EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR
EAST ASIAN LIBRARIANS[†]

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In 1930, East Asian language collections in the United States held some 400,000 volumes; half a century later, these collections have grown by an astonishing 180,000% to holdings near to or in excess of 7,000,000 volumes. This dramatic increase took place primarily during the 1960's when, with federal and private support, a massive development effort was made in East Asian area studies, in particular in Chinese and Japanese studies.[1] This support, and an increasing awareness of the political and economic importance of the area, led to the formation of a large group of East Asian specialists, most of whom have been trained as research scholars.

In sharp contrast to this development, the training of the personnel needed to handle the large increases in East Asian library materials and to continue a sound scholarly development of these collections has been sporadic at best. Undeniably, the dramatic expansion of library holdings led to an increase, albeit not a spectacular one, in the staff of East Asia related libraries. This growth took place primarily, although not exclusively, through the hiring of persons with native language ability. Whereas this is understandable, it has to be noted that extremely few of these staff members had any training in East Asian area studies; in fact, most of the personnel members had been trained

in Western subjects such as, for example, English literature. The statement made by Knight Biggerstaff in 1964, during his presidential address to the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, that "most of the professional librarians already dealing with Far Eastern books aren't prepared for their jobs," is still valid today.

The absence of qualified librarians led the Association for Asian Studies to investigate the needs of the nation and of the profession. This concern led, in 1964, to the well-known report by T.H. Tsien on the present status and personnel needs of East Asian collections in the United States. When, in 1976, T.H. Tsien presented his second report on the profession to the Steering Committee for a Study of the Problems of East Asian Libraries, American Council of Learned Societies, the needs of the field, in essence, had remained unchanged.[2]

A careful comparative analysis of the situation in 1964 and 1976, however, reveals that T.H. Tsien's evaluation in 1976 was overly optimistic in spite of its urgent tone. Between 1964 and 1976, holdings of East Asian language materials in the United States increased by about 100% whereas the only training program in East Asian Librarianship[3] provided less than 5% of the professionals in the field. In fact, most of these graduates occupied existing, not new positions; hence the actual percentage is substantially less than 5%.

In view of the development of East Asian studies during the last two decades, the massive volume of material already acquired and still being acquired and, finally, considering the special difficulties of the field, serious attention to the adequate training of library professionals in East Asian studies is urgently needed and seriously overdue.

One of the major problems confronting the profession is that traditional training in librarianship does not provide training in East Asian studies, and, similarly, training in East Asian studies does not provide any training in traditional librarianship. Furthermore, both types of training fail to provide instruction in East

Asian bibliography, a centuries' old and native discipline. Customarily, library needs for East Asian specialists have been filled with people possessing a native language ability and a library degree issued by a recognized American institution; thus, without training in the requirements peculiar to East Asian area studies. This solution to a staffing problem, still the predominant solution, is far from satisfactory and, at a time of general financial retrenchment, presents a serious threat to the research quality of East Asian language collections in the United States.

On numerous occasions, professional librarians as well as scholars have stated the requirements a librarian in East Asian studies has to meet. They were succintly formulated in 1972 by T.H. Tsien and, as their validity has remained unchanged, we will merely reiterate them. These requirements are "three basic qualifications: 1) *scholarly competence* in the language and culture of the area, 2) professional education in general librarianship, and 3) a special knowledge of East Asian bibliography and library subjects. The combination of language-area competence with a general library training is not enough for a qualified librarian in East Asian studies if the librarian lacks such special knowledge as the book, the book trade, printing, publishing, cataloging, indexing, bibliographies and reference tools in East Asian studies needed for the daily operations of the collections. These special disciplines represent the tradition in Oriental librarianship and bibliography but are not normally covered either in the language-area program or in the general library school curricula in this country. The study of East Asian bibliography and librarianship is a combination of East Asian studies and librarianship and yet a further specialization in both disciplines."[4]

Although the need for a strong language training will not provoke any disputes among those interested in, and involved with, East Asian libraries, the nature of the language training may provoke some discussions, especially in light of the fact that many East Asian librarians also fulfill the role of reference person for their respective areas. It is precisely in this role, that of

reference librarian, that the language training of many current East Asian librarians, in particular those whom we may call the younger generation, is all too often deficient. In part, this appears to be a direct consequence of extant hiring practices in which general library administrators emphasize native language ability over scholarly language ability. Yet, these same administrators will not hire a native speaker of Greek for their Classics collection unless that person has a substantial training in Classical Greek. To state the very obvious, different language skills are required to read the *Shih-chi* or the *Jen-min Jih-pao*, the *Kojiki* or the *Asahi Shimbun.*

It appears self-evident that for East Asian librarianship the same scholarly requirements have to apply as those that are commonly expected for librarianship in the Classics of European civilization. Indeed, in addition to be able to read the contemporary language at sight, the librarian, whether he is responsible for a Chinese or a Japanese collection, has to have a thorough training in the classical or literary language of his region. In addition, the librarian needs an extensive exposure to the historical evolution of the language, from its origins through the fully established use of the contemporary vernacular. This is absolutely necessary for, unlike the research scholar or the language teacher, the librarian, through the nature of his work, is exposed to a substantially greater variety of language materials, both in printed and in manuscript form. This type of language training does not originate with native ability but requires advanced training, often beyond what is offered by many of the language-area training programs.

Whereas emphasis on scholarly rather than native language ability will represent an important step towards the improvement of the quality of East Asian librarianship in the United States, by and of itself it will not be sufficient. Far too few East Asian librarians have an advanced degree in Chinese and/or Japanese studies in addition to an advanced degree in library sciences. A master's degree in English literature or in Sanskrit does not enable

a native speaker of Chinese or Japanese to provide adequate service to library patrons in the areas of, for example, Ming or Tokugawa literature, Ch'ing or Meiji history. A professional knowledge of subjects like these is neither inate nor is it acquired through cultural osmosis.

The absence of adequate advanced training in East Asian scholarship is one, if not the major problem confronting East Asian librarianship today as well as in the future unless drastic changes are implemented immediately. It seriously imperils the continued quality of East Asian collections in the United States, this at a time when financial constraints will inevitably result in a reduction of material acquired. Scholarship will be the best guide to quality at a time of financial retrenchment.

Whereas the present situation may have found its origins in the historical development of East Asian collections in the United States, the continuation of the present situation, for whatever reasons, cannot be condoned and must be counteracted by all those concerned by the quality of East Asian language resources in the United States, i.e. by scholars, East Asian librarians and general library administrators alike. If, at the time of the dramatic expansion of Chinese and Japanese holdings, the available pool of adequately trained personnel to meet the newly created needs was inadequate, this situation no longer prevails. In fact, the opposite is true. It is well-known to all that there is a fairly large pool of highly trained East Asian specialists, nearly all of whom are Ph.D. holders, who cannot find stable academic employment and who are frequently reduced to the nomadic existence of one year appointments or who have to abandon East Asia related activities altogether.

It is within this pool that candidates for East Asian librarianship could be found and who, rather quickly and with minimal retraining, could raise the scholarly, and hence the qualitative characteristics of the profession. However, the prevailing hiring practices, often beyond the control of East Asian librarians themselves, virtually exclude, and undoubtedly discourage many of

these specialists from pursuing East Asian librarianship careers.

This brings us to the point of what type of training should receive emphasis. Should the training of East Asian librarians in the United States emphasize library sciences as defined by graduate library schools and the American Library Association, or should it emphasize East Asian scholarship? This question can be reduced to a choice between a disciplinary and an area approach and, hence, falls within the debates that are taking place in the social sciences between disciplinary and contextual, i.e. area studies. It is the essence of these debates that the adherents of the purely disciplinary approach downgrade the area approach as unscientific, i.e. that it cannot be modelled on the so-called exact sciences. The scientistic pretensions of the disciplines lead to rigid definitions and very little interaction between disciplines.[5]

As any observer can note, the library profession as a whole is subject to the same scientistic or pseudo-scientific pretensions; witness its present infatuation with computer technology and the hermetic jargon that characterizes many of its publications. The interdisciplinary approach, the essence of area studies and ideally also that of librarianship, is given but token recognition by the library profession. This is evidenced by the fact that it is the pursuit of a rigidly discipline oriented career that leads to the highest positions within the profession as well as by the attempt, at least by some research libraries, to eliminate the area components.

Without denying the existence of the need for a library science discipline, the inflexibility of the present definitions, stated as well as unstated ones, has nefarious consequences for area studies components such as East Asian libraries. The scientistic attitudes exclude from employment in East Asian libraries, area specialists who do not have a recognized library degree. In other words, it results in the hiring of people who, at most, are only marginally qualified to meet the highly specialized needs of East Asian libraries and those of their patrons.

It seems self-evident that the principal training for an East Asian librarian should and must be East Asian scholarship and that the emphasis of the training, other than the language, should be either in the humanities or the social sciences; this to reflect the type of holdings and the clientele served. Additional training in library sciences would and should be desirable. But, if East Asian scholarship is the foremost requirement, how much general library training is needed, or is any needed at all? It is better not to open this Pandora's box but graduate library schools offer very little that is relevant to the handling, maintenance, acquisition and, to some degree, cataloging of materials in Chinese and Japanese.

The minimum educational requirement for employment as an East Asian librarian, whether in public or technical services, should be an M.A. in East Asian studies; because of the language needs, however, a Ph.D. would be preferable. If, in addition, a degree in library sciences has been acquired, maybe the ideal world can be attained.

It is, however, clear, that the current near exclusive emphasis on a degree in library sciences has led and will continue to lead to a severe reduction in the quality of East Asian librarianship in the United States. It is absolute necessary and urgent to reverse the present situation and, again, stress the need to be thoroughly trained in East Asian scholarship. Such a change, however, will require a substantial effort on the part of those concerned with the quality, present and future, of East Asian collections. Such a change will not be easy for it threatens existing fiefdoms, practices and, maybe most important of all, prevailing self-images.

Notes

1. Statistical information about the development of East Asian studies and libraries can be found in, among others: T.H. Tsien, *Current Status of East Asian Collections in American Libraries 1974/75* (Washington, D.C., 1976); E.T. Massey and J.A. Massey, *CULCON Report on Japanese*

Studies at Colleges and Universities In the United States in the mid-70's, (Washington, D.C., 1977).

2. American Council of Learned Societies, *East Asian Libraries: Problems and Prospects,* (New York, 1977).
3. This refers to the joint training program between the Graduate Library School and the Department of Far Eastern Languages and Civilizations at The University of Chicago.
4. T.H. Tsien, "Education for Far Eastern Librarianship," in E. Bishop and J.H. Waller, eds., *International Cooperation in Orientalist Librarianship,* (Canberra, 1972), pp. 108-116. (Emphasis added.)
5. On this problem and its relationship to East Asian studies, see Benjamin I Schwartz," Area Studies as a Critical Discipline," *Journal of Asian Studies,* vol. XL, no. 1, 1980, pp. 15-26.

Comments

As discussants, Professor James Bartholomew of the Ohio State University and Mr. Eugene Wu, Librarian, Harvard-Yenching Library, made their comments as follows.

Professor Bartholomew agreed with L. Kwanten's stress on the need for East Asian librarians to be intellectually curious and alert people who genuinely love books and libraries. Yet he felt that L. Kwanten tended to juxtapose the M.L.S. and the M.A. or Ph.D. modes of training too sharply. He expressed the views that, while acquisition of the Ph.D. might be desirable for an East Asian librarian, its value could be overemphasized, particularly because doctoral programs are designed to train specialists, whereas librarians, to provide the best patron service and acquisition service, should be good generalists. He added the thought that M.L.S. programs, where they work well, have the considerable merit of training the librarian to use reference and other scholarly works efficiently so as to gain rapid acquaintance with various research fields as the need might arise.

While agreeing with Dr. Kwanten in the need for insuring quality development of East Asian collections, Eugene Wu felt that a successful East Asian library program must be able to satisfy a number of other requirements. For example, a cataloger must, in addition to subject knowledge, possess technical expertise for the proper organization of materials for use; a library administrator must be a good manager who can make efficient and effective use of the library's human, material, and fiscal resources. An East Asian library, as is the case with any research library, must therefore employ a variety of talents in order to properly discharge all of its responsibilities. Using an advanced degree in East Asian studies as the sole criterion for selection of personnel for East Asian libraries without regard to the candidate's professional competence thus becomes a highly questionable proposition. He counseled a multidimensional rather than a one-dimensional approach to solving the problems of East Asian libraries.