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Hidden Gems Uncovered - Discovering China Studies Special Collections in Liberal Arts Colleges in the U.S.

Xi Chen         Oberlin College

An Overview
This analytical report describes a website survey that aims to discover special collections (pre-1949) related to China Studies in 80 liberal arts colleges (members of Oberlin Group, an organization comprised of selective, and top-ranked liberal arts colleges) in the U.S. It offers a general review of the current scale of collections as well as the disciplinary nature of these hidden materials. Secondly, it explores the online discoverability and accessibility of these collections through active navigation of the institutions’ websites. Finally, it discusses the major reasons that contribute to the low accessibility of these collections and the trend toward enhancing access through digitization.

Special Collections Related to China-Studies in Liberal Arts Colleges:
Small liberal arts colleges form an inseparable part of U.S. higher education. Many American Christians who embarked on missionary trips to China and East Asian regions from the mid to late nineteenth century were graduates and faculty of liberal arts colleges. When the missionaries returned home, they brought back first hand materials such as journals, photos, records of missionary work, print materials and artifacts that documented their encounter with the oriental societies. Some personal collections were bequeathed to their alma maters during their later lives and some were donated by their descendants after they were deceased (e.g. Oberlin Shansi Collection). Student records and personal items left by Chinese students who came to study in U.S. in late 19th and early 20th century also make up a sizable portion of the overall collections (e.g. Soong Sisters’ Collections at Wesleyan College). Another fraction of the surveyed collections is oriental artifacts collected by alumni who were China enthusiasts (e.g. Lucy A. More Collection at Wheaton College). Those primary sources have since been curated by the libraries and are often overlooked by general audience especially scholars outside the U.S.

The reasons that these collections are not as broadly exposed as those of research libraries may include:
- Small liberal arts colleges emphasize undergraduate teaching. The demand to use primary sources for research is lower than large research universities.
- Small liberal arts colleges do not have as many librarians and archivists as large research universities do. As a result, materials may not have been adequately processed, described and published on their websites;
- Limited budget and lack of manpower in small liberal arts colleges are the main obstacles to digitization.
- Liberal arts colleges may not be as well publicized to the general public as large research universities. The collections at liberal arts colleges often fall under users’ radar.
Discoverability and Accessibility
In the age of renewed interest in China due to its rapid economic growth and political influence, these hidden gems are gradually gaining scholars’ attention. In December 2014, 80 liberal arts college libraries (Oberlin Group) were surveyed via website visit. It was found that 25 libraries indicated their ownership of primary sources related to China through their websites (see Chart 1 and 2). They vary in formats and content, spanning from the late 19th century to mid-20th century. Materials consist of travel journals, letters, photo albums, newspaper clippings, postcards and artifacts. All the 25 liberal arts colleges have Chinese studies programs as indicated by their course catalogs.

These primary sources have been deposited and curated in those libraries’ special collections or archives. During the website visit, it was discovered that 18 out of 80 Libraries have documented their China related collections through Finding Guides (See Chart 1). However it was not always easy to discover them if a user does not have prior knowledge about the nature of the collection. Many of the collections were named for the donors, which didn’t reflect information on their related regions or historical period. Therefore utilizing searching functionality appeared to be especially important for researchers. Relevant materials were discovered using three types of searching mechanism: Search function of Finding Guide System (e.g. Archon, ArchivesSpace, and LibGuides); Search engine of the library/college website; Popular search engine such as Google. The results yielded by keyword “China” proved to be satisfactory as the materials found were mostly central to “China” topics.

Collections with detailed descriptive information (Finding Guides) and discoverable through online searching are as following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collection Theme</th>
<th>Collections and Colleges</th>
<th>Digital Collections (Yes/No)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Missionary</td>
<td>Carleton in China at Carleton College</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Asia Collection (including four China-related collections) at Claremont Colleges</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dickinson in China at Dickinson College</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Missions in China Pamphlet Collection and Opium Pamphlet Collection at Drew University</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grinnell in China at Grinnell College</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asian History and Culture Materials at Haverford College</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Missionary Paper Collections at Hope College</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Missionaries Collection 1841-present at Mount Holyoke College</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Among the above mentioned libraries, five (Oberlin, Carleton, Claremont, Smith and Wheaton) have recently digitized selective parts of their collections. Other digital collections discovered through the web survey are stand-alone collections that do not have corresponding descriptive texts in Finding Guides.

Listed under “digital collections” or “featured collections”, these collections have higher chance of getting discovered than regular collections buried in Finding Guides. Here is a list of digital collections that are highlighted on the library or archive’s website:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Digital Collections and Colleges</th>
<th>Funding (if indicated)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Asian Studies Collection and Digital Collection Lantern Slides at Beloit College</td>
<td>Freeman Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haldore Hanson's China Collection at Carleton College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twentieth Century Posters Collection at Claremont Colleges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Sketch at Colgate University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Art Collection at Connecticut College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Asian Art Collection at Gettysburg College

East Asia Image Collection at Lafayette College

Oberlin in Asia - Shansi Digital Collection at Oberlin College Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

Formosa-Nineteenth Century Images Collection at Reed College Culpepper Foundation instructional technologies grant, Murdock Charitable Trust new technologies grant, Stillman Drake grants, Faculty Summer Scholarship funds, W.M. Keck and Booth-Ferris digital collections integration grant, Reed College Library funding.

YWCA Overseas Secretaries from China to Liberia at Smith College

Lucy A. More Collection (Images of Chinese Shoes) at Wheaton College

Chart 2

The possible factors contributing to the rising number of digital collections on China Studies in liberal arts colleges include:

- New East Asian/China Studies programs have been established and existing programs have been strengthened in liberal arts colleges at a steady pace in response to the growing influence of Chinese economy, culture and politics. There is an increasing need to re-discover and incorporate institutional collections into teaching and research.

- As China Studies become increasingly interdisciplinary, these primary sources have transformed into multidimensional objects that appeal not only to historians, but anthropologists, artists, political and social scientists and more.

- The ongoing trend of digitization in the general library and archive field begins to sweep through liberal arts colleges’ campuses. Enhancing access to information through digital technology has been a major item on library administrator’s agenda. In recent years, digital humanities has become a buzzword in academia.

- Various internal and external funding geared toward liberal arts education have made digitization more feasible (as shown in Chart 2).

The book titled “Christianity in China: A Scholar’s Guide to Resources in the Libraries and Archives of the United States” (Wu, 2009) thoroughly documents the resources on Christianity in China that reside in libraries and archives in the U.S. In this book 36 Oberlin Group colleges (see Appendix) reported that they had relevant materials, while the web survey showed that only 14 (see Appendix) of the same group of libraries in Wu’s book have online representation of their China related resources. This finding shows that many still haven’t been able to describe and publish the collections on their websites yet.
The lack of online presence may directly result in poor discoverability of these collections because nowadays researchers have come to rely more on online resources. More often than not researchers would come to the library or archive’s website first to scan for potentially valuable materials. Lower priority for processing due to lack of academic demand, limited personnel and constrained budget are common explanations to why these primary sources were not sufficiently exposed online.

**Conclusion**
As more liberal arts colleges establish China-Studies programs and even library collections to support curriculum and research needs, such hidden gems will be gradually unveiled. Thanks to the online finding guides and recent digitization initiative in the library and archive field, a significant part of these collections have become more discoverable and accessible. It is hoped that the future horizon of special collections related to China Studies in liberal arts colleges will continue to expand as more researchers start to lay their eyes and hands on these invaluable primary sources.

**Reference**


**Appendix**
36 Oberlin Group college libraries surveyed in Christianity in China: A Scholar's Guide to Resources in the Libraries and Archives of the United States (2009) reported they had primary sources on Christianity in China. 14 libraries marked with underscoring have online representation as revealed from this survey (12/2014).

Albion College, Augustana College, Bates College, Berea College, Bowdoin College, Bryn Mawr College, Bucknell University, Carleton College, Claremont Colleges, Clark University, College of Holy Cross, The College of Wooster, Davidson College, Dickinson College, Drew University, Earlham College, Furman University, Grinnell College, Hamilton College, Haverford College, Oberlin College, Ohio Wesleyan College, Randolph-Macon College, St Olaf College, Simmons College, Smith College, Swarthmore College, Trinity College, Trinity University, Union College, Vassar College, Washington and Lee University, Wellesley College, Wesleyan University, Wheaton College, Whittier College.