

# DEMAND FOR CHINESE LIBRARY MATERIALS FROM THE ACT LIBRARY SERVICE:

## A SURVEY OF FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN ATTENDING CHINESE SCHOOLS IN CANBERRA

by Amy Bartlett, University of Canberra  
(paper based on Honours thesis)

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT), like Australia itself, is a multicultural society. The ACT Public Library Service (ACTLS) as a public information service provider endeavours to provide an equitable level of service to all sections of the community. However, in the face of Commonwealth funding constraints for library services, it is difficult to achieve this equitable level of service. The writer made the disappointing discovery that there were very few Chinese books in the Dickson public library. The writer was told that there were no requests for Chinese books in the library. If it were true, it might be a justification for the public library service to supply few materials. However one would like to know what the real demand is for these Chinese library materials. The objective of this research study was to ascertain the answer to this very question.

### **Aims of the Study**

The study aimed to examine demand for Chinese library materials from the ACTLS by the Chinese community in Canberra. The research findings were expected to provide information about library services which would:

- alert the ACTLS to the needs for Chinese library materials among the Chinese community;
- arouse the attention of the library administrators to improve the collection in this area;
- assist the ACTLS in the planning of library service to this Chinese community;
- increase the awareness of the Chinese community about the existence of the Chinese library materials at Dickson library;
- arouse the interest of the Chinese community in the Chinese library materials provided by the ACTLS; and
- develop a methodology which might be considered by the ACTLS in approaching other ethnic groups in the community to determine their needs for library materials in their own languages.

## BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

There is a relatively large Chinese population in the ACT but there is a small and poor collection of Chinese library materials available to this community in ACTLS. The Chinese community has apparently not expressed its needs for Chinese library materials. The existence of Chinese schools in Canberra indicates that there is an interest in learning Chinese and a potential need for Chinese reading materials. ACTLS has the intention of improving the library service to the Chinese community. What the library administrators need to know is the specific demand for the Chinese materials in the ACTLS.

For the study, it was assumed that:

- families with children attending Chinese schools were potential users of Chinese library materials;
- the expression of opinions of potential users was desirable in the planning of library services for them;
- the respondents were capable of assessing what they like to read; and
- at least one family member was capable of completing a questionnaire on behalf of the family members.

## METHOD

According to the 1991 census, there were more than three thousand people speaking Chinese at home in the ACT. In order to contact this Chinese community, three Chinese schools in Canberra were identified.

- Federation of Canberra Chinese Community Incorporated Chinese School (F.C.C.C.I. Chinese School)
- Chinese Canberra Club School: The School was established in 1982 by the Chinese Canberra Club.
- East Asian Art Society Chinese School (E.A.A.S. Chinese School):

### Pilot Survey

In this study a pilot survey of the pre-tested questionnaire was undertaken by the F.C.C.C.I. Chinese School. Altogether ten questionnaires were returned out of the twelve that were distributed. The results of the pilot study were similar to the main study. Apart from this group coming mainly from China and three families saying that they used the Chinese materials from the Australian National University (ANU) Menzies Library, the other results were consistent with the results of the main study. Hence, details of the results of the pilot study are not presented in this report.

## **Main Survey**

The main survey was conducted at the Canberra Chinese Club School and the E.A.A.S. Chinese School. The questionnaires were administered in a similar fashion in these two schools. Both school principals were contacted on the phone and on visits to their schools in March. Before the questionnaires were distributed, a sample questionnaire was given to each principal for comment (this was part of the process of pre-testing the questionnaire) and to brief them about the questionnaire.

Questionnaires, each in a numbered yellow envelope, were distributed to each student with a brief introduction to each class by the writer. The children were to take the questionnaires home to their parents and return them. The writer realised the importance of the children's assistance and therefore showed the class the souvenirs they could have on returning the questionnaire. They could pick between a box of stars or a bouncing ball. They had to return a completed questionnaire in the envelope with the drawing of a star or a ball on it. The envelope was then returned to them through the principal containing the present. The presents proved to be a successful incentive for the children to return the questionnaires.

## **RESULTS**

The response rate was 82 per cent, with responses from 68 families out of 83 families. Altogether 289 people (149 children, 136 parents, and 4 grandparents) participated in this study. This number of people represented about one-tenth of the Chinese population in Canberra. The respondents came almost equally from both schools: 140 from the Chinese Canberra Club School and 149 from the E.A.A.S. School.

### **Personal Details of Respondents**

From the background of the respondents the researcher concluded that this surveyed group of the Chinese community came predominantly from families of middle-aged parents with children going to primary or high schools. Most of these families came from Hong Kong and Malaysia, with most children born in Australia. Moreover they were not new to Canberra, nearly half of them having lived in Canberra for over ten years. The surveyed families could also be considered to be an educated class as over half of the parents had received a tertiary education at a university or college. Among all parents, only two were unemployed. This is considerably below the ACT adult unemployment rate of 7.3 per cent in May 1995. Three-quarters of parents had a full time or part-time job.

The background of the respondents can be attributed to the place of collection of the data. Parents who are more educated, better off and more concerned about their children inheriting the Chinese culture tend to send their children to Chinese schools. Also only those families who are not new to Canberra have the necessary knowledge of Chinese schools for their children. Parents who have school age children are normally middle aged.

There was a small number of children who were attending university or college.

This group of students was thought to have more access to Chinese collections provided by universities such as ANU, University of Canberra, or the National Library of Australia. However further investigation would be required to verify this point.

The survey results did not show that there was a sufficiently large population of aged Chinese to justify a special service to this group of people at this moment. The ACTLS, in the face of limited funds, might have to concentrate on providing a service to the portion of the Chinese population consisting of families with middle-aged parents with children attending primary or secondary schools.

### **Reading Chinese Materials**

As far as general reading of Chinese materials by the respondents was concerned, results showed that there were more people who preferred reading in English than in Chinese, the majority of whom were children. This could be explained by the fact that there was a high number of children who were born in Australia and whose Chinese was not good or who did not know Chinese at all.

Results also showed that parents who spoke better Chinese than English, or with a good level of Chinese, tended to read more Chinese materials and had a greater preference for reading in Chinese. An overall preference among parents for reading in English can be explained by the fact that the surveyed parents had a high educational background. It is assumed that their English was good enough for them to enjoy reading in English.

However, overall, there were more people who actually read Chinese materials than those who did not. Those who did not know Chinese or whose Chinese was not good also indicated that they read Chinese materials, even though there were not as many as those whose Chinese language knowledge was good. It can be explained by the fact that some respondents whose Chinese was not good liked to read in Chinese to improve their Chinese reading abilities. Children whose parents were interested in reading in Chinese and sent them to Chinese schools would be encouraged to read in Chinese as well. On the whole, the majority of those respondents who read Chinese materials could read Chinese very well.

Those respondents who read Chinese materials were frequent readers of Chinese newspapers and magazines. More respondents expressed that they read books, but they did not read them as frequently as they did magazines. As magazines are published on an ongoing basis, most people want to keep up to date with current issues of topics in which they were interested.

When they read, most preferred reading in full form Chinese characters. This was probably because most respondents came from countries like Hong Kong or Malaysia, where full form Chinese characters are used.

The previous description presents respondents' reading habits of Chinese materials. In serving this part of the Chinese community, the ACTLS has to consider these characteristics in the development of the Chinese library collection.

Results indicating infrequent use of the ACTLS's and other libraries' Chinese collections were disappointing. They implied that the reading needs of Chinese materials were, for the most part, not currently being met by the ACTLS. These respondents preferred buying their own collections or borrowing them from their friends. Instead of guessing what the Chinese would like to read, the ACTLS has to reconsider the real reading interests of the Chinese community when buying the Chinese library materials. The following section gives an insight into this area.

### **Use of Chinese Library Materials in the ACTLS**

Use of the ACTLS by this Chinese community was generally high. Most of them were members of the ACTLS. This finding was very different from the traditionally held attitude that non-English people do not like reading. This result can be attributed to the high level educational background of this survey's Chinese community.

Even though the respondents were frequent borrowers of books, they seldom or never borrowed any Chinese books from the ACTLS. In fact, nearly eighty per cent of this Chinese community had no awareness of the Chinese books located at Dickson library. For those who were aware of their existence, the reasons for not borrowing were that they lived or worked too far from Dickson library and that they were too busy. However, most people agreed that the existing Chinese collection was relevant in its content but too small in size.

Most people nominated children's literature, fiction and Chinese literature in the form of books, magazines and video cassettes as the kinds of Chinese materials they would like to have in the ACTLS. The most popular content was Chinese cooking, followed by news about their home country and Chinese medicine. The question limited the possible subjects that the respondents could pick. The researcher suspected that if more alternatives had been provided that they would have been selected as well. Therefore the library should not limit itself to providing books on these topics.

If suitable materials were provided in the ACTLS, these people would be more likely to borrow, and to borrow more frequently. Most of the respondents reflected that they would borrow them at least once or twice a month. This possible high future usage seems to justify improvements to the ACTLS' service to this Chinese community in the form of more interesting and an increased number of Chinese library materials.

Last, but not least, most parents thought that it was very important for their children to learn to read Chinese. After all, it is important for one to inherit one's culture by maintaining one's own language.

### **IMPROVING LIBRARY SERVICES TO THE CHINESE COMMUNITY**

This section suggests courses of action for the ACTLS to improve its Chinese collection. Areas for further study are also suggested. The practicality of these suggestions largely depends on the priority the ACTLS places on the service to the

ethnic groups in Canberra and therefore its allocation of funds and staff time.

- **Increased Awareness**

The low awareness of the existing Chinese collection at Dickson library presents a significant message to the ACTLS that more promotional work has to be done. Promotion in the form of display is often effective. Other outreaching promotional activities include advertisements in the newsletters of Chinese community clubs and organisations. A simple advertisement in Chinese and English could also be posted on Asian food shop windows or Chinese restaurant notice boards.

- **Relocation of the Chinese Collection**

More thought also needs to be given to the location of the Chinese collection in the library. At present it is situated behind a pillar with no signs whatever to indicate its location. Relocation to a more open space would increase awareness and use of the materials. As for relocating the entire Chinese collection, there is no information available to indicate which branch would be the most suitable. As there is no concentration of Chinese community living in any suburbs, the Dickson branch was still thought to be the most suitable as Dickson was considered to be the "China town" of Canberra for its concentration of Chinese shops and restaurants.

- **Improved signage**

If the library service had difficulty relocating the Chinese collection elsewhere, there should at least a sign saying "Chinese collection behind this pillar!" to clearly indicate its location in the Dickson Library. Signs also need to be placed near the front door and the reference desks to provide clear directions.

- **Development of a Chinese Catalogue**

At present, Chinese titles are romanised and can be accessed on the Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC). Without a knowledge of romanisation, most Chinese people do not understand the romanised titles on the OPAC. Since the provision of Chinese script on the OPAC is out of the question in the near future, a separate hand-written or computer printed Chinese catalogue is a practical alternative. A volunteer could be invited to write this catalogue if there is no Chinese-literate librarian available. It could be placed at the information desk at each branch library and also with the actual collection.

- **Setting Up a Consultative Committee**

In order to collect more reliable information about the real interests and needs of the Chinese community, a multicultural consultative committee could bring together some outstanding community members with knowledge of current reading interests of the relevant ethnic groups. During my contact with the Chinese community, there were people who enthusiastically volunteered to participate on this kind of committee. At the moment, there is a general Collection Development Policy Committee in the north region of the ACTLS. It is open to public participation.

However, the ACTLS should consider setting up a committee oriented specifically to the service of the multicultural communities in order to provide a multicultural library service.

- **Encouraging Donations**

In the face of funding shortages in the public library system, donations are an alternative method of increasing the number of books in the collection. At the time of writing, the ACTLS was promoting donation of books to the library. The writer believes that if the ACTLS actively approached the Chinese community through Chinese clubs and organisations, to donate Chinese library materials, the response would not be disappointing.

### **AREAS FOR FUTURE STUDY**

This survey focused on the demand for Chinese library materials by families with children attending Chinese schools in Canberra. Further research into the general library and information needs of the Chinese community as well as specific groups and their information seeking behaviour is suggested. It is also worthwhile to study the general demand for Chinese reading materials by the general public, which includes those who study Chinese as a language at the universities or at school.

A similar study can be carried out with other language schools, such as French, to compare results. At the moment, there is very little information available on what exactly is needed by various ethnic communities. A comparative study of different needs of the ethnic groups would be interesting and useful in helping the ACTLS in the planning of a multicultural library service.

### **CONCLUSION**

The public library has a mission to serve its community's reading and information needs. Australian public libraries, like many public libraries in other countries of the world, such as America or Canada, have been facing the challenge of providing a multicultural library service to diverse communities. Their success depends on the priority that the library management place on this service and the knowledge of the reading needs of different ethnic communities. The availability of resources is also significant in a multicultural library service. Under the 1995-96 ACT Budget, the ACTLS has already felt the effects of budget cuts. Some library services have already been affected (Community and Public Sector Union. ACT Branch 1995). It is hoped that despite this difficult circumstance, the ACTLS will persist in improving library service to the Chinese community.

It is also essential to recognise the demands before any policy can be developed appropriately. As it is clearly shown in this survey that the Chinese community has a demand for Chinese library materials; the decision to respond rests with the ACTLS.