

Asian Studies and its research material: a roundtable discussion – a summary

Dr Amy Chan
ANU

In the common pursuit of Asia knowledge and its dissemination, the roundtable discussion brought together two interdependent sides of a divide: users of Asia-related research material and those who seek to provide them. On one side is the recognition that Australia is facing its 'Asian Century' and the need to build its Asia-related research and teaching resources (books, journals, newspapers, data, etc.) across the disciplines. On the other side are the information providers vociferously pushing to meet this need amidst budget cuts, institutional constraints, the encroachment of generalisation and a changing technology landscape. The discussion brought to the fore some of these under-discussed and –illuminated issues and challenges by traversing the divide between the academic pursuit and the provision of information sources for the study of the region, and jointly consider possible strategies to tackle these issues within the Australian context.

The first panel discussion focused on the new directions of Asian Studies, the reduction in information specialisation and its impact on academic research and activity. The focus of the second panel was on digital research and the need for a national approach to build Australia's Asia-related research resources and strategies for achieving it. Despite the apparent diversity of topics, the discussion in the two panels coalesced around two phenomenon: new directions in Asian Studies, and the rise-and-rise of digital technology.

New directions in Asian Studies and implications for subject-specialist librarianship

When Prof Robert Cribb agreed to present on the topic of Asian Studies and its future direction, neither of us knew the depth and gravity of the changes to ANU's School of Culture, History and Language. Prof Cribb lamented the shift Asian Studies in Australia has taken. In his words:

In the last two decades we have witnessed a profound 'thinning out' of the Asian Studies tradition that was based on deep familiarity with history, with 'high' cultural traditions and on research competence in more than one language. This tradition was inter-disciplinary and therefore relatively isolated from discipline-focussed scholarship. In its place we now have an approach which is much more theoretically informed but empirically weaker. Much of what is written is accessible in English rendering the need to learn the vernacular language unnecessary.

Further, the general ‘mission’ of Asian Studies to inform the wider Australian society of its Asian neighbours is somewhat accomplished as most Australians are ‘aware’ of and ‘know’ Asia to a degree through travels, news, popular culture and others. There is also the argument that because English is widely used in Asia, Australians can ‘know’ Asia without learning any vernacular languages. In addition, with the aid of Google Translate, although imperfect, has rendered much non-English publications accessible.

He continues:

The change has been driven partly by the intellectual power of theory, partly by the drive for social and policy relevance and partly by the constriction of opportunities for long and thorough training. Old-style scholars regret the shift, but the new accessibility of electronic research resources offers the change of achieving impressive results, even within the limitations of the new approach.

There is a wider diffusion of knowledge on the region made accessible partly via the various electronic media; information that is easily accessible and ubiquitous. Unfortunately, this diffusion comes at a price: such information is easily read out of context, anecdotal and its veracity unchallenged. Hence, knowledge about the region is superficial, lacking in depth and engagement.

Is superficial knowledge good enough? By extension then, is the Asian Studies subject specialist librarian still needed? The discussion that ensued unanimously confirmed the important and necessary role of the subject specialist librarian. English-language-only knowledge of the region lacks the nuanced understanding of place and people. Australia’s knowledge of the Asia region requires balanced information that is found in a wide range of resources that includes information in the vernacular languages. Members of the audience alluded to the role of the subject-specialist librarian in ‘future-proofing’ Asia research resources for future research. [Dr Aline Scott-Maxwell’s paper](#) elaborated on this issue; she discussed the current digital library environment and changing role of the specialist librarian.

Dr Vanessa Hearman presented on her experience as the academic liaison to the University of Sydney Library. This is a real-life example where there isn’t a subject specialist librarian and the task of subject-specific collection development is relegated to respective academics. Dr. Hearman noted that in the last few years 157 library staff were stood down. As a result, there was a significant shift to less specialist support and cluster-team model for library liaison, and to using approval plans for monograph acquisition. Her duties included selecting books for library acquisition and monitoring the acquisition budget, duties usually undertaken by collection development librarians. While the advantage for the particular academic undertaking these duties is a direct say in what gets acquired and the chance to choose specific titles that are close to one’s interest, such tasks take up valuable time; time taken from the other duties such as research and writing, teaching, student supervision, lesson preparation, etc. She also raised that the subject designated book-buying budgets are dependent on the size of the expected income the research

project brings: how much your research brings is how much you will get for resources. This will be a problem for smaller but significant research projects, particularly in the humanities, that do not generally generate large research income but still require extensive research resources.

Silo-isation of research resources and future-proofing access to information

The discussion in the second panel shifted entirely to what seems of concern to many: the difficulty in accessing Asia-related material, and the preservation of research resources. Drawing from her personal experience, Dr Amrita Malhi raised both issues in her presentation. As a freelance researcher, she found working outside the institutional network limited her access to much of the academic resources, particularly electronic resources. This is potentially a great inhibitor to research as more and more libraries are taking up an “e-preferred” approach to collection development, where ebooks, ejournals and eresources have become the preferred format. One would imagine that in this day and age, we would have boundary-less access to information. But unfortunately this is not the case. The rise of licensing has limited how and how much information can be shared. While the copyright act allowed for interlibrary loan of print books, it does not have jurisdiction over ebooks. The distribution of ebooks is bound by the respective license agreements between the publisher/vendor and the individual libraries or institutions. Her experience echoed with members of the audience in the discussion. The general discussion that ensued centred on the idea of a shared collection that is open to individual members and not limited to an institutional affiliation.

As with other researchers who have accumulated invaluable research material, primary sources (e.g. interview tapes, observation notes) and other ephemera, Dr. Malhi has a collection of Malaysian election ephemera in her possession which is potentially primary research material for further research on this topic. She argues that if this material was housed in a publicly accessible archive or library, this material could be a basis for other research projects, for the development of further knowledge on this topic. This, as with her previous point, echoed with members of the audience. The emeriti community have similar personal material in private collections that are presently locked away and inaccessible to others. Questions were raised on how the higher education community can ensure such material is preserved for future research. Are the universities obliged to retain and preserve the research information and data of the projects they support?

In my paper, I proposed that depositing material with a library will preserve the material, but may not necessarily ensure dissemination. Confronted with budget cuts, many libraries would not have the adequate resources to curate and catalogue the material, even less to digitise for greater discoverability and wider dissemination. The work of digitising material is highly labour intensive: to sort and evaluate the material (to curate), to design the end-product, to undertake the act of standing at the machine to press the ‘Go’ button, to scrutinise the output particularly if it has undergone OCR, to create the metadata so that it is findable, and finally to upload for public viewing and/or access.

Presently, much of this work and projects are undertaken by commercial e-publishers, such as Adam Matthew and Gale Cengage. These companies do develop products that are very good,

beautifully designed and of high usability. However, Asian Studies resource is just too much for a niche market and not commercially viable for these companies to take up. Nonetheless, these commercial companies have developed many good products for Asian Studies, particularly for China studies. But there are many more that aren't made available. So, the task of developing digital resources for other regional studies is relegated to not-for-profit, mainly academic institutions to undertake when there is spare resources or when there is demonstration of demand. In the discussion afterwards, we raised the various projects and efforts already underway: newspapers (NLA, Cornell University Library and *Indonesia's Transition in Print* (INTIP)). However, this is only a drop in the ocean. We were reminded of the non-print material such as audio-visual that also requires preservation and digitisation.

My paper concluded that there is a need for long-term commitment, planning strategy and curatorship; technology and technical knowledge: digital management, metadata standards, hardware specifications; access to funding (government and other funding bodies); and coordination between the libraries on their digital collection development initiatives.

Dipin Ouyang concurred in the conclusion of her presentation on NLA's web archiving project. The Asia and Pacific Web Archiving project started in 2007 in partnership with *Archive-IT*. Since its inception, 59 collections have been created and 2,560 sites archived. A collaborative platform amongst the research and university libraries on such projects will enable centralised coordination and policy-making, tool development and collection building, lower operational and staff training costs, and reduce duplication. In her words:

Working together gives us access to greater knowledge, expertise and best practices; encourage the development and use of common tools, techniques and standards that enable the creation of nationalised archives; and increase communication and collaboration across other institutions to avoid duplication of archiving web content.

Perhaps as an exemplar and example of how such collaboration can be realised, the panel ended with Friederike Schimmelpfennig's (presented in absentia) paper on Cross-Asia, part of the Germany's Research Foundation initiative for a national purchasing and licensing consortium. She wrote:

With more and more electronic resources coming up, the DFG saw the need of operating on a national scale very early, and clearly stated in its programmatic description that a paradigm shift from vendor-defined offers to costumer-defined offers was a first priority. The states and their libraries had already formed purchase cooperatives, or regional consortia earlier, and in cooperation with them, the DFG and other key players decided to arrange for a nation-wide purchasing and licensing system, containing two different forms of licenses: the national license and the alliance licenses.

This consortium enables the Foundation to negotiate and purchase resources on the individual library's behalf, based on a terms that are more sympathetic to libraries and users. For example, 'authorised users' encompasses individual users affiliated with authorised institutions, walk-in users, private citizens residing in Germany, and users of German research institutes in overseas.

Diane Costello, Executive Officer of the Council of University Librarians (CAUL), in her response, provided the picture of the current Australian environment. Unlike the situation in Germany, CAUL is an opt-in purchasing consortium that represents its university/research library members in negotiations with the commercial vendors, and purchases are not centrally funded. It invites libraries to opt-in on specific products, and under this model only resources that have broad interests are successfully negotiated and purchased.

Conclusion

On that note, the discussion came to an end. With renewed energy and inspiration, and a sense of conviviality and camaraderie, the group disbanded to await the next instalment in two years, at the next ASAA conference. However, the ALRA committee is determined not to allow for another two years to pass without further action on at least some of the issues raised here.