The Future of East Asian Libraries: A New Vision for Public Services

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THE FUTURE OF EAST ASIAN LIBRARIES:  
A NEW VISION FOR PUBLIC SERVICES*

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East Asian libraries are in a period of rapid change driven by changes in technology, user populations and costs. At the same time, we have wonderful historical collections that need shelving, maintenance and preservation. All of these factors influence my vision for East Asian libraries over the next ten years.

Technology has been a driving force for change in libraries for the past two decades and more. Finally East Asian libraries are in a position to narrow the gap with main libraries and to take advantage of the benefits of technology. Soon, not only will there be CJK terminals for cataloging, but also integrated library systems (online catalogs and online ordering databases) will be able to accommodate CJK input. We will be able to do reports, claims, serial check-in, all with CJK display. The problems of different encoding systems, too, will be addressed. Card filing will cease to exist.

But these changes in technical services have been in the works for some time; the difference is quantitative rather than qualitative. The changes for public services are more qualitative, in my opinion, as we have to rethink how we provide public services and what we provide. Distance and physical location are less important. More people are able to do preliminary searching for themselves, but need our help sorting through the mass of information they find. When people went through print indexes, it was so laborious that they would copy out only the most likely and most interesting looking sources. Now an electronic search can yield hundreds if not thousands of results. Our subject expertise as well as our library skills in Boolean searching and making maximum use of subject headings can help the patron find a few well-chosen sources.

Then, too, as the use of the web expands, students need our help in learning to evaluate sources. Librarians have long selected books, and students used to be limited by their selection decisions. Now with library catalogs, full text databases and a variety of other materials available on the web, students are confronted not only with traditional scholarly materials but personal pages--pages that only purport to do something. It is important to know how to evaluate and use web pages. If technology continues to change as rapidly as it has over the past decade, our role in educating and re-educating our faculty is going to grow. Nothing seems to stay the same very long. If you have not used a database in six months or a year, many things will have changed; there are new tricks or ways to maximize your results, and new electronic materials will have been added. While many patrons can figure this out, my experience has been that frequent education or re-education is important if our faculty and students are to make good use of these expensive resources that we are making available to them. We know who our faculty are, what their foibles and strengths are, what their interests are. We know whether they will respond best to an informational email or to a personal contact, whether they prefer to come to us when they

* This paper is a revision of a talk originally presented at the University of California at Berkeley, February 2000.
are working on a new project, and if they like to be kept up to date on changes. Personally I think this kind of personal service will grow rather than diminish, at least in ARL libraries. It is something we can do that justifies the library's long-term investment in us and our specialized knowledge. And to the extent that the library is in competition for scarce resources on campus, our ability to make ourselves valuable to the faculty helps the library justify its existence.

Our language expertise, too, will be increasingly valued. Libraries are increasing the number of languages in which we collect materials and the number of subjects that we collect in multiple languages. We are also finding an increased demand for materials published in foreign languages by people who cannot read those languages but who can afford to pay for translation. All of this increases the value of our language and subject expertise.

One other way technology is driving changes in public services and collection development is that location matters less. With RLIN and OCLC we know where books are housed in the U.S., and ILL is no longer a matter of guessing that a book might be at UW because of a professor's interests (assuming it was not in the NUC). Delivery from China and Japan has become an accepted way of getting materials not held in the U.S. But this means that we have new people to cooperate with, and new obstacles to overcome. We are no longer negotiating with nine libraries in one university system or a peer institution down the road; we find ourselves dealing with government bureaucracies that are loathe to change.

It is not just changes in technology that are driving changes in the library. Changes in user populations also contribute. No longer is the Pacific Rim exotic; the "loss of irrelevance," to use Pat Steinhoff's phrase, has forced East Asian Studies into the mainstream of academic life. Users of East Asian collections come from fields outside of the traditional humanities and social sciences and may or may not speak or read an East Asian language. But we have resources they can use: photographs of buildings destroyed by the Kobe earthquake in an issue of AERA may answer the questions of an engineering student; statistical yearbooks from China may only need their headings translated to be useful to a student in economics.

Related to the fact that East Asian Studies has become mainstream is that distance education is becoming increasingly important especially at public universities and professional schools which attract students who are already in the work force and want to supplement their schooling. Advances in technology make it increasingly feasible to deliver quality instruction. The challenge of libraries is to deliver services. Print collections are cumbersome; the advent of electronic resources (from online catalogs to full text journals) makes delivering information easier, although we remain dependent on the campus network to allow us to deliver this information to students in Venice or Santa Cruz. This does raise the question, however, of how an East Asian library provides access--only in the East Asian library per se because of format, license agreements of cost or through a site license? Addressing this question will be increasingly important, and solutions will come both from national efforts to seek solutions on pricing and licensing and local solutions on networking.

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Increases in costs, variety of formats, and quantity of publications are also factors in the changes happening in public services. All of them place a greater premium on selection. Without someone who understands how these materials will be used, how can the library select the best format? Ease of use is but one criterion: inclusiveness, indexing and content are others. If we are to avoid having uniform or vanilla collections, we need to have selectors who can build unique collections with an appropriate balance of breadth and depth targeted towards their campus needs. Finally, if we are to cooperate with other libraries to maximize the resources available within the United States, the subject expertise of our librarians is a sine qua non.

One other change that will encompass East Asian libraries, I think, is greater interaction and cooperation with other units on campus. As technology becomes more universal, the areas of overlap increase. Language is less of a barrier. Students and faculty want to know about all resources in their subject area, not just those in English or Chinese or Japanese. So our librarians in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean studies need to be familiar with, indeed knowledgeable about, Western language sources. They need to know how to search Academic Index or Historical Abstracts. They also need to know the differences in the structure of Academic Index and Zasshi kiji sakuin. Keyword searching is available in both databases, but the results are quite different because most Western language databases are built around a thesaurus and will refer you to articles that do not use it as a key word. If you search Zassaku, the word you choose for women will limit your results. And it is important that we convey this to our users.

There are other areas of overlap, areas where we can share expertise. I was talking with our Western European studies librarian and told her about the agreements for collecting local histories. She thought that this was an exciting idea and wished that it could be done for France—too many local histories are being published and no one can buy them all. Cataloging, preservation, off site storage, digital initiatives—all can benefit from shared expertise and shared resources. Rather than being isolated on campus, East Asian libraries will become mainstream and the learning will go both ways.

To sum up, I think change will be a continuous state of mind. But to be honest, this is why I have enjoyed library work: no day is like another; no year repeats the year before. There is always something new to learn, a task that is finished leads to a new task to do. We have hurdles in front of us: to recruit new librarians to replace those who retire and provide opportunities for training, to secure adequate funding for collections and staff, to make sure that pricing structures do not circumscribe access, to continually educate ourselves and our users to think and act globally. But there are new opportunities behind every challenge, and I am hopeful that this adopted profession of mine will have a long and productive future.