

Language and Area Studies Specialists in Libraries in a Changing Resource and Budgetary Environment

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Abstract: Asian studies programs in Australian universities and Asian-language collections in university libraries have traditionally been supported by specialist librarians with expert area studies knowledge and Asian language skills. However, pressure on staffing budgets in Australian academic libraries is increasingly impacting on these arrangements with solutions ranging from the appointment of librarians required to support multiple languages or the sharing of expertise between libraries to reliance on generalist librarians. The paper discusses the role of and need for the specialist Asian studies librarian within the contemporary Asian studies, library resourcing and online environments, considering both researcher and library perspectives.

Paper

The question I am addressing in this presentation is: - at a time when library staffing budgets are shrinking, the digital age is making resource discovery for researchers ever easier and the area studies model that has underpinned Asian studies is in transition, do we still need specialist Asian studies librarians (by which I mean librarians with one or more Asian languages and specialist knowledge of the discipline and resources)?

I will also outline a collaborative solution that we in Victoria are currently implementing at Monash University Library and the University of Melbourne Library in order to retain specialization in a shrinking budgetary environment.

Historical background of the specialist Asian studies librarian role

The specialist Asian studies librarian role emerged in tandem with the development of Asian studies in the post-World War Two period and the development of Asian-language collections, especially East Asian collections, to support teaching and research. This was a time when the market for the supply of vernacular print material was much less developed than it is now, and of course there was total reliance on print resources together with microforms for research. Specialist librarians were therefore an essential intermediary for researchers to access the materials they needed.

Even with the early introduction of electronic resources, these permitted discovery but not access: databases were mostly indexes and therefore still required the sourcing of print materials. There was minimal content available via the internet and search engines were much less sophisticated than they are now. Therefore, researchers relied heavily on curated gateways to facilitate access to online resources. I'm sure many of us remember Matthew Ciolek's Asian studies WWW virtual library (hosted at ANU), for example.

The principal reason for the development of the specialist Asian studies librarian role, however, was the technical difficulties and requirements of non-roman scripts. Early computerized platforms, systems and software did not support CJK characters. In Australia, some of you will remember that we had two separate national bibliographic databases, the ANB and the ANCJK databases. Catalogue records required romanization of scripts and romanization rules were developed specifically for libraries by the Library of Congress. Even today, these complex romanization systems are difficult for library users to use, especially as they often differ from the systems used in the particular country. Later, the retrospective work of adding CJK characters to computerized catalogue records became another requirement for library staff with knowledge of Asian languages.

Current environment

The processes for acquisition of print materials from Asia have become much more 'overseas library'-friendly than they used to be (though not equally so for all countries). Electronic resources are proliferating exponentially, they are much more user-friendly and there is an almost universal expectation for availability of full-text. In addition to subscription resources there are plentiful free resources online. The development of IME permits easy input and retrieval of material in non-roman scripts. Also, electronic resources can increasingly accommodate different scripts via single interfaces.

In this context, where researchers are becoming increasingly self-sufficient, what is the present-day role of the specialist librarian, if any?

First, I will briefly outline what currently remains of the in-house library role for specialist librarians (or staff with Asian language expertise). Then I will consider the library user's needs and the role that specialist Asian Studies librarians currently have for researchers and students. I should emphasise that my observations are based entirely on current practice and experience at Melbourne and Monash Universities and not on any systematic research of what happens at other libraries. So you're most welcome to disagree with me as part of the discussion at the end.

The following chart provides a very summarised overview of current trends in the treatment of Asian-languages materials and the role of the specialist Asian studies librarian in relation to (1) the technical services area of cataloguing and acquisitions, (2) collection management and development, and (3) liaison (which overlaps directly with the library user's needs).

Task/service/process	Current trends	Role for specialist librarian
Cataloguing	Outsourced cataloguing, catalogue records provided by vendor, reduced need for original cataloguing (records available)	Minimal role, eg. upgrading old records with characters, upgrading minimal records for e-books, correcting poor quality outsourced records
Ordering	Manual or through vendor portal.	Ongoing (but usually handled by technical support staff with Asian languages (depending on the language))
Collection management/weeding to offsite storage	Decisions often based largely on circulation statistics	Reduced role
Selection/collection development	Approval plans and patron-driven selection being trialled in some libraries	Ongoing/reduced
Trial database selection and evaluation	Some libraries rely entirely on user evaluation	Ongoing/reduced
Communication with database vendors	Mostly handled by non-specialist collections staff	Language and cultural knowledge can assist (eg. translation of Japanese database licences)
Faculty liaison	Handled by generalist liaison librarians in many libraries	Reduced but ongoing

I am not going to go through the details of the above chart.

However, to summarise the situation, I would describe the in-house library role of the specialist Asian Studies librarian today as a reduced role, or perhaps even a residual or transitional role. Libraries that have significant Asian language collections continue to benefit strongly from having Asian language expertise and subject knowledge on their staff, including librarians, but this is less critical than it once was.

So what about the researchers and the students? Can, and do, they manage adequately without specialist Asian studies and Asian language assistance from librarians?

As I mentioned, finding research resources online has never been easier and the quantity of online content is growing. This includes the provision of full-text databases, although there is a dramatic imbalance in what is available for individual countries and languages (for example, China versus Indonesia). Many researchers even manage to bypass library-subscribed and provided electronic resources to find at least some of what they need (although in the process they are also likely to miss out on much useful material).

Also, importantly, there is a growing body of research on Asia conducted by researchers without any knowledge of Asian languages and who therefore have less need of the services of specialist Asian studies and Asian languages librarians. Another current trend is that research is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary or covering multi-country regions rather than individual countries, which in turn limits the value of Asian language resources and Asian-language expertise for these researchers.

Academics undoubtedly value specialist Asian studies librarians (where these roles still exist) and they value the language-based 'one-stop shop' service that Asian studies librarians provide. This is partly because these librarians understand and may even be part of the community they serve. They have a good knowledge of their clients' needs as well as expertise in the language, the country and the information resources relevant to their clients. In some ways it is a relationship-based service based on shared values (which include an appreciation of specialization) as much as knowledge.

But is having access to specialist librarians simply a convenience for academics and researchers, a bit of a 'comfort blanket', even a luxury rather than a necessity? Could it perhaps be that, for researchers, there is status attached to the specialness of the service they are given? How much is the persistence of these roles and the value placed on them by academics and researchers simply one of continuity, tradition or familiarity? Or, alternatively, are academics and researchers simply concerned that the absence of specialist Asian studies librarians will also reduce the visibility and priority given to Asian Studies and Asian-language collections in libraries?

I would particularly like to have comments about this from the panel and the floor – especially from academics and researchers.

From my Monash University Library and University of Melbourne Library perspective, however, my observation (and again, I emphasise that this is an observation rather than a researched position) is that the role is evolving into a niche, more specialised or trouble-shooting role rather than a core role. Researchers tend to contact specialist Asian studies librarians only when they experience problems rather than as an integral part of the broader research process, for example, when they have problems finding particular materials or using particular databases or resource discovery platforms, or when they require assistance with mediating Document delivery or ILL requests or advice about accessing resources in libraries or archives in Asia.

With reduced direct contact with their client base, librarians are putting their time into developing teaching programs and specialist web resources. For example, a big project

undertaken by specialist Asian studies librarians at Monash University Library (together with the Slavic Studies Librarian) in 2015-16 was a libguide called Finding Non-English Resources. This online resource provides comprehensive information about searching and input techniques in a range of Asian and other languages and includes 'test yourself' exercises on inputting non-roman scripts and romanization.

<http://guides.lib.monash.edu/finding-non-english-resources/>

Another example is the libguide for the University of Melbourne postgraduate architecture unit on Architectural Conservation, which involved the expertise of three specialist Asian studies librarians working together from Melbourne and Monash Universities Libraries.

<http://unimelb.libguides.com/c.php?g=459836>

Solutions

So, in this changing library and research environment with a reduced or, at least, evolving role for the specialist Asian studies librarian who supports a relatively small user base, individual librarians for all languages and areas are increasingly being seen by libraries as not cost-efficient or sustainable.

So what are libraries doing about it? Some libraries are dispensing with specialist librarians altogether for cost reasons. Others are giving them additional non-specialist duties, which dilutes their specialist role, or are requiring them to cover multiple languages and area studies beyond their particular language and area studies expertise.

At Monash and Melbourne University Libraries we have embarked on a collaborative solution. In early 2015, the University of Melbourne Library suddenly found itself without its specialist librarians for Chinese and Japanese studies, while Monash University Library was trying to manage without a Chinese studies librarian, who had retired two years earlier and whose position had not been filled due to staffing rationalizations. There was already a long-term history of collaboration between the two libraries as Asian Libraries in Melbourne (ALIM).

<http://alim.monash.org/>

After very extensive negotiation between the two libraries by library directors as well as involvement by HR and the university solicitors, an agreement was reached to share two specialist librarian positions for Chinese and Japanese studies. These would be split between Melbourne and Monash University libraries respectively: 70/30% for Chinese studies and 30/70% for Japanese studies. The Chinese position would be a new appointment whereas the existing Japanese studies librarian at Monash University would work at the University of Melbourne three days a fortnight. The arrangement is that each library funds one of the positions. The agreement is for an initial three years.

With an appointment finally made for the Chinese Studies Librarian position at the end of 2015, the two new shared positions have now been in place for 6 months. The arrangement is

still a work in progress and under ongoing review. But, so far, I see it as a very positive outcome. It enables the retention of specialist language and subject expertise in both libraries to support Asian studies teaching and research at the two universities and develop and deliver programs, resources and activities. It is also supplemented by existing long-standing sharing of Indonesian and Korean expertise. A summary of the collaborative staffing arrangements is as follows:

- Newly appointed Chinese studies librarian shared 0.7 UOM/0.3 Monash
- Existing Japanese studies librarian at Monash shared 0.7 Monash/0.3 UOM
- Indonesian studies librarian at Monash continues to provide casual support at UOM
- Korean studies librarian at Monash continues to provide support at UOM in exchange for annual subsidy for purchase of Korean materials

Beyond the actual new shared staffing arrangements, my expectation is that, as part of our broader ALIM collaboration, it will lead to further opportunities for collaboration and exchange to maximize resources and impact.

In preparing for this panel, I looked at a U.S. report which flagged a future need for cross-institutional partnerships:

‘The enduring need within the library for deep subject expertise will be increasingly met by teamwork and cross institutional partnerships.’

(‘21st-Century Collections: Calibration of Investment and Collaborative Action’, ARL Task Force on 21st-Century Research Library Collections, March 10, 2012.) <http://www.arl.org/storage/documents/publications/issue-brief-21st-century-collections-2012.pdf>

I don’t know to what extent this is being implemented in the United States. In Australia, ours is the first such arrangement that I’m aware of, but I suspect it won’t be the last.