

New directions for library collections on Asia

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Introduction

How are we to define ‘scholarly information on East Asia’ in today’s academic and research environment? What is the ‘Asian studies’ that libraries with East Asian collections are here to serve? My paper will focus on the development of what is generally called the ‘new’ Asian studies, and review how it grew out of earlier roots in orientalism and area studies. I will discuss some of the issues for libraries in collecting for the ‘new’ Asian studies, and note in passing how some of the academic theories underpinning modern Asian studies have considerable relevance for the development of library collections on Asia as well.

The main purpose of the paper is to describe the implications for libraries in building collections for the new Asian studies, and to pass on observations of the Australian experience in providing services to a new generation of Asian studies scholars. This group has different expectations and interests compared to its predecessors, and I believe we need to ensure that library collections and services remain relevant to them, or run the risk of library collections being ignored.

From this I will conclude that there are pressing reasons to consider long term changes in collecting policy for those libraries with Asian collections, both within and outside the Asian region.

New research paradigms for the study of Asia

The idea that Asian studies have developed and changed over the years is by now well established. It was a central theme of the National Library’s Asia Research Forum in October 2005, where a number of speakers charted the historical development of Asian studies as a discipline.

Historical paradigms in Asian studies can generally be summarised as the ‘Orientalist’ view and the ‘Area studies’ view. The orientalist view dominated until the mid-20th century, and focused on the ‘deep history’ of Asia, that is a study of its culture, literature, language and philosophy, recognizing the long history of civilization. The orientalist view was linked to the colonialist period, when Asia was seen as something to be ruled and controlled – a view expressed in the writings of Edward Said.

By contrast the Area studies view underpinned the post-colonial era of capitalism, communism and cold war politics. This was a time of the so-called 'helping hand' of developed countries, and research focused on the division between the East and the West, between developing and developed countries. It tended to focus on particular historical periods of the country, such as modernisation issues and it was frequently country-based.

In the late 20th and early 21st century, the emergence of the theories of postmodernism and poststructuralism in the academies radically altered the social sciences and humanities, and along with them Asian studies. Postmodernism brought the idea of cultural relativism, the idea that all communication is shaped by cultural bias, myth, metaphor, and political content. There was no such thing as objective reality, only representations of reality.

Deconstructionists, structuralists and poststructuralists, led by Jacques Derrida, applied the theories of postmodernism to the analysis of texts. Deconstruction was meant to undermine the frame of reference and assumptions of a text and reveal its contradictions, and ultimately its lack of authority. This led to the poststructuralist position that there was no intrinsic meaning or truth, only a superficial or surface form. These debates then entered the academic disciplines, with far-reaching consequences for disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, such as history, politics and literature. The debate over postmodernist theories has become exceedingly theoretical and complex, with very little agreement, even, over what postmodernism actually is. I will not discuss it further here, but refer interested readers to the Wikipedia (itself a notable example of the postmodernist fluidity of knowledge) for an excellent summary of its main points.

The Asian studies that is emerging from these turbulent currents of modern thought looks very different from its 'area studies' predecessors. The topics being written about and discussed will be familiar to anybody dealing with Asian studies researchers or attending conferences:

- 'Subaltern' studies¹
- Post-colonial theory
- Gender and feminism issues
- 'Critical' Asian studies²
- 'Connected' studies, transcending the nation-state
- Globalisation studies

Research trends in Australia and elsewhere

¹ A general term drawn from Indian studies, looking at how people actually lived day-to-day at the grassroots level, not just as colonised peoples.

² As exemplified by the University of Washington project and related publications, accessible at <http://depts.washington.edu/critasia/home.html>

In Australia and elsewhere these topics are being pursued with enthusiasm by younger scholars, as a glance at any Asian studies conference program will tell you. In Australia at present a 'baby-boomer' change is occurring as a large cadre of senior and highly respected scholars who entered the field in the 1970s is leaving the scene and a new field of talented younger postgraduates and scholars is emerging. These younger scholars are benefiting from the solid foundation laid by earlier generations of scholars, but they are taking a new path.

Research topics are no longer bound by a particular discipline, such as history or politics. Interdisciplinary studies are increasingly popular. Issues and problems drive the research instead, such as gender, HIV-AIDS or terrorism. Country studies are now replaced by topics like sub-national studies, minority studies, provincial studies and inter-country studies (migration between China and India; management of bird flu in Asia). Comparative studies are now often between countries of Asia, not between East and the West. The idea of 'East and West' has been displaced by 'the local and the global', as research focuses on the local in order to understand the global – terrorism studies being a case in point.

And in Australia, the study of Asia has spread beyond the traditional Asian studies faculty. More than half of the current cohort of Asia scholars work outside the traditional Asian studies faculty – in schools of law, politics, history, communications, health, business, cultural studies and so on.

New demands on library collections

So, as these disciplinary shifts are taking place in the tertiary sector, are researchers really changing their library usage patterns? To test this, a survey of Asian studies postgraduates and researchers' library usage habits was run jointly by the National Library of Australia and the Australian National University's International Centre of Excellence in Asia-Pacific Studies in September and October 2005. The survey was circulated widely amongst Australian tertiary institutions and achieved enough responses to be statistically significant.

Several hypotheses were tested. One was that use of the National Library's Asian language print collections was declining because researchers were not interested in its subject content. Another was that researchers lacked the language skills to use the collections. Another was based on anecdotal evidence that some younger scholars working in multidisciplinary fields lacked the traditional print-based research skills that were such a feature of their predecessors' work. And of course we speculated that many researchers just used Google to look for resources. (Evidence, unfortunately, pours in for this. As I was preparing this paper, one reputable academic commented to me: "[Google is] probably the only tool my students actually use, and I think a lot of academics are the same").

So what did we find out?

The Asian studies diaspora in Australia

Firstly, there is indeed an Asian studies diaspora – 40% of respondents were based in an Asian studies faculty, 60% in a non-Asian studies Faculty. The majority of responses indicated either a multi-country or a multidisciplinary approach to their study – for those who defined their research as being based on a country, typical answers were Southeast Asia and China; Japan, China and Mongolia; Vietnam and Australia, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. For those who defined their research as being based on a subject, typical answers were refugees and international relations; film studies and gender; post-colonial studies; psychoanalysis; global family values; development and conflict studies.

Decline of minority languages

We asked what languages were used in research – the most popular were Indonesian / Malay, Chinese, Japanese, and then a large gap to the rest. The survey doesn't of course represent the totality of Asian research in Australia, but the comparative balance explains at least part of the decline in usage of the National Library's Thai and Korean collections.

In Australia in the last ten years there has been a decline of Asian language teaching in schools following the withdrawal of government funding for these programs. This has been followed inevitably by falling enrolments in university programs. Although well documented and consistently lamented by commentators, the federal government has not reinstated any programs. A quarter of the researchers in our survey indicated they either did not have or were not confident of their language skills.

And about 10% of respondents used English language only.

Success in using libraries

Do students just Google when they're looking for resources? We found that this group of researchers divided their time pretty well equally between the library and the Internet when looking for research materials. Some of them bought what they need and a third used blogs and other networks to find information.

While a third of the sample came out strongly supporting the level of library provision they currently enjoyed, another third indicated that they didn't always find what they needed in the library. When asked further about this, two-thirds identified finding resources on their subject as an area they needed help with. As much as 60% of the sample identified searching electronic databases as an area they needed help with.

And finally, nearly 20% of the sample said they needed help understanding research methods.

Impact on libraries

So what does this mean for libraries?

We felt slightly reassured that new Asian studies postgraduates in Australia have not yet deserted the library, although the general lack of research literacy is an extremely worrying trend.

The rise in Google's popularity as a research method has gone hand in hand with a continued decline in traditional library usage, as seen in the debate over the 'deserted library' phenomenon in the US (Martell, 2005)³. The National Library of Australia's statistics on usage of its traditional Asian collections show a similar trend decline. In a recent article entitled 'Future, or memory: Japanese studies librarianship in the 21st century',⁴ Kuniko Yamada McVey commented that East Asian studies libraries needed to understand the Net generation and their information-seeking behaviour. She gives an example of a typical student who, while reading *The Tale of Genji* on screen, simultaneously checks facsimile images online, and uses her iPod to listen to an audiobook. She argues that libraries need to learn to compete with Google in making content simple to search and access.

This is a convincing argument. However I would suggest that arresting the downward trend in use of traditional Asian collections requires a rethink not only of how easily and quickly services can be provided to users. We also need to consider the content of these services as well – that is, library collecting policy.

It is very clear that researchers are using an ever broader range of primary resources, and many of them are finding these resources outside libraries. I would suggest that another version of McVey's student has her doing postgraduate research on attitudes of Japanese youth to war, drawing on sources such as taped interviews, a current TV miniseries and pulp teen magazines sold on bookstands.

As research topics change, so do research methodologies and research resources. The texts, or materials which researchers are seeking to support those topics now range very widely from traditional to non-traditional sources. These non-traditional sources include:

- Ephemeral and shortlived materials such as posters, brochures, leaflets
- Marginal print publications, underground or proscribed publications, such as those dealing with sexuality, pornography or terrorism
- Objects and material resources, such as for the study of popular culture: match boxes, food, clothing, art, jewellery, gardens, religious objects
- Sound and images
- Geographically specific resources – documentation in any form of local communities and groups

³ Martell, Charles R. 'The ubiquitous user: a re-examination of Carlson's deserted library', *Libraries and the academy*, vol. 5, no. 4 (2005), p. 441-453

⁴ Kuniko Yamada McVey 'Future, or memory: Japanese studies librarianship in the 21st century'. *Journal of East Asian libraries*, no. 136, June 2005, p. 33-38.

- Electronic cultural materials such as DVDs, VCDs, computer games
- Blogs and websites

These materials have become the new primary source documentation for many topics in the 'new' Asian studies. It is interesting to note that these materials represent quite closely the category of knowledge identified by the postmodernist French philosopher Michel Foucault in the 1970s as 'subjugated' or 'hierarchically inferior' knowledge.

Foucault described 'subjugated knowledge' as follows:

"[Subjugated knowledge] ... a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity. I also believe that it is through the re-emergence of these low-ranking knowledges ... these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work."(Foucault, 1980)⁵

Many of the categories I have listed are materials that at one point or another libraries might indeed have considered not 'good' enough to put into a library collection. Some of these materials are by definition not found in libraries, but on the streets, or their cyberspace equivalent.

So if Foucault is right, we should be collecting, cataloguing and preserving these 'hierarchically inferior' materials. In fact I would argue that libraries have no choice, for two reasons. Firstly, if they are to fulfil libraries' traditional role in building collections and making them available for research in the future, they may need to consider extending the traditional definition of scholarly information to include these 'marginal' materials. Secondly, many of these non-traditional sources are at risk: they need to be identified, acquired, catalogued and preserved in libraries before they disappear and are lost to research altogether.

Of course many libraries, especially national libraries, have been collecting some of these materials for a long time. For example the National Library of Australia has excellent Australian ephemera and oral history collections – classic examples of 'subjugated knowledge' – which are increasingly heavily used for research. And it was pleasing to see on one of the lists recently how quickly a researcher was found recordings of Japanese popular music from the 1940s in a US library. So in many ways the national and major research libraries are already fulfilling their role as preservers of knowledge.

But what is happening for contemporary Asian language materials? Is anyone collecting and preserving these new, non-traditional research resources in research libraries outside the Asian region or, for that matter, within it?

I suspect the answer is, yes, to some but no to others. Some of the formats I have described present a fundamental challenge for libraries, whose workflows and decision-making procedures are set up for altogether easier

⁵ Foucault, Michel *Power/Knowledge: selected interview and other writings*. Harvester, 1980 p. 82

formats than these. Libraries may lack the capacity to identify and source some of this material, while the issues involved in cataloguing and preserving it are considerable.

However I do not think these are good reasons for not doing it, and I would like to briefly outline some of the key issues for each step of the process.

- Collecting

Identifying and sourcing non-traditional research materials requires collection development librarians to be knowledgeable and inventive in seeking out new sources of supply. Links with the scholarly community will, as for print materials, yield recommendations and donations. Today's researchers are collectors just as their predecessors were, even if their collections are images or sex publications or websites. They are already looking for a 'safe' place to store their precious materials, but they may not be as aware that the library is an option for them. This is our experience in Australia.

- Cataloguing

Most of these materials will need to be catalogued, or have metadata created. This is a resource pressure for libraries; requiring us to seek efficiencies elsewhere to free up staff time for this more complex cataloguing.

- Preservation and archiving

By their nature, also, many of these materials will be resource-intensive for preservation. The issues of paper-based preservation is well understood in libraries, but an understanding of the issues involved with digital preservation will also be needed, as they apply both to digitised resources and to materials in digital format, such as websites and PDF documents. These materials are also at risk: PDFs will be obsolete one day, and backup is not a preservation strategy. The exciting 'digital library' projects in Asian studies represent a wonderful resource, but they need a sustainability strategy and a permanent host institution to be of long term value.

I believe there is a good case for adopting a collaborative approach to digital archiving, using existing infrastructure where possible, such as institutional repositories. The Australian scholar Geremie Barme's 'Morning Sun' website⁶ is an example of a high quality multimedia scholarly resource on the Cultural Revolution. Its creators are strongly aware of the need for a sustainability strategy for such a complex site, and it will be archived in the Australian National University's digital repository when it is complete.

Conclusions

⁶ <http://www.morningsun.org/library/index.html>

As research trends in Asian studies have changed, so also have users' needs for research resources. Today's researchers are increasingly using a diverse variety of primary source material such as non-traditional print materials, film, websites, images, ephemeral publications, sound and objects.

All of these formats represent important cultural materials which need to be stored and preserved for future use. Many of them are already in danger of disappearing altogether.

This presents libraries responsible for Asian language collections with a fundamental challenge. We need to be sure that library collections stay relevant to a changing user base, but that means tackling a diverse and complex array of new resources. Maintaining and developing staff skills will be vital to this process. It may mean re-engineering library processes and adopting new ways of working.

Partnerships with the academic community will assist libraries, as they do now, to identify and source these new materials for addition to the collection. In this way collections will not only be enriched, but a new generation of scholars will learn to work with libraries, and be educated about libraries' role in the scholarly communication process. The strategic benefits of creating a higher profile for library collections cannot be underestimated, and will assist in ensuring that East Asian collections have a healthy future into the 21st century.