

ASIAN LIBRARY COOPERATION

written from notes to an address by
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At the ALIA Second Biennial Conference in Albury, Professor David Goodman, Director of the Asia Research Centre at Murdoch University, addressed a session on the topic of Asian library cooperation. Professor Goodman is a researcher on Twentieth Century China, who uses materials in Chinese and Japanese. The following is the gist of his address.

The key issue raised by Professor Goodman was the implications for reorganisation, management and supply of library resources, given the general trend in education and other areas towards an increased emphasis on East and Southeast Asia. All collections, including Asian collections, take time to build. For example, while Murdoch University is a major centre for Asian Studies, it was established relatively recently and the Library has had insufficient time to develop a major collection to support Asian Studies. The large collections in overseas libraries have the advantage of having started much earlier than Australian libraries and being developed over the years. One solution is cooperation and resource sharing in selection, acquisition, and management. But if there is to be cooperation, under what conditions will it function?

When we talk about Asia, it is important to recognise a couple of points. Firstly, it should be understood that Asia is not a single entity; it covers many countries and areas, each having differing library requirements. Secondly, Asian Studies should be treated in the same way as other areas of study. It would make no sense in the longer term if cooperation were at the expense of Asian Studies generally. However the costs are measured, the total life cycle costs of Asian materials should at least be roughly equivalent to non-Asia related materials.

Furthermore, Asian library collections are, by their very nature, largely in the humanities and social sciences. It should be noted that many costs of the humanities and social sciences are greater than in the sciences. Whereas scientists have their equipment and laboratories on hand, the library itself is the laboratory of the social scientist. It follows that, in libraries, the staff costs for serving humanities and the social sciences are disproportionately higher compared to the sciences.

A distinction must be drawn between library resources for teaching and library resources for research. They serve different purposes and are different in kind. In Australia, the pattern of Asian library holdings is highly concentrated in Canberra between the National Library of Australia (NLA) and the Australian National University (ANU). Together the collections, for East Asia at least, represent probably the fourth best library in the world. The other Australian libraries with specific, if limited, collections are: the University of Western Australia for South Asian material, the University of Sydney for Classical Chinese material, and the University of Melbourne on contemporary China. However, the general range of Asian material is missing.

It follows from the foregoing that cooperation in Australia is likely to be useful in the case of specific collections for research, but less useful for teaching support. In between, there is a wide range of options.

Two kinds of cooperation can be identified: cooperation within states, especially for teaching collections, and cooperation at the national level. This latter would not be simply for research collections in vernacular scripts, but for the whole range of processes involving the selection, acquisition, cataloguing and coordination of collections. Without these processes, other forms of cooperation cannot function.

Cooperation at the state level appears, superficially, to be a simple operation. In each state there is at least one adequate Asian Studies teaching library. However, it is desirable for each institution teaching Asian Studies to develop its own library support resources, since teaching materials need to be on hand. While the Asian Studies Council and its successors have provided expansion grants for Asian Studies, these have rarely included a library component. As an interim measure, cooperation within a state should be possible; unfortunately, experience indicates a low level of contact amongst neighbouring institutions in the same town, let alone the same state!

At the national level, if there is to be cooperation to achieve maximum utilisation of resources, the various universities need to recognise the centrality of the NLA/ANU library nexus and its base in ANU's academic staff. There are about 150 academic staff at ANU working on East and Southeast Asia. This could well be the highest concentration at a single institution anywhere in the world.

However, this is not an ANU resource alone. It is the basis for a national resource, which to some extent is funded or regarded nationally in those terms. The National Library, of course, is funded separately. It would appear logical that the development of Asian library resources in Australia should be based on even closer cooperation between NLA and ANU, forming a 'National Asia Library'; there should also be a concerted development Australia-wide but with this National Asia Library nexus taking the lead.

For acquisitions, cooperation could be based on a general strategy and policy which would include an agency of staff in, or travelling through, Asian countries. In China and Indonesia, for instance, serials may have to be acquired painfully, issue by issue. Alternatively, exchange schemes with libraries in Asia are often a cheaper and more effective way of obtaining access to materials from some countries. Not all materials are under bibliographic control, and there is a lack of union lists, particularly for vernacular materials.

Union lists are needed if there is to be cooperation, coordination of resources and access to them. Online catalogues would assist the process greatly. This, in turn, leads to the problem of reproducing Chinese, Japanese, Korean and other scripts online. While the technology is available, resources in terms of time and money are required to develop the appropriate systems software. Not least, at the policy level, there must recognition of the need to put Asian materials online.

Thus, cooperation in the expansion of Asian Studies library resources is not impossible, but requires funding. At the same time, the essence of the Ingleson Report was that, in the long term, as society's priorities and foci changed, resources would be diverted towards Asian Studies, rather than additional resources being added to the educational system. There are positive steps which can be taken to improve the situation. Academic staff applying for grants could assist the development of Asian library resources by always including a library component in their grant application. Additionally, other libraries outside the NLA/ANU nexus should be prepared to cooperate and make their collections available as part of the national Asian Studies resource.