Japanese Studies for the 21st Century: The Public Services Perspective

Yasuko Makino

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Preface

For many years, I felt the need of a subcommittee to cover the public services aspect of CEAL not represented by other subcommittees. When I became a member of the CEAL Executive Group, I voiced the need of establishing a new subcommittee to deal with matters related to public services. The subcommittee was created, and I was appointed to serve for two years as an ad hoc chair since the Executive Group did not want to wait until the next election to elect a chair. Judging from the numbers of attendance in this room tonight, I was right at least about the need for such a committee. Whether I shall be right about my topic for this talk, “Public services for Japanese studies in the twenty-first century,” only the future can tell.

Standing at the threshold of the twenty-first century, it is natural to wonder what it will hold for us. Knowing full well that predicting the future is very difficult if not impossible, I will leave that job to the futurists. Instead, I would like to envision the near future of the Japanese studies from the perspective of public services librarians since I am aware where the field of Japanese studies stands, and know the status of Japanese collections in North America.

Trends of the Field

There was great increase in the size, scale and scope of Japanese studies in the past decade. Japanese studies have become more and more interdisciplinary, and specialization broadened. The users of Japanese collections have increased and diversified. There are many professionals who consider themselves to be Japan specialists who work outside of the boundary of traditional Japanese studies, such as people working for consulting firms, research institutions, corporations, government agencies and law firms.

As Professor Pat Steinhoff reported in the survey commissioned by the Japan Foundation, Japanese studies have greatly changed in the last decade or so. According to her, Japanese studies programs have spread into many new academic institutions with little or no resources, numbers of researchers in traditional Japanese studies have decreased, and there are more social scientists who need different types of resources such as primary sources and statistical data in addition to library materials.

* This talk was originally presented at the annual meeting of the Committee on Public Services of the Council on East Asian Libraries in San Diego, California, on March 8, 2000.
Professor Steinhoff also reported significant new areas of interest and expertise in Japanese studies. She reported many Japan specialists selected plural subject specialization within a field as well.

Japan specialists and Japanese studies programs are dispersed widely throughout the United States. This means that the majority of Japan scholars, including some trained in large institutions who are now working at institutions without Japanese collections, need access to Japanese language resources for their research. Although many travel to Japan or collect their own data or obtain their own research materials in Japan, a wide range of Japanese language materials still must be available in the United States to support Japanese studies. Libraries have changed from “warehouses of information” to “providers of access to information” and now we need to deliver information.

As more and more information becomes available on the Internet, larger institutions will be bombarded with reference questions as well as with ILL requests from outside of the institutions. This is because they are the primary resource to which specialists all over the country will turn for materials and information that cannot be made available at smaller institutions. But larger institutions alone cannot serve all the needs, and it will be necessary for smaller institutions to join in consortial arrangements and hire Japanese librarians to serve clientele in different institutions without physically being on campus all the time. Physical distance doesn’t matter so much any more.

Professor Steinhoff has concluded her 1995 report with the following statement: “The challenge of providing Japanese library and information resources for Japanese studies in the United States is the biggest challenge facing Japanese studies in the 1990s.”

It will certainly continue to be a big challenge in the twenty-first century, as well.

The level of services expected by users is much heightened over former years. Users are accustomed to quick responses from computers, and they expect immediate results. They will not put up with a long wait from their initial request to actual delivery of items. We need to find ways to ensure timely delivery.

Library book users, particularly students, are accustomed to doing research within collections that have been screened: pre-selected for them by a collection development librarian who chooses among all that is available to acquire items most suited to the institutions’ faculty and students. When students begin to use resources on the Internet and to work with digitized texts and other sources, they do not have enough knowledge to evaluate the information they have found. They do not know how to judge well and choose the reliable sources among all they have found on the Internet, so they want to get everything they see.

What should we Japanese studies librarians in public services be doing?

We librarians function more and more within an environment of rapid change. The driving force behind this change is of course constantly changing technology. I remember very clearly how librarians in some smaller Japanese collections reacted when the subject of
cooperation among East Asian libraries was brought up in a regional meeting in the late eighties. Many librarians were discouraged and pessimistic about any cooperation using electronic media because their universities did not have any plans for either using national online databases or for developing online systems for their local use. Some East Asian collections were excluded or ignored from the automation of their parent libraries at that time. They felt helpless.

The impact of new advanced technology changed the picture completely. As a result of the rapid development of the Internet, libraries no longer have walls around them. The new information technology has given all of us unprecedented equal chance to be world-class libraries. With the technology available to all, the hierarchies between various sizes and types of libraries have broken down, and this will be even more the case in the twenty-first century.

Still, there are many challenges facing Japanese studies collections of the future, for example the dramatic increase in volume and variety of formats; high costs of acquiring needed information; the difficulty of maintaining acquisition levels given financial restrictions; and responding to broadened user demands. Unfortunately these are all too familiar problems.

One of the important responsibilities of librarians in public services is instructional. Without censoring, librarians have to function as good consultants and judges. To do this effectively, we have to be trained in subjects as well as information retrieval to navigate through the broad electronic information landscape.

Librarians are no longer serving only as the key to a particular collection. We should concentrate our services on what only humans can do. Librarians are there to assist, consult and act as a gateway to help users navigate among electronic information scattered in databases as well as in paper format and make the right choices.

We have to reexamine the organization for services to use limited human resources more effectively. Innovative technological solutions such as placing intelligent front ends to online resources that allow users to have access to desired information without the intermediation of librarians will enable this.

We need to renew our commitment to resource sharing, not only library materials, but also reference services, facilities and human resources as well. Consortial use of and subscription to ever-increasing expensive online databases, electronic journals, periodical indexes, and digitized full texts, etc. will become common.

We need to explore and define future directions for Japanese collections and articulate roles in the Japanese studies research community. If Japanese collections are to have a prosperous future, the librarians will have to create it.

We have to have vision, and we must train ourselves to have the insight to foresee the direction the field is heading and to prepare for it. We must find ways to accomplish this goal through cooperation both national and international by working as a team. Our future will be an exciting time of change. The future of Japanese studies collections depends on
how effectively we cooperate and, with the help of advancing technology, use limited resources, both material and human, to their fullest potential.

Conclusions

Cooperation in all areas of library services is the key to everything. For collection development, we must be mindful of what we are collecting and how it fits into the vast pattern of national resources.

How Japanese collections in the U.S. will be maintained and developed will not be the decision of Japanese librarians alone. Scholars in the field of Japanese studies and related fields and the administrators of the institutions where they belong will play a significant role in characterizing and influencing the future of Japanese collections.

Committed librarians with clear visions of their goals and a thorough understanding of the needs of the Japanese library field can create a good and desirable future by assessing the environment, identifying alternative futures, and planning. Technology will decide the kind of futures that are possible, but we Japanese studies librarians must work together with wisdom to decide which of these possible futures is desirable.