2-1-1995

From the Chairperson

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From the Chairperson

February 21, 1995

The text shown on this issue's cover is from Zhuangzi (ch.33, "Tianxia"), wherein the writings of one of our hero’s favorite foils, Hui Shi, are said to have been so extensive that "they filled five carts." Despite this, though, Hui was confused in the Way. The story lives on today in the expression, "knowledge rich enough for five carts" (學富五車).

The point is not, of course, to criticize large accumulations of knowledge, but to caution us that masses of information are of little use unless they are properly ordered and placed in perspective. This is the issue of the Bulletin in which we publish the statistics of East Asian holdings in North American libraries, and the growth they herald continues to be impressive. The numbers, however, tell only part of the story of how well we have been serving our purpose.

Hui Shi’s five carts would have held quite a bit of information, for that time, but not as much as might be thought at first. Hui and Zhuangzi lived a few centuries before a fundamental information/communication revolution: the invention of paper. Hui Shi’s writings would have to have been recorded on bamboo or wooden slips, more expensive and many times bulkier than paper. As paper came into common use, it became easier to make copies of texts and other records and to transport them. The political, economic, and cultural effects were profound and far-reaching. Printing, of course, magnified all of these changes.

It was the consequent expansion of written records that created the need for the development of bibliographic classification in China, as a way of reasserting control over the expanding universe of knowledge. Just downstream from that development lies the origin of our profession.

The situation in which we find ourselves today is similar. Our ability to absorb the ever-deepening transformations brought about by the electronic revolution and to use them to assert control over the bewildering array of available and emerging data sources must be seen to be fully as important as our institutional volume counts. Otherwise, it will become increasingly easy for us to get confused in the Way.