

National CJK Service -- What is in it for Chinese studies scholars?

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A major obstacle for Chinese studies in Australia

Primary sources written in Chinese are indispensable for Chinese studies. Obtaining Chinese language materials has been a daunting task for scholars ever since the 1950's when Chinese studies began in Australia, as such materials were not easily obtained from sources within this country.

Scholars have been trying to overcome this obstacle by:

- Buying materials themselves. Buying Chinese materials in Australia nowadays is much easier than before as there are more local specialist bookshops. Internet shopping from online bookstores specialising in Chinese materials also makes the buying process much easier and faster.
- Going on field trips in the areas concerned - China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.
- Using Chinese materials available on the Internet. More and more full text databases have become available in recent times.

These methods can be expensive, and, the materials obtained by individuals are usually not available for wider use. Libraries should have the responsibility for collecting. Tertiary education and research are inconceivable without library support; scholars are dependent on libraries for much of their information needs.

The response from libraries

Libraries responded to scholars' needs more or less when Chinese studies began. University libraries in Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra have been steadily building their Chinese collections. The National Library has also been committed to establishing a healthy Chinese collection - its Chinese collection together with the ANU's forms over 80% of Chinese materials in Australia. The Chinese collections in Canberra are commonly regarded as the national collections.

Access to the highly concentrated national collections has created problems for scholars not residing in Canberra. To use the collections, they would have to:

- Come to Canberra in person
- Rely on the interlibrary loan services provided by their own libraries to borrow materials from the national collections

To use the national collections effectively, scholars outside Canberra need to know what is in them. They need an efficient and accurate way of looking up the catalogues of the national collection, and this was considered the highest priority.

Further response from libraries -- ABN

Libraries were quick to respond. In 1981, a national library network, the Australian Bibliographic Network (ABN), was established. Until it was replaced by the new national network system, Kinetica service, in April this year, ABN was one of the success stories of the Australian library community. ABN enabled most libraries in Australia to contribute data in support of union catalogue for materials held in Australia.

Materials in Chinese script were steadily added to ABN over the years, but only in the transliterated form, as there was no library software available at that time which could handle CJK scripts.

Whilst this provided some access it still was not sufficient as there were a few drawbacks. Transliterated words were not easily identified, even by trained users. Also, the transliteration systems used to represent Chinese characters varied, members could use Pinyin and/or Wade-Giles forms, as both forms were recognised by ABN.

The following example demonstrates the confusion caused by using transliterated words. A Chinese novel about a love story in Hong Kong by the famous author Wang Anyi could coexist on the ABN in different forms:

Hsiang-kang ti ch'ing yu ai – Wang An-I chung p'ien hsiao shuo
(in Wade-Giles)

Xianggang de qing yu ai – Wang Anyi zhong pian xiao shuo
(in Pinyin, using one of the recognised word-division guidelines)

Xianggang de qing yu ai – Wang Anyi zhongpian xiao shuo
(in Pinyin, using another recognised word-division guideline)

Xiang gang de qing yu ai – Wang An yi zhong pian xiao shuo
(in Pinyin, using another recognised word-division guideline)

Apart from the confusion caused by using transliterated words, the other disadvantage of using ABN was that the search interface was not very user friendly, and only trained library staff, and not users, generally had access to it.

Lack of access to scripts was clearly a major deficiency. The need for an automated library system to support the CJK script languages was identified as an essential step towards the aim of giving timely and accurate access to scholars. A good collection could become a wasted collection to scholars, if access was poor or nonexistent.

Further response from the libraries -- The National CJK Service

What East Asian librarians have wanted for a long time was to have a national system which allowed them to use East Asian characters for cataloguing their CJK (Chinese Japanese and Korean) materials and provide wide access to their holdings.

The time was ripe by the end of 1980's as library systems that could support CJK scripts were starting to appear. But librarians still needed support, moral as well as financial. Academics provided them with both.

The call to have a national CJK library system came loud and clear from the academic circle (Ingleson Report in 1989, Ross Report in 1990). They even went much further by helping the library community in obtaining funding from the government, A\$20,000 from the Department of Employment and Training in 1991 to be used to search for a suitable system, A\$60,000 from the Australian Research Council for identifying a suitable system, and A\$400,000 for the implementation of the selected system.

The Australian East Asian library community then took up the challenge in 1993 and worked hard to turn the idea into reality – resulting several years later in the establishment of the National Chinese Japanese Korean System. The search for the system and its implementation took over 2 years. It was a joint effort involving a consortia of members including the National Library and seven universities libraries with large CJK collections. The National CJK Service database went live in June 1996.

The National CJK Service database is now growing fast. In June 1999, the database contained more than 1,000,000 cataloguing records and 312,000 location statements compared to 520,000 bibliographical records and 220,000 location statements in June 1996.

The number of members has also grown from the original 8 in 1993 to the present 22 including the National Library, 15 university libraries, 6 public and special libraries and 1 library consultancy company. The National Library administers the system on a cost recovery basis while all member libraries contribute data and holdings and mutual technical support. There are also advisory mechanisms for members to provide policy advice.

The National CJK database can store the data in the original script as well as the transliterated words. To meet the needs of libraries and academics, two parallel databases were created, one using Wade-Giles transliteration and the other using Pinyin. Users therefore have more choices.

The National CJK Service's solution to ABN's confused displays is that, for example if we take the same titles mentioned above, these can now be searched either in the Wade-Giles or in the Pinyin database, and the search terms can be in the transliterated form or the Chinese characters. The bibliographic record display includes both the transliterated form and the Chinese characters. The confusion is gone.

Hsiang-kang ti ch'ing yu ai – Wang An-I chung p'ien hsiao shuo

香港的情與愛 - 王安憶中篇小說

Xianggang de qing yu ai – Wang Anyi zhong pian xiao shuo

香港的情與愛 - 王安憶中篇小說

What can academics do for the National CJK Service database?

The Australian Library community has benefited from the National CJK Service and academics are believed to be the biggest winner. Academics can directly benefit from it, ie if their libraries join, academics can use a PC in their library to search Australia-wide holdings on the database and see displays containing characters and so on. CJK data is now available in a variety of formats with an easy to use interface.

There is room for improvement of the system, librarians know that well. But in order to decide on which improvements should be made, users' input is vital. The system needs to be used and viewed critically. Comments and feedback then should be provided to the librarians and the system's administrators for any future development. Academics, who pushed for the creation of the system, can now contribute in order to improve the system.

If your university is not a National CJK Service member, perhaps you can urge your library to join. If your library is already a member, go and talk to the library staff about how to use the Service to its fullest extent and to reap the benefits.

Make use of the free trial period of the Service's Web OPAC (WebPAC). If you have access to the Web, you can search the WebPAC anytime and anywhere. The URL is: <http://cjk.nla.gov.au>. In order to view the CJK characters, you will require specialist CJK software on the computer. Consult your East Asian librarian for the required software.

Your comments and feedback is vital for the improvement of the service and its future development. Librarians have done their part, now it is up to the users, especially the academics, to use it, and let the National Library or your East Asian Librarians know what you think of the service, whether you like it or not.