

A PATH THROUGH THE LIBRARY: UNDERGRADUATE, BUT NOT FOR MUCH LONGER, AT MONASH UNIVERSITY

by Teresa Anile¹

INTRODUCTION

Apparently my aura signals that I am the quintessential 'average' Asian Studies Research Library 'customer'. It must have been this that prompted Eiko Sakaguchi, the Japanese Studies Librarian at Monash University Library, to request that I write this article on my experience in using the library. She could not possibly have known that I have my personal list of publications on Japan available in the Monash collection, divided into subject categories such as History, Art, etc. My lecturers might have guessed, though, when this 'smarty pants' would volunteer serial numbers whenever some book or author was suggested to the class. My protestations that my Japanese linguistic skills were practically non-existent, and that all my sources for academic work had been in the English language, did not dissuade her that my opinions were still valuable².

I have been an undergraduate in the Department of Asian Languages and Studies for the past three years and have managed to use the library quite well despite my aversion to electronic retrieval systems. Not without frustration, naturally, but with delight too at the plethora of articles and monographs that I would one day read for my personal enjoyment (hence the list).

Earlier this year I presented a tutorial paper on the future direction of Japanese Studies (in Australia). I would like to borrow from that paper the concepts below that could (tangentially) be applicable to this discussion regarding issues in library use:

- Integration and development of an interdisciplinary focus
- Understanding the whole of contemporary Japan
- Academic competition for resources

This context is used as a starting point because it was also for this tutorial that my co-presenter came up against a brick wall at every electronic turn when trying to find out about the state of Japanese Studies in Japan. All searches led to information about Japanese Studies in Europe!

The response to the user survey conducted by Eiko Sakaguchi, also published in this newsletter, provides good ideas for improvements to library services. I

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² Accordingly, I will be writing about the library in general unless I specify the ASRL.

would like to personalise the anonymous figures by expanding on some of the suggestions made therein:

1. List of recent Japanese publications
2. Current publications
3. The gap between student needs and the collection, including subject bias
4. Conference papers and theses
5. Co-operative resources

No doubt the lecturers' patience was stretched every time I knocked on their door, attempting overly ambitious essays and failing to contain and narrow the topic but their enthusiasm and interest were encouraging. This was unfailingly the response I also received from Eiko Sakaguchi. Nevertheless, the deflation was real too, when we realised that often there was a dearth of information on the issues that I wished to explore.

Throughout the last three years there have been some recurrent themes in both my essays and tutorials; gender relationships, sexuality, androgyny – this last has been the bane of my library searches. Breadth of materials means that writing on divergent topics, from the *Bunraku* puppet theatre to post-war economics, is less problematic than developing one area of interest without continually coming across the same titles. At least honours and post-graduate students have recourse to the document delivery service for that out-of-reach article.

I understand co-operative journal acquisition is already in place since the MARLC (Melbourne Asian Research Libraries Consortium) was formed in 1993, however there is still room for improvement. A journal like the *US-Japan Women's Journal* is available in Canberra but nowhere in Melbourne. Last year when doing *Women in Japanese Society* I kept coming across articles relating to relationships between the sexes, and on women's role in marriage and the family which I had to cross off my list when the search traced them to the aforementioned journal. On another occasion, the *Haiku Review* was also unavailable in Melbourne, whilst the *Chanoyu Quarterly* is available at Deakin University [I wonder who needs it there?].

My needs are not those of the academic who generally has a personal library of monographs and subscriptions to journals and a network system which keeps them abreast of recent developments; nor of the post graduate whose requirements are very specific: depth of information on a narrow field of research.

Also, not yet proficient enough in the Japanese language to seriously peruse the ASRL, I am limited to English language sources which are generally excellent and wide ranging. One noteworthy gap is in visual resources and graphic materials such as contemporary or historical photography. I refer to both visual art but especially 'street' images of Japanese society which give clues to the physical and socio-cultural terrain of contemporary daily life. These would also broaden the

user base to non Japan area specialists doing comparative studies as well as those who are not Japanese literate³.

Predominantly lacking is information that is up to the minute and focused on popular culture. I do not wish to give the impression that my main cultural interest is *manga* or *anime*, for I bemoan the whittling of departments that has reduced teaching staff and curricula to the barest thread of a classical and traditional emphasis. Japanese culture is now a whirlwind tour through the centuries; and whilst there is a preponderance of materials on traditional culture, there is precious little time for those of us who yearn to linger in front of this Hiroshige woodblock print or that *Waka* poem.

In the evolving academic climate of cultural studies, there is a cry for the legitimisation of popular, or mass culture, as a serious academic field of study. Treat argues that "the shows we watch and the novels we read are not escapes from the tedium of everyday life but are implicated in how that life is constructed and experienced"⁴. Accordingly, students of foreign cultures who cannot experience them first hand must rely on 'images' which vividly present those societies- if they are not to regurgitate tired and one dimensional views.

The study of Japan has broadened from the homogeneous to a more complex image, and library materials must reflect the requirements of the departmental coursework. Hence, the importance of current periodicals, including non academic ones of popular culture and the arts, in providing a window to contemporary Japan. Perusing something like the monthly *Tokyo Journal* (available on the web) for example, which publishes what's on in Tokyo, as well as articles on current trends, could lead to observations about what is popular and of interest to young people and foreigners. Ideas and questions about a society can also germinate from these less than lofty beginnings.

Library cataloguing is a specialised art and inscrutable to unsystematic minds struggling to guess which combination of words will reveal some relevant articles. Often success is as much a result of serendipitous manual 'thumbings' as of voracious reading which points to related essays.

If I can digress to an 'experiment' I conducted. It goes without saying that finding what one needs is easier if one knows the exact title but gems also lie in edited monographs with titles such as *Japan in Traditional and Post Modern Perspectives*, a book I stumbled upon during the year. Therein are essays relating to Japanese nativism, literature, economic development and women in cinema, amongst others. I chose this last essay and went a-searching in the Bibliography of Asian Studies, the Social Sciences and Humanities Indexes. It was easy to type in the exact title and quickly ascertain that it was unlisted. But my point is that it is frustrating to know that the information is frequently on the shelf if only there was a path to it.

3 Masako Ema Watanabe, International Research Centre for Japanese Studies, "Visual image databases and research projects at Nichibunken: possibilities and limitations for Japanese Studies, in *Journal of East Asian Libraries* No.118, June 1999, pp:21-24.

4 See: the Introduction, "Japanese Studies into Cultural Studies" by John Whittier Treat, in *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture*, (Surrey, England: Curzon) pp:1-14

The suggestion for maintaining a selection of relevant conference papers and theses is excellent. Many interesting papers are not always published. At the 1996 British Association of Japanese Studies Conference, Rupert Cox presented a paper on how the Zen Arts contribute to the 'orientalist' mystification of Japan. In vain I searched the BAJJ Journals around that year as well as the web.

Undoubtedly one of the skills that students need to acquire during their time at university is the ability to research materials. However some short cuts would be valuable for time strapped students. Most lecturers provide very useful reading lists for their subjects. A list of recent acquisitions of Japan related publications could be posted on the subject noticeboard. Library sessions specifically catering to Japanese Studies, for example, at the beginning of each year might also be valuable. It takes a good deal of time both to find out what is available and for students to become experienced enough to know what questions to ask of a librarian or to think more laterally when approaching searches. For example, it is worth students being informed about the types of journals which, though not solely about Japan, regularly contain relevant articles. In recent issues of the *Asian Journal of Women's Studies, Gender and History*, and the *Journal of Popular Culture* topics covered were, respectively, the labour migration of women into Japan; gender and power in the US Occupation of Japan; and the export of Japanese cartoons and animation to the US.

A more co-operative approach to sharing resources need not only be for institutions, but could encompass students in the same class. At the risk of sounding quaint, I would propose a return to the spirit of the library monitor or students interested and willing to act as resources to their group; the more the merrier, each according their strengths. For example, the luddite could enlist the computer nerd's *sang froid* when faced with a web search. These interactions occur spontaneously, of course, but could also be incorporated into the classroom ethos, with the last five minutes of a tutorial devoted to sharing resource knowledge. This presupposes that there is ever time available for such attention to detail and depth of enquiry; the reality is that tutorial times can barely accommodate the discussions which follow a presentation.

Let me, nevertheless, go even further and suggest that students be paid as additional support either to the subject lecturer or librarian and serve as a connection to relevant resources.

CONCLUSION

Commitment and integrity is difficult to maintain in times of competition for ever tightening financial resources. By colluding with employers who view the Arts degree as irrelevant, short sighted university administrators unwittingly dilute their university's reputation⁵. Similarly, there needs to be an understanding of the importance of libraries to research communities and the confidence and commitment to provide not only a solid and balanced collection but also the technical support for good service provision.

5 . Adeline Johns-Putra and Trefor Jones, "The Australian Arts Education Crisis: A Solution?" in *Compass* 1999, Monash Postgraduate Association, pp:20-22.