

LIBRARY ISSUES FOR CHINESE STUDIES ACADEMICS IN AUSTRALIA

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Most of what I want to say builds on the contributions of Kam Louie and other academics at earlier library panels at Chinese or Asian Studies Conferences. The issues do not go away, but need to be kept in the public eye.

Chinese Studies academics in Australia enjoy both positive and negative circumstances in comparison with their colleagues elsewhere. On the positive side, we have a world-class China collection (especially for modern and contemporary China) in two libraries in Canberra, which compares well with anything outside China or the United States. In the most general terms, we must ensure that the collection is maintained and kept up to date.

On the negative side are the usual issues of the tyranny of distance and of scale. In Western Australia (and the Northern Territory) we are even more conscious of distance than are academics in the rest of Australia. The cost of going ourselves, or sending our graduate students, to work in the libraries in Canberra is very substantial. The time difference also requires a greater commitment of time (a day visit, which is possible for academics in Sydney or Melbourne, and maybe even other Eastern States centres, is out of the question for us). An aspect of distance is also the small scale of most China centres outside Canberra, which makes it difficult to argue for large regional collections of China material.

What are the implications of this situation?

First, it is vital that the Canberra collections are seen as national rather than local resources - both are after all funded on this assumption. The National Library of Australia has always seen its role in this way, and has always been extremely helpful. The record of the Australian National University (ANU) has been more mixed (though by no means always negative), leading to some resentment in the states. In the long run, amalgamation of the two collections into a single National Asia Library seems a logical course of action. In the meantime, both of the existing libraries should reach out to serve the whole country.

Second, one important way to do this is to re-institute the travel grants for library use by research students. This issue was raised by Kam Louie last year, and must be given priority in terms of actually serving the whole nation: academic staff also need such support, but they have more access to research grants, so that the most urgent need is for research students. On a more minor note, since most students and academics coming to Canberra

will find that the most efficient way to use their time is to slave over a hot photocopy and copy materials to take back to read at home, it is important to keep copying costs as low as possible.

Third, we need to note the very positive role played by the Internet catalogues of the two libraries, recently upgraded by the CJK system. Minor irritants remain - continuing use of Wade-Giles (though I am happy to hear both libraries are switching to Pinyin), incomplete listing of some earlier works etc - but overall these catalogues are a major resource, when backed up by an efficient inter-library loan system.

Fourth, I wonder whether it might not be worth the Canberra libraries considering a scheme such as that at the Universities Service Centre in Hong Kong, where one can hire research assistants to collect and photocopy materials on a particular topic. I am not sure what the cost implications of this would be for the libraries or for the clients, but it would be another way to increase the access of the states to the national collections.

I have already mentioned the impact electronic catalogues accessible through the web have had on our research. The broader potential of the Internet is of course even greater, and I have found Bick-har Yeung's paper at this session extremely useful in that context. Obviously the Internet has the potential to overcome the tyranny of distance to some extent. The ANU Chinese Serials Database is a major step forward in this respect (though it is no longer being updated and the latest issues are from 1995; I also had difficulty in using the search engine last time I tried). Again, the ANU Asian Studies WWW Virtual Library is a major gateway into a mass of materials. Beyond that, more and more Chinese periodicals and other materials can now be found on the 'net, so the need physically to go to Canberra (or elsewhere) to access them is less (though not, at least to an old-fashioned scholar brought up in the 60s, removed entirely!).

There remains, however, a problem of scale. Inevitably, many of the Internet sites - China and elsewhere - charge for access. Certainly some of the major Western language sites (Nexis, WNC etc, but these are useful far beyond the China field) are quite expensive. Here scale becomes a problem - within only a small number of China scholars in any one place, University libraries have to question whether it is worth subscribing to narrower China-related sites for just one or two users. I don't know what the answer to this is - there are obviously complex copyright and commercial issues involved - but it does point to the fact the Internet will not solve all problems.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Andrew Gosling for organising this panel and for his continuous focus over many years on user concerns.