are developing to meet the dual challenges of pervasive information technology and reduced budgets. There are repeated calls for libraries to give customized service, be intimately aware of users' needs and deliver documents at the point of use. In an article on the efficacy of branch libraries entitled "Organization Misfits," it is posited that departmental (or "branch") libraries, due to their size and flexibility, can provide models for this type of service with little change to their structure or organizational relationships.<sup>1</sup> This sort of service and "client-centered" approach, to use the term coined by Charles Martell<sup>2</sup>, seems to describe exactly how East Asian branch libraries work in the United States today. They are thus ahead of their time and should be eminently capable of dealing with the age of electronic materials which has just begun to dawn in East Asian collections.

American librarians have been debating the benefits of the branch library since Keyes Metcalf introduced the topic in 1950 in his discussion about libraries at Harvard University. He listed the arguments in favor of "decentralizing" (i.e., creating branch or departmental libraries) as:

1. It places the books in convenient locations for those who make the greatest use of them.
2. It broadens the basis of support of the university library system.
3. It gives the various departments a direct interest in their libraries.
4. By breaking down the collections into units by subjects, special library methods can be introduced which give better service at no greater cost.

The arguments against decentralization are:

1. Decentralization often results in unnecessary duplication; the various libraries in the biological sciences at Harvard are a good example.

2. The policies in departmental libraries may get out of line with those for the university library as a whole, in respect to staff organization, salaries, and book acquisition.

3. Departmental libraries offer a ready opportunity for overdevelopment through the interest and promotional ability of a particular librarian or head of a graduate school. Costs then get out of bounds, and subsequent reduction of expenses is difficult because of the bulk of materials already at hand.<sup>3</sup>

Although Metcalf expressed his concerns over forty years ago, and well before the first *Committee on East Asian Libraries (CEAL) Newsletter* began its life as *the* organ for East Asian library issues, his concerns and many of his arguments are so fresh and pertinent today that the present piece might adapt his title to be called "The Place of the East Asian Library in a University," a slight alteration from the original title, "The Place of the Library in a University."

### Unique Features of East Asian Collections

East Asian libraries offer benefits Metcalf enumerates and have some of the disadvantages. They retain their own uniqueness which may enhance and exacerbate these advantages and disadvantages. For example, the languages of China, Japan and Korea may still be termed exotic and certainly offer challenges in automation and access. Staffing is unusual in that each staff member (often even circulation staff and shelvers whose language skills in a main library environment are usually of marginal importance) is a language specialist as well as a master at some library task. There are few interdisciplinary cross-overs from East Asian to other subject areas as might be true with a chemistry collection where there might be a significant overlap with collections in engineering, microbiology, etc. East Asian collections, especially the vernacular materials, can usually stand alone, and cannot be consulted by someone in a related field. If a historian of Russia, for instance, wanted to gain some insight into the Sakhalin Islands, he could not consult the Japanese collection without extraordinary language skills or the assistance of a translator. Finally, East Asian collections usually have a relatively small clientele when compared with that of a science or technology library. At a major university, the agriculture library might serve hundreds of undergraduate majors, graduate students, and faculty. East Asian studies enrollments almost never reach these numbers, and so their cost effectiveness is often questioned.

All these unique factors pose administrative challenges in the research library. Until the introduction of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean automation in the last decade, an East Asian branch library usually could not contain the bibliographic records for the collection of the entire library system. Conversely, the main library's union catalog often did not include East Asian records, especially if the East Asian filing order were by four-corner system or some other non-roman based system. Thus, it was often a matter of convenience for the East

Asian collection to be physically separated from the main library, a reflection of its separation on bibliographical, staffing, and clientele grounds.

In fact, because East Asian collections tend to be self-sufficient in all the regular service areas (circulation, reference, etc.), as well as in technical processing, the main library's established reporting structure may not easily accommodate the East Asian collection. The variety of reporting patterns found in North America is indicative of the special nature of East Asian collections. A collection may report to anyone from the library director to the head of branches, head of collection development, or the head of special collections.

Although the clientele of East Asian libraries may be small compared to that of an engineering library even in these years of increased enrollment in East Asian studies courses, the number of materials published and the relatively high price (particularly in the case of Japanese materials) and the high postage and shipping fees (for all materials coming from East Asia), as well as the vigor with and depth to which students and scholars use their collections, all militate for special budgetary and administrative considerations within the institutional context.

Service at East Asian libraries is often of the highest order, in part because librarians can know all faculty and most students in the subject area. The students and scholars come to identify with the library at the same time that the librarians are unusually well-informed about the needs of faculty and graduate students. A loyalty issue comes into play here, however, because the librarian must champion their patrons while also displaying allegiance to the library administration. Since the intellectual interests of academic departments and policies of the library administration inevitably are in conflict some of the time, the librarian must often choose whether it is more politic to straddle an issue or take up one side.

This loyalty issue is tied in with the stature of East Asian librarians and staff within the university library personnel corps. It is difficult enough for the usual branch librarians to participate in policy setting and planning for the whole library system; with East Asian librarians, where English may not be the native language and their materials and processing methods cannot even be reviewed by others in the library system, the problem is compounded.

East Asian library staff have been perceived as working "behind a bamboo curtain" (an expression overheard in reference to a hardworking East Asian unit). They may not take part in the same or as many professional development opportunities as other librarians do; and thus their contributions to the profession may be overlooked. East Asian librarians may publish a groundbreaking article that appears in an Asian studies journal or a journal issued in a Chinese-speaking country, Japan or Korea, for example, where the right readership appreciates the piece. Other colleagues in the main library may not know about or understand the importance of the publication, however. East Asian librarians must decide where to place the bulk of their efforts then: in a place that will benefit the East Asian library and scholarly community specifically or in the library field at large. All these issues

have bearing on decisions for promotion and tenure and often contribute to a sense of unequal treatment or discontent among East Asian staff. In addition, there is little opportunity for promotion within an East Asian library so staff must either go "mainstream" into a main library or resign themselves to staying at the same level working for the same branch head for their career.

Overseas travel, albeit costly and time-consuming, is necessary for East Asian librarians. Library administrations are generally enlightened as to the necessity of such travel, particularly for acquisitions purposes; but lengthy trips to what for most Americans is unknown territory still set the East Asian librarian apart. Such trips are usually measured in weeks, during which time the librarian is away from the action on campus and running up travel bills for the library.

With the advent of automated cataloging for East Asian materials in the mid-1980s, East Asian libraries' bibliographic records finally entered the domain of the late twentieth century automated library catalog. In only a few libraries so far, however, such as the University of California, San Diego, do such records contain the vernacular script. Thus, users still must turn to a special terminal, or card catalog, usually in the East Asian branch library, for full vernacular bibliographic data. In this way, East Asian branches retain a distinct service that is not necessary in a branch library housing western-language materials.

Nonuniformity in library service is an issue often raised in library literature on branch libraries. On the whole it appears that while East Asian libraries usually do not offer the long open hours of a main library, in other ways their service is often better or at least more tailored to their clientele. For example, in this day where many states have privacy laws that prohibit a library from disclosing circulation records, East Asian libraries may be so sanguine as to allow users not only to know who has checked out the book they want, but even to allow the users to consult the circulation file themselves. Document delivery is still beyond the service capabilities of most branch libraries; however, at places such as Ohio State University, a custom-designed current awareness service for faculty is rivaling similar services found more commonly in branch libraries in the sciences.

Equipment and facilities are also often perceived by branch librarians as distributed unequally, and East Asian librarians are no exception. Such libraries are often housed in aging buildings never designed as libraries in the first place or at least not designed as open-stack libraries or as repositories for large collections. With a branch library there is often no space for expansion. All the leaks, inadequate environmental controls, and other undesirable physical conditions common in old buildings make the life of a branch librarian, who often does not have a building maintenance person wholly devoted to the library (as will be found in a main library building), fraught with constant problems and anxieties. East Asian libraries often are short of microfilm readers and printers, audio-visual equipment, security devices, on-line searching capabilities, personal computers, etc. This, of course, hampers the librarians' ability to serve their patrons in the way they would like. The same inadequacy is found with general reference tools, for while East Asian libraries are flush

with Chinese dictionaries, Japanese encyclopedias, and Korean yearbooks, they may not have such rudimentary materials as *Books-in-Print*, and they will surely not have it in the easy-to-use CD-ROM version. Such services, which are costly in staff training and equipment, such as database searching, are also in their infancy in East Asian libraries.

Preservation of branch materials sometimes comes tardily in a library's reformatting or conservation program. Special collections housed in a branch library are likely not to get the attention given to the main library's special collection division where generally climate control, facilities, conservation treatment, and funds are first-rate.

### The Future

With cutbacks and retrenchment spreading through the country's universities, one might wonder if consolidation of branches is an economic necessity. In other words, just what is the future for East Asian branch libraries? Where service is more important than budgetary considerations, branch libraries will flourish. Politics often determine the fate of a branch collection, since a powerful lobbying effort could save a library otherwise put on the chopping block. Where such administrative problems as control, coordination and communication are minimal, branches can also live on. There has been some consolidation of East Asian branches, as in the case of Columbia University, where the School of International Affairs' East Asian collection was folded into the East Asian library; but this is a different type of consolidation than most library pundits are pushing.<sup>4</sup>

The Association of College and Research Libraries' Board of Directors approved Guidelines for Branch Libraries in Colleges and Universities in 1975.<sup>5</sup> In it they give four considerations to use when analyzing the need for a branch library. These include: (1) the educational philosophy and objectives of the institution and the role of library services within this context; (2) a description of projected branch services, (3) a description of present library services, and (4) a comparative analysis of projected branch services and existing library services, using each of the factors identified in points 1, 2, and 3. While few East Asian libraries have a written document setting forth these four considerations, they could probably do so in a way that would convince the least sympathetic administrator of the advisability of a separate East Asian collection.

Such a collection may be in the main library itself or in a separate location. In either case, total integration of East Asian collections and staff into a main library does not seem advantageous either administratively or economically except with very small collections. As the Pacific Rim looms ever more important on our horizon and as East Asian library staff continue to give the sort of service expected in such models as the client-centered library, East Asian libraries, as discrete units, appear to be healthy, desirable, and adaptable institutions. With the strength of CEAL behind these collections and the *CEAL Bulletin* continuing to offer a forum for sharing ideas and experiences, East Asian libraries present a robust front and good practical example of how both to administer a subject collection and

to offer the best service possible no matter what new scholarly endeavors or electronic media lie ahead.

### Notes

1. Patricia A. Suozzi and Sandra S. Kerbel, in *College & Research Libraries* 53, no. 6 (November 1992): 513.
2. For a thorough explication of Martell's approach to an administrative model for libraries to come, see his *The Client-centered Academic Library*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983).
3. K. D. Metcalf, "Harvard Faces Its Library Problems," *The Place of the Library in a University: a Conference Held at Harvard University 30-31 March 1949*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Library, 1950), pp. 47-48.
4. See *Branch Libraries in ARL Institutions*, SPEC Kit #99, (Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries, 1983), 101 pages.
5. "Guidelines for Branch Libraries in Colleges and Universities," *College & Research Libraries News* 9 (October 1975), pp. 281-83.

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