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LIBRARY USER SERVICES:
WHAT DO NEWLY ARRIVED CHINESE STUDENTS NEED?

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Introduction

There are two groups of newly arrived Chinese students at the University of California-Davis. The first group includes first generation Chinese immigrants who came to this country in their teen years. Some of them attended a few years of high school in the United States and graduated; some of them just arrived from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, or the Southeast Asia region having graduated from high school in their countries of origin. Then, they came to study undergraduate programs at this campus. The second group is made up of newly arrived Chinese graduate students who completed their undergraduate degrees in their home countries. In the fall quarter of 2004, 17.8% of registered Chinese students at the University of California-Davis came from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (Summary, p.12).

Newly arrived Chinese students are unique: they know English and Chinese and they also read and write Chinese very well. Therefore, they use the library’s Chinese materials as well as English collection. Over the years, I have learned that newly arrived Chinese students face common difficulties in using library resources in this country.

In this paper, I will present my findings on the difficulties that face the newly arrived Chinese students and discuss what they need to do to overcome their difficulties and to become information literate with the help of Chinese librarians and library administration in this country.

Difficulties Facing Newly Arrived Chinese Students

- **English Language Difficulties:**

  There are reasons for English language deficiency in newly arrived Chinese students. First generation Chinese immigrants have never been taught basic skills for English oral or written discourse in high school. Instead they worked mainly on “English as a Second Language” workbooks. Thus, they have not mastered enough English to keep up with their classmates in a subject requiring verbal skills (Hsia, p.83). Although Asian American students earned higher grades than other students in many subjects, including English, their scores from ability and achievement tests provide unequivocal evidence that Asian Americans, particularly newcomers, do not do well on tests that measure English verbal abilities or achievement in vocabulary, reading, and writing (Hsia, p. 70).

  The problem is exacerbated because the newly arrived Chinese students do not speak English as their first language (Justiz, p.264). According to the U.S. 2000 Census, there were 2 million people in the U.S. who speak Chinese at home (Shin, Figure 3). Moreover, a study showed that there were environmental factors that limited English proficiency of the newly arrived Chinese. The factors included Asian home languages, almost exclusively Asian friends, discomfort in the presence of respected non-Asian faculty, and lack of familiarity with
American society (Hsia, p.152). Thus, the newly arrived Chinese students have found it difficult to function in an English speaking setting even though they have successfully passed a standardized English proficiency examination.

Take the library as an example: everything they see is in English, and everyone they need to communicate with is speaking English. In addition, they also have a hard time comprehending everything they see and hear. They must speak, read, write, and think in English all at same time, a far harder task than the Chinese that they knew from their birth. As a result, they lack the confidence to speak and ask questions in public. When faced with a non-Asian librarian at the Reference Desk or in the library class sessions; they tend to shy away from them.

- **Unfamiliar Library Environment and Culture:**

The next difficulty I found is the barrier of adjusting to the new library environment and culture. For first generation immigrants, they might have explored the library environment for a short period in their high school; however, they probably did not have much experience using the library because they spent lots of time trying to learn to speak and read English. For the newly arrived Chinese students, the library is a foreign place to them.

Take the general library collection, for example: the main collection is all in English or Western languages. East Asian materials are a small section of the general collection. Almost all of the library staff are non-Asians who do not speak Chinese. Thus, many questions that cause no problems for English native-speakers in using the library become frustrating for the newly arrived Chinese users: “Do I need an ID to enter the library? Can I use the computer to search without permission? Can I walk in and browse in the stacks by myself? Where do I begin to find things I need?” And even, “Where is the restroom?”

In addition, Americans and Chinese have vastly different cultural norms and expectations. While Americans tend to be more direct, aggressive and impatient, the Chinese expect a courting process. For example, the American student would say, “I need an English dictionary,” to the reference librarian. But, Chinese students would say, “Excuse me, would you let me know where can I find an English dictionary?” The Chinese students are polite and patient. Also, the newly arrived Chinese students would expect the reference librarian to guide them, just not answer their questions. For another example, it is normal for most American students come in to the library alone and sit at a study table alone to study. But Chinese students would prefer to come and go as a small group. Furthermore, the newly arrived Chinese students feel intimidated when there are other students already familiar with using library resources around them. The end result is often that the newly arrived Chinese students are overwhelmed with different ways of organizing, thinking, feeling, and acting that make them feel disoriented and unable to navigate effectively.

- **Difficulties in Retrieving Library Information**

Retrieving library information is very frustrating to the newly arrived Chinese students. Because the information system in this country uses the English language, even the non-Roman languages are recorded in alphabetic format; thus, the first barrier to retrieving information facing the newly arrived Chinese students is the language barrier. Retrieving information becomes even more complicated due to different library systems and the lack of
assistance from a library specialist who is familiar with the Chinese language and cultural differences.

The newly arrived Chinese students are not familiar with the Library of Congress Classification System. I have learned that the Chinese University of Hong Kong started to convert their records to the Library of Congress Classification System in the spring of 2002, but the libraries in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and probably in China also, have used Chinese Classification for many years. All their Chinese records are in Chinese with Chinese subject headings.

A crucial difference is that libraries in this country use Romanization to transcribe non-Roman characters such as Chinese into alphabetic format. Thus, Romanized Chinese is “twice-removed” from the original character. In addition, some of the records still are in Wade-Giles Romanization rather than Pinyin. Furthermore, the library’s integrated system may not index Romanization correctly. Aresenault’s study showed that using Romanization as the primary retrieval technique in OPAC still remains rather problematic for many end users (Aresenault, p.46). The use of Romanization in catalogs in the U.S. contrasts with libraries in Hong Kong and Taiwan, which do not use Romanization for their Chinese collection records. The students can easily type in Chinese for Chinese materials and type in English for Western materials in searching.

In addition, there is the functional obstacle that most library computers in this country are based on an English platform. Unless the computer is equipped with Asian language applications, users won’t be able to type in any Chinese characters for searching. Furthermore, even if students can type in Chinese characters by using the Chinese language application, they may not be able to get a result because records may not be searchable in Chinese.

Moreover, our records for East Asian language materials have subject headings in English only and the subject headings are assigned according to the Library of Congress Subject Heading that reflects the cognitive tradition of library information system in the Western industrialized world. As a result, the newly arrived Chinese students not only face the difficulties of using English language, but also have difficulty applying the words which are appropriate in the Western industrialized world for research. It is an intimidating experience for them.

Finally, will the newly arrived Chinese students be able to find a Chinese-speaking librarian to assist them for all these various obstacles easily? Although many major academic libraries have a Chinese collection, in general, most of them do not maintain general public service hours and do not have a full time reference librarian. It is very inconvenient and uncomfortable for the newly arrived Chinese student to have to filter through layers of bureaucracy to find assistance in the library. Yet trying to find library resources without any assistance is an even greater dilemma for newly arrived Chinese students.

 Unsatisfactory Library Instruction Classes:

The fourth difficulty I found is poor library instruction for newly arrived Chinese students. A study showed that 44.6% of international students had never taken any of the orientation options offered by the library, such as guided tours, presentations by librarians, instruction in research skills, or term paper counseling (Conteh-Morgan, p.30). Newly arrived Chinese
students said that non-Asian librarians taught almost all of the library instruction sessions. The instructions concentrate on English or Western language resources that do not reflect Asian cultures. Furthermore, the librarians seldom address the newly arrived Chinese users’ special needs, such as unfamiliarity with library terms or environment. Thus, the students felt that their needs or frustrations would not be understood.

A study also showed that most students do not like the instructor-dominated, lecture-demonstration format that typifies library skills classes; they want to replicate the hands-on, low-anxiety, relaxed and friendly atmosphere they are familiar with, one in which they can learn more comfortably (Cotehe-Morgan, p. 32). Newly arrived Chinese students already feel uncomfortable about their language skills, and lecture demonstrated classes create even more anxiety for them. Thus, the classes are neither significant nor helpful to them.

**New Learning Style:**

The final challenge to the newly arrived Chinese students is the different classroom culture in this country. At home they are taught to respect their instructor as a subject expert and disciplinarian; thus, they are not used to speaking in class to challenge their instructor. They are used to being given instructions and materials on what to study for examination; now, they feel that they either have too much to read or have to find their own resources. In addition, instead of being given a topic and information for a paper by their instructors, they must locate the materials themselves and formulate their own thinking on a topic.

Furthermore, the American fluid learning style that requires analysis and critical thinking skills frustrate Chinese students. Take an example of newsreels. The newsreels appear to have a truth about them because we see what seems to be happening. But subsequent analysis of old newsreels reveals that though the overall picture is true, in reality the program is a compilation of footage from different times and different places where politically sensitive and emotionally sensitive issues are covered. Critical thinking and evaluation skills are needed to bear on the evidence. This kind of learning style is very new to the newly arrived Chinese students.

In another example, the instructor may ask students to draw a valid conclusion after showing a short film in theater class. Questions such as, “What is the moral of this film? What is the physical expression of the actor’s status in the world? How did you define the character in the film?” require critical thinking skills as well as verbal ability for which Chinese students have not been trained. They need to adapt to the challenge of becoming involved in their own learning from their passive modes of instruction.

**What Do Newly Arrived Chinese Students Need?**

Newly arrived Chinese students are unique. They know English as well as Chinese. Most of them came from supportive parents and made great efforts to get educated this far. In addition, they are not complete strangers to the library setting. Many of them have the ability to understand and use practical and conceptual tools of current information technology, including software, hardware and multimedia, which are relevant to education. They also have positive attitudes toward learning and respect librarians. They are proud to be students. Because they are motivated to learn, if librarians, especially Chinese librarians who experienced the same situation before themselves and understand the strengths of the newly arrived Chinese students, can be
available to assist them in their needs, the newly arrived Chinese students will follow their lead in learning. Here are few suggestions of ways that Chinese librarians can help to overcome difficulties of newly arrived Chinese students.

- **Chinese Librarians Are Visible in the Library:**
  
  Most of the Chinese Collections or Libraries in this country do not maintain a regular schedule of public or reference services, and the Chinese librarian does not serve regularly at the public or reference services desk for the general library. Therefore, the Chinese librarians in the library seem to be invisible. The Chinese librarians do not have to be Western civilization subject specialists, but they are library professionals who can serve at the Information Desk or volunteer for the library tour, or teach a brief library instruction session for the Chinese Collection, so Chinese librarians will be visible to the Chinese students. In general, when the Chinese students see Chinese librarians who may be more familiar with their needs, they may develop a more friendly and relaxed relationship with the library.

  A study showed that Asians with five years or less of residence have not yet mastered required English verbal skills yet (Hsia, p.83). If the newly arrived Chinese students try to ask a question in English to the non-Chinese speaking librarian at the Information Desk, they may be sent through layers of connection before they can reach a Chinese speaking librarian. This is certainly an uncomfortable experience for them, and it may cause the students to leave. Thus, it is especially important that Chinese librarians make themselves visible in the library, so the newly arrived Chinese students will feel at ease in asking questions, even in Chinese, and help them feel comfortable in the library.

- **Chinese Librarian to Approach The Students First:**

  Entering a large academic library for a foreigner is an intimidating feeling. I serve at the Reference Desk of East Asian Languages Collection regularly and at the General Reference Desk in the evening and weekend hours. Thus, I have many opportunities to see the newly arrived Chinese students. Whenever I recognize an unsure and polite Asian student who seems to be lost, I approach the person first. Once they find out that I speak Chinese, all kinds of questions pour out. At the end of our first meeting, most of the students leave the library feeling relief, and some of them return later and continue to learn more about library. I believe they need someone to help them overcome the feeling of intimidation.

- **Chinese Librarian to Teach Them Basic Information Literacy:**

  Because the America learning style is new to the newly arrived Chinese students, teaching them basic information literacy will help them in the long term. My user services experience has taught me that they need to learn an overall American-style library research. First of all, they need to know all the information available in the library. Physical sources include printed materials, microform, audiotapes and discs, visual aids (films, video), and online; literary sources include language dictionaries, monographs, encyclopedias, yearbooks, newspapers, periodicals, conference proceedings, government publications, statistics, directories, biographical source of information, geographical sources of information, dictionaries of quotations and concordances, and theses. In addition, bibliographical sources include general national bibliographies, published library catalogs, bibliographies of periodicals, subject bibliographies, literature guides, and author bibliographies.
Next, students need to learn the basic concepts of research, such as recognizing the need for information, formulating the research question, and using guides, handbooks, and encyclopedias for background information. They also need to become familiar with Library of Congress Subject Headings and controlled vocabularies in online catalog searches to locate books; and learn the nature of periodicals, indexing and abstracting concepts, and how to search for relevant indexing/abstracting sources to locate periodical literature. Furthermore, they need to know what primary and secondary sources are, and how to search and evaluate the sources from Internet or World-Wide Web. These are all part of fundamental concepts to the research process.

Teaching the newly arrived Chinese students to become information literate may also help them to adapt to a new culture and become an independent learner; as a result, they might be able to connect with the new environment more easily as well.

➢ **Offer Them An Individual or A Small Instructional Class With a Paper Topic:**

The “one size fits all” approach of teaching is inadequate (Jacobson, p. xxiv). Even the Chinese librarians in Hong Kong and Taiwan have learned that their large classes of Bibliographic Instruction to the freshman students have not been effective. In the situation of the newly arrived Chinese students, an individual library session or a small group with friends works best because they are unfamiliar with library environment and lack confidence with English verbal skills. In addition, students will build stronger academic collaborations with the librarian if a Chinese librarian teaches the session. Furthermore, instruction through use of concise examples, such as a class paper topic, also works better for the newly arrived Chinese students. In this way, the Chinese students will get a real experience through the process. I have found that customized service is an effective way reach out to the newly arrived Chinese students who tend to shy away from the library because of language and cultural barriers.

➢ **Librarian to Write Helpful Guides Online:**

Many newly arrived Chinese students are skillful with computers, but will need time to comprehend English language content; thus, they appreciate private time on the web to learn and absorb the information at their own pace. For example, the Chinese University of Hong Kong wrote an “Information Literacy Tutorial” on the web. The program includes types of information, timeline of information, formats of information, when to use different categories of information, how to locate various information, how to evaluate the information sources, and citation styles. These pages seem to catch users’ attention gradually. The librarians do receive appreciative notes and comments from time to time.

Another useful online program is an exercise in critical writing literacy for Chinese students. The exercise may include a historical, a philosophical, a sociopolitical, or a cultural perspective. However, a faculty member’s contribution to this exercise is necessary because of its complex content.

Another helpful online tool is providing a convenient search method with Romanization charts. All East Asian Librarians know that searching a library’s Chinese resources in this country is very cumbersome because of Romanization. Therefore, I have created a few Romanization conversion charts on the web to be used with the main library’s search page side by side, as both windows are tiled vertically on screen. Students can click any one of the
Romanization conversion charts, and the main library’s search page will appear on the side with the Romanization conversion chart; then, students can utilize the Romanization chart to find the alphabetic format for words for the search box on the library’s online catalog. The result will be displayed in the search box. Students do not have to memorize or look up the printed Romanization chart to type in any Romanized word. The students at the University of California—Davis have found it very convenient.

➢ **Chinese Librarian to Keep Contact on Their Progress:**

The newly arrived Chinese students see librarian as their teacher; thus, they tend to rely on the librarian’s guidance once they are introduced to the library instruction session. If Chinese librarians take this special bond and keep in contact, the students tend to do well. Although Chinese librarians in academic libraries in this country wear many hats and feel the pressure to fulfill the demands of their various duties, as professional Chinese librarians with unique backgrounds, our willingness to give can be a great help to some of the students.

**What Can the Main Library Do to Support?**

Another issue is what the main library can do to support filling the needs of the newly arrived Chinese students. First, it is very important that library administrators recognize that public service for the East Asian Collection or Library is necessary. In general, the East Asian Collection or library has a cataloging librarian, acquisitions librarian or bibliographers, or a librarian for all these library duties, but rarely has a full-time public services librarian. Chinese libraries in the U.S. should change their traditional library image and publicize their rich collections by promoting user services as well as information literacy for the Chinese collection users in this country. The East Asian Collection has the uniqueness of a Special Collection section in the main library. Why can’t the East Asian Collection have a full or half time public service librarian just as the Special Collection has?

Equally important is that libraries need to provide a user-friendly environment for newly arrived Chinese students. A study showed that Asian Americans are taught to respect elders and authority, and to value educational achievement. Berlanga-Cortez also found that the quiet behavior of Asians is often mistaken by the dominant culture as a lack of knowledge. These cultural traits may work against Chinese users when seeking library services because their passive demeanor stands in the way of receiving the attention and assistance they need in accessing information (Guerena, p.56). To combat these stereotypes, cultural diversity training for library professionals should be emphasized. Library professionals need to recognize and respect Chinese students’ unique cultural background. They should understand that Romanization is not Chinese language, in order to provide a user-friendly environment for newly arrived Chinese students.

Furthermore, the library needs to provide multi-language computing technologies for library users. Because of incompatibilities between computing systems of the Chinese regions and this country, the obstacles to searching Chinese information will continue to hinder many users. For example, Chinese students won’t be able to type in Chinese characters for a search without a Chinese word processor; won’t be able to find the search result if the Chinese characters are not indexed; won’t be able to use Chinese electronic databases without availability of Chinese viewers on the computer; and students will be forever frustrated with variations of Romanization and a non-integrated system.
Finally, upper administrators need to encourage and give the Chinese librarian time to get involved in the library’s public services and acknowledge his or her efforts if there is no Chinese reference librarian in place. The presence of a Chinese librarian can ease the newly arrived Chinese students’ foreign feeling and boost the students’ learning process.

In Conclusion

Newly arrived Chinese students need help to begin their information literacy process in this country. I have identified the difficulties of newly arrived Chinese students that may prevent them from becoming information literate in this country. Fortunately, with their strengths of computer skills, positive attitudes toward education, and diligent character, these users can become skillful in using library resources if Chinese librarians can help to overcome their difficulties and guide the students properly through the information literacy process.

For their part the newly arrived Chinese students, who have grown comfortable with passive modes of instruction, need to accept the challenge of becoming involved in their own learning. Instead of a faculty member accessing the most current information on a topic and presenting it in lectures, students will need to be able to access materials to formulate their own thinking on the topic. Thus, they need Chinese librarians or other librarians to help them understand and develop the ability to locate, evaluate, synthesize, organize, and apply information in this resource rich environment.

Most importantly, the library must support a diverse user-friendly environment, a multi-language computing system, and Chinese Reference personnel to promote information literacy for newly arrived Chinese students. Without these supports, Chinese librarians won’t be able to fulfill the common goal of librarians: to empower their constituents, and to guide students toward self-actualization by providing basic skills of seeking and using appropriate information.

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