

OLD BARRIERS, NEW FRONTIERS: CHINESE INFORMATION ACCESS IN AUSTRALIA

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As the millennium draws to a close, Australia is at last beginning to come to terms with the reality of its location in the Asia-Pacific region. The realisation has been, and to some extent still is, slow, painful, reluctant and driven largely by the economic imperative. Nevertheless, increased news and current affairs coverage throughout the country in both the electronic and print media, particularly since the Bicentenary, has undoubtedly contributed to raised public awareness of the ancient continent's Asian neighbours. Ironically, however, constant reference to generalities such as Asian language, culture and society with newspaper headlines urging us "All to learn Asian" or police announcements which refer to criminal suspects or fugitives from justice as being "of Asian appearance" tends to create an impression of Asian homogeneity which is to say the least quite misleading.

In fact, Asia is so vast that even superlatives fail to do it justice. The land surface alone covers 16 million square miles. Its ecological zones range from the cold Arctic tundra and Steppelands of the north to the hot, humid, tropical monsoon forests of the south. Within this huge area of roughly a third of the Earth's land surface live over two-thirds of the world's population and a greater variety of mankind than exists on any other continent. The range of languages, cultures and socio-economic conditions is immense and includes cultures as diverse as the horse-riding nomads of the Mongolian grasslands and the once head-hunting tribes of the Borneo jungle.

Providing access to information in a multitude of formats on such a broad topic as Asia presents huge difficulties. It is not possible to explore within the constraints of a single paper the plethora of issues involved in the broader topic of Asian information access, without resorting to the generalities referred to earlier. For this reason, this paper confines itself exclusively to Chinese information access which refers to information in the Chinese language about China, including Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao (sometimes referred to as Greater China) and the population of approximately 25 million overseas Chinese scattered through the world. The paper does not purport to be a comprehensive discussion of all the issues involved in providing adequate access to Chinese information sources. Rather it aims to focus on the major impediments to such access as well as the efforts currently underway to overcome them.

There are substantial holdings of Chinese language materials held in Australian library collections. Although there are Chinese collections at universities such as Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Griffith and Murdoch, the major concentration of materials is in Canberra. A survey of Asian Library Materials conducted by the National Library of Australia Distributed National Collection Office in December

1994¹ found that the combined East-Asian Collections of the National Library of Australia and the Australian National University Library constituted more than seventy five percent of the country's total holdings of East-Asian language materials. Moreover the combined Canberra collection is rich not only in quantity but also in quality and has been universally acclaimed. The East-Asian collections (of Chinese, Japanese and Korean material) are reputed to be amongst the very best in the world. Professor David Goodman, an internationally recognised China scholar, at the time Director of the Asia Research Centre at Murdoch University and now Professor of International Studies at the University of Technology, Sydney, in an address given at the Australian Library and Information Association Conference in Albury in 1992 commented that 'together the collections, for East-Asia at least, represent probably the fourth best library in the world'². The report of the Australian National University Faculty of Asian Studies Review (July 1993) too found that 'The Asian Collection is the one area in which the University Library has national and even international pre-eminence'.

In an era in which access to information is universally acknowledged as being of paramount importance and particularly, in view of Australia's increasing engagement with the Asian region, access to the information contained in the nation's Chinese collections can only be described as woefully inadequate. There are many reasons for this, most of which relate to the nature of the Chinese language. The Chinese vernacular script comprising more than fifty thousand characters is not only the most complex but also with a history of three thousand years, the most ancient system of writing still in use today. The fact that it is a tonal language and that there are both traditional and simplified forms of characters merely adds to its complexity. The reverence of the Chinese for the written word is such that rag-pickers used to be employed to collect scraps of written paper from the streets to prevent them being trampled underfoot. However, although paper and printing, dictionaries and encyclopaedias were all Chinese inventions, the process of automating the script has, because of its very complexity, lagged behind the automation of other scripts.

The basic components of Chinese are monosyllables, 410 in the case of Mandarin or *putonghua* which has been standardised as the National language and is recognised as such throughout the world. The narrow range of syllables in modern Chinese makes it impossible to spell the language phonetically. Even though individual monosyllables are also differentiated by tones, there are still far too many characters which have the same sound and the same tone but a totally different meaning. Romanisation is therefore a meaningless representation of the sounds unless of course one is lucky enough to be able to guess the meaning from the context.

Meaningless though it is, for libraries in the western world romanisation has nevertheless been the only means available to incorporate records for Chinese language material firstly into card catalogues and subsequently into automated catalogues based on alphabetical arrangements of roman script. The situation is further complicated by the fact that there is a multitude of different romanisation schemes in use in libraries throughout the world. In the English speaking world the two major schemes in use are Wade-Giles and Pinyin.

¹ National Library of Australia DNC Office. *Results of the DNC Asian Library Materials Survey Office*. February 1994

² *East-Asian Library Resources Group of Australia Newsletter* 23, November 1992

Wade-Giles romanisation is the Library of Congress standard for the romanisation of Chinese and is widely used on the island of Taiwan. In general, the Wade-Giles romanisation is used by a majority of the older and larger collections throughout North America and Australia. Pinyin which is the official romanisation used on the mainland of China is used by the more recently established and smaller collections in Australia. Any suggestion that Pinyin should be adopted as the standard provokes passionate debate amongst the international community of East-Asian librarians. Caution on this issue is justified since there is an additional complication inherent in the use of Pinyin and that is the vexed question of the lack of standardisation in relation to word division. Thus publishers of a serial published on the mainland who frequently add the Pinyin romanisation to the title page and/or the cover may and do divide the words of the same title inconsistently not only from issue to issue but even between the cover and the title page of the same issue.

Access to the information contained in Australia's Chinese collections is currently largely through card records which include the bibliographical description in the vernacular script and are therefore meaningful to those who read the language or through automated records in romanised form only which are for the most part incomprehensible to those who read the language or through a combination of both.

Currently, most of the libraries with Chinese collections in Australia are ABN participants who have been contributing romanised only records either in Pinyin or in Wade-Giles depending on the convention of the individual library to the National Bibliographical Database over a period of several years. The ANU Library is a major exception in that it has preferred to insist on the vernacular script and, in response to the wishes of its primary clientele, on acquisitions rather than cataloguing. Given the different romanisation systems, the inadequacy of the romanisation systems, the problem of word division, the absence of the vernacular script, cataloguing arrears and the lack of inclusion of much material in the national bibliographical database, discovering whether the country holds a particular item is like participating in a treasure hunt.

Major developments however are currently taking place in Australia to improve access to the country's East-Asian collections. The Australian National Chinese, Japanese, Korean Project (NCJKP) which owes its existence largely to the initiative and persistence of ANU University Librarian, Colin Steele and the pioneering role played by the ANU Library is one such development. The results of this project will be a national database of bibliographic records for Chinese, Japanese and Korean material with full support for the vernacular scripts. The database will initially contain half a million bibliographic records from a variety of sources including LC, ABN, OCLC, RLIN and Japan MARC. It will serve as a national union catalogue for the country's East-Asian collections, as a source of copy cataloguing and an OPAC for libraries whose local systems lack the vernacular script capability. Initial users of the system will be librarians and researchers from the eight participating libraries that comprise the project consortium. These are the Australian National University Library, Griffith University, Monash University, Murdoch University, University of Melbourne, University of Queensland, University of Sydney and the National Library of Australia. Other Australian and

overseas libraries have expressed interest in the system and client numbers are expected to grow after the system is implemented in 1995. Access to the system will be via the Internet as well as a gateway from ABN.

Individual libraries in Australia are also now beginning to make significant improvements in access to their Chinese collections. During 1994, the libraries of both the Australian National University and Murdoch University have implemented Innovative Interfaces' Integrated Library Management System which incorporates full vernacular script capability for East-Asian materials. At the Australian National University Library, there are full vernacular script records online with access by author, title and series for all orders placed for the East-Asian collection since May 1994 as well as at least title access in the vernacular script for all acquisitions received since that time. These should be accessible via the Internet either in romanisation or in the vernacular script depending on the individual searcher's equipment and software. When implementation is fully completed in the very near future, approximately 9000 East-Asian catalogue records produced since January 1991 using OCLC online access, the majority of which are for Chinese material will be downloaded into the system and users will be able to search for material using the vernacular script OPAC capability.

The national challenge for Australian libraries once the NCJKP is implemented and vernacular script records matched with romanised records already in the system and downloaded, will be to effect retrospective conversions for all the records which currently exist only in card form in local catalogues. This applies particularly to the larger collections which have substantial collections of material to which card catalogues are currently the only access. The ANU Library has already made overtures in this direction in the form of submissions for external funding. Although applications made so far have been unsuccessful, hopefully a funding source will soon be found which will realise the potential value to the country as a whole in the support of such a project.

Another exciting new development in relation to access to information in the Chinese language is the recently announced co-operative initiative of the Australian National University Library and the National Library of China to collaborate in a trial project to provide Internet access to tables of contents of selected Chinese journals in the vernacular script linked to key-word indexes in English. A Letter of Intent signed in Peking in March 1994 was followed in December 1994 by the signing of a formal agreement. It is hoped that the first tables of contents will be accessible via the Internet by March 1995. This initiative has been welcomed by libraries throughout the world.

Chinese language CD-ROMS are a recent addition to the publishing market in China and although CD-ROM might already be regarded as an outmoded technology for western language materials, they should make a significant contribution to information access for Chinese language materials. The ANU Library already holds Chinese language sources in a variety of different formats including film, video and satellite broadcasts of news and movies from Chinese Central Television (CCTV) which may be viewed live or from the taped broadcasts. Acquisition of several titles on CD-ROM covering sources of information as varied as the People's Daily and classical texts are currently under consideration.

There is still a long way to go before access to Chinese language information can be expected to equal access to information in roman script languages. Recent progress however has been encouraging and if it continues, considerable improvements can be expected in the foreseeable future. One could argue that it is essential to Australia's national well-being given its geo-political location that such progress does continue. It is perhaps not generally realised that Chinese, in terms of numbers of speakers, is now Australia's second language. In a recent article in the Sydney Morning Herald entitled 'Orient Express: The facts and faces behind Sydney's rapid Asian shift', Bill Mellor wrote of Sydney: 'On the streets and in the homes of what was until the mid-1970s an overwhelmingly European city, Chinese in its various forms has now overtaken Italian, Greek and Arabic to become the second language'¹. Moreover, worldwide more people are able to communicate with each other in Chinese than in any other language. China is the giant of the Asia-Pacific region with a rapidly developing economy, an enormous publishing output and its people a fifth of the world's total population. We cannot assume that English will retain its pre-eminence as a world language.

According to Professor Stephen Fitzgerald, Director of the Asia-Australia Institute and Australia's first ambassador to China delivering the annual St. James Ethics Centre lecture in Sydney in November 1993, 'Australia's institutional "discovery" of Asia lacks any intellectual base and is bereft of any long-term forward thinking. The fundamental ethical issue facing Australia today is to look forward 50 years to the convergence with Asia that will inevitably take place. It would be a time when we are totally cheek by jowl with our Asian neighbours, when every facet of Australian life will be impacted on by Asian societies and cultures, because we will be a part of an Asian political confederation in fact even if not by the way of a European model or a Treaty of Maastricht'².

Chinese culture is so far-removed from the European cultures with which Australians are usually more familiar and there are gulfs of misunderstanding between China and the Western world that no amount of trade, tourism or investment can bridge. Access to information on China is an essential pre-requisite if we are even to attempt the crossing. In the current 'global village environment', it is abundantly clear that China's destiny will determine more than the lives of its own people. Unless Australia is prepared to devote considerable resources to understanding China, the dragon may well catch us sleeping.

¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday February 4, 1995, Spectrum 1A

² *Australian Business Asia* vol.1:7, NOV17,1993)