

Braided Streams: Collections, Connections, and Information Literacy in Asian Studies at St. Olaf College

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Abstract

Expectations for access to research materials in Asian studies by undergraduates and faculty at liberal arts colleges have grown exponentially in concert with the availability of materials via the Web. Collaboration among three liberal arts college libraries in Minnesota has enhanced Asian Studies programs by using creative, shared collection development strategies. At St. Olaf College it has also facilitated expansion of the Asian studies information literacy program and served as a catalyst for innovative curriculum development within the department.

How can liberal arts colleges meet the demand for specialized area studies materials and teach their use well? Asian studies programs have become accepted and established over the last several decades¹ and curriculum-based liberal arts college libraries have needed to expand and deepen their collections accordingly. Universities generally employ subject bibliographers with disciplinary expertise (often at the Ph.D. level) who collect materials, provide access through web pages and specialized reference service, and often teach

bibliography courses designed for masters and Ph.D. candidates. But liberal arts colleges generally don't have the budget or demand for full-time specialists, and work to meet needs as they have done traditionally.

Several years ago, St. Olaf, Macalester, and Carleton Colleges decided to collaborate on the assessment and improvement of their Asian Studies collections and reference services, and to hire an East Asian specialist jointly between the three schools²

Collection Development and Asian Studies

The first focus of the position is collection development. Until rather recently, area studies such as Asian studies in the Western academia has been handicapped by the paucity of research materials available. Take China studies, for instance. Up to the 1970s, it was not possible to purchase books directly from the People's Republic of China. The eruption of Chinese Cultural Revolution in the 1960s made the situation even worse.³ As a result, the scholarship produced during that period of time was marked by a high level of generality, a direct consequence of limited information available to the field.⁴

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Not until the early 1990s did things change significantly for the better. The economic boom of the 1990s in the Pacific Rim region led to an explosion of information on and from East Asia. From 1992, China speeded up its economic reform and the policy of market economy brought about an unprecedented economic growth that has been going strong since then. In almost no time China caught up with U.S. and Japan and became one of the ten countries with the largest publishing output in the world.⁵ More recently, starting from the late '90s, electronic publications, such as CD-ROMs, online databases, digital libraries, are developed at a furious speed and pushed to the world market aggressively.⁶ These products are fundamentally changing the way East Asian Studies scholars conduct their research. Thanks at least in part to the easy accessibility of information on East Asia, East Asian Studies now is no longer seen as an esoteric branch of learning but gradually merging into the mainstream of the Western academia.

The "academicization" of East Asian Studies in the West⁷ as well as the flood of fresh information from East Asia in various formats has also fundamentally changed the role of East Asian Studies librarians, particularly those working for small and medium sized academic libraries. Building East Asian collections used to be the privilege, or burden, depending on your perspective, of a handful of large research libraries. Now, with the rapid growth of East Asian Studies programs nationwide, even small college libraries have to take on the task of building their own East Asian collections. In addition to collection building, East Asian Studies librarians are also taking on a new role as information navigator, leading the library patrons through often-uncharted waters of ever increasing, ever expanding digital information.⁸ Unlike large research libraries, small college libraries are often faced with unique challenges in meeting the needs of East Asian Studies faculty and students in that 1) they have a much smaller, thus more restrictive budget; 2) they often do not have library personnel with adequate training in the subject area. Drawing from real life experiences from a liberal arts college library, this presentation introduces a new model of collaboration between libraries, between fellow librarians, between librarians and faculty, in coping with the unique challenges facing small college libraries.

Collection Development: What We Have Achieved So Far

To develop a robust East Asian studies collection to support the Asian studies curriculum at the three colleges, the first task that the East Asian project librarian set for himself was to understand the needs as well as the collections. By using a variety of methods such as shelf browsing, title counts, checking against standard bibliographies, and surveying the faculty, the East Asian project librarian conducted a relatively thorough collection assessment and identified the strength and weakness of the existing collection as well as needs for future development. Even though each of the three library collections has its own special needs, and therefore demands different approaches to their problems, a common theme that underlies the project librarian's work for all three libraries is "coordination." On the one hand, a strong in-house collection is crucial for meeting the needs of library patrons; on the other hand, no library can afford to buy everything. Coordinated purchasing can greatly ease our burden of having to buy materials that are peripheral to our curriculum, or purchasing big-ticket items that threaten to burst our budget. A unique advantage of having a shared librarian is making a potentially troublesome process of coordination most natural. Since most library purchases on East Asia come through the project librarian, it is much easier to coordinate the purchases on the three campuses, thus avoiding a large number of unnecessary duplications.

For the past year, we have successfully built up a relatively strong core collection for each subject area in Chinese studies as well as strong core reference collections in East Asian studies. So far, our focus has been on English language materials, given the fact that these are the materials that are likely to be utilized by a large user group. But despite a relatively small user group for East Asian language materials, there is clearly a need for that kind of materials from both the faculty and senior students in East Asian studies. This is probably the worst dilemma faced by every East Asian studies librarian working for small college libraries: on the one hand, we cannot ignore these small but legitimate needs; on the other hand, we cannot afford to stuff our precious shelf space with materials that will hardly be used, if at all.

The good news is that digital products that are constantly coming out of East Asia may solve our problem; the bad news is that most of the products

are prohibitively expensive and most likely beyond the reach of small libraries. There are many ways, however, that East Asian librarians at small libraries can make a difference. One way is collaboration between libraries, either in terms of consortial purchasing or resources sharing via inter-library loan. Representing St Olaf and other two libraries, the project librarian actively collaborates with the East Asian librarian at the University of Minnesota in negotiating best possible prices for East Asian language databases. For instance, for about half of the original price, the four libraries (the university plus three college libraries) have recently successfully negotiated for a web-based Chinese language database, The Complete Classics Collection of Ancient China, which would greatly strengthen the Chinese studies collections in the three college libraries.

In addition to consortial purchases, the project librarian also constantly watches out for good deals in the East Asian database market. In order to expand their market in North America, many East Asian database producers are willing to reduce their prices or come up with flexible pricing models to accommodate the needs of overseas customers. A good example would be Super Star Digital Library. This digital library claims to have digitized over 60 percent of the total monograph production in China so far. For a trivial price (\$20 a year), the libraries can purchase a one-user account and access millions of Chinese language books, with unlimited downloading and printing. Another long established database producer in China, Wanfang Data, also recently promotes their products with extremely competitive prices and pricing models in an effort to push their products to the Western market. By taking advantage of these historical opportunities, the project librarian is able to greatly expand the scope of the library collections in ways that would otherwise be impossible.

Finally, for resources beyond the library collections, the project librarian actively seeks ways to provide access. For instance, the Chinese Academic Journal database (CAJ) contains full text articles of thousands of academic journals published in China, a critical resource for scholars studying contemporary China. While the three college libraries cannot afford the full text version of the database, they do have access to the index version of the database for free. On behalf of the three libraries, the project librarian made arrangements with the East Asian Library at the UM, which

subscribes to the full-text database, so that the patrons at the three colleges can have the full text articles that they have found through the index database delivered to their email accounts. The project librarian has also established ILL relationships with academic libraries in Japan and China, through Gateway Service Center of Chinese Academic Journal Publications⁹ and Japan GIF¹⁰ (Global ILL Framework). Through all these national and international ILL connections, the three libraries are able to transcend the limitation of local resources and provide best possible services to East Asian studies faculty and students.

In short, a shared East Asian librarian not only helps to maximize the library resources through coordination in building effective East Asian studies collections, but also by bringing in his language and subject expertise, has been able to find innovative ways to enhance the library collections and services.

Information Literacy and Asian Studies

Now that the materials are available, how does one go about teaching methodologies and strategies for accessing them? A review of the literature shows some documented activity. Most of the Asian studies work has come out of East Asian collections at the university level, as might be expected. Cathy Chiu of UC Santa Barbara surveyed libraries in 1993 and found that just over half of the East Asian collections at the university level offered bibliographic instruction.¹¹ She later went on to establish a BI clearinghouse for East Asian classes¹² and to describe how librarians can set up a "one-stop shopping" page of resources to facilitate internet searching on Asian Studies topics.¹³ More recently, Shen and Gresham note the increasing ability of reference librarians to access and to teach East Asian materials.¹⁴ They go on to encourage librarians to actively participate in changing the ways in which needs of undergraduates in this area are addressed. Yi outlines ways in which the internet can be used to access a myriad of primary history resources in Asian Studies by undergraduates¹⁵ and Kojima details information literacy for graduate students in Japanese studies at the University of Pennsylvania.¹⁶ And, finally, there is a major effort underway by the North American Coordinating Council on Japanese Library Resources to incorporate information literacy sessions on electronic Japanese resources at gatherings of Asian Studies researchers and professors nationwide.¹⁷

Asian Studies Information Literacy at St. Olaf
Reference and information literacy have long been a part of the Asian studies offerings at St. Olaf College. A reference and instruction librarian with some background in Japanese studies was hired simultaneously with several other key Asian studies faculty members in the early 1980s, and has participated actively in the department as it has grown. Assignment-specific instruction has been offered for many years. With the addition of the Freeman project librarian, the two librarians have been able to co-teach information literacy sessions and to offer specialized reference based on their area studies backgrounds. However, what really had been missing (in addition to the deep subject expertise to do a systematic assessment of the collection and language background to buy materials in the vernacular) was the “focus time” to develop specialized resources and to work on a program of information literacy integrated in a systematic way into the major. Early on the project librarian was able to provide a web-based gathering of resources of particular use to Asian Studies faculty and students to fill the former need.¹⁸ The revised information literacy program has unfolded over a period of two years and has involved concerted efforts of both faculty and librarians.

The challenges

- **A multitude of entry points for the major.** Majors do not follow a neat progression in their move through the department. Because of a general education sequence integrated with language study¹⁹ some of our students begin as majors in their first year and their assignments reflect the need for basic, introductory resources. Given a four-course sequence, assignments can be designed to enable the teaching of these resources in a step-by-step fashion. But the “Asian Conversations” program is not taken by all of our majors—some begin the major early in their careers but not through the sequence, and others come to the program after study abroad experiences that whet their appetites for more on-campus study. So in the introductory course designed for majors not entering through the sequence, one may have students from any year and with a vast variety of research expertise (both in Asian studies and other disciplines). Therefore the material covered in the four courses of the Asian Conversations sequence must be taught in one course, and must be taught to

an audience that might be alternately bored or over-challenged.

- Because this is an area studies program, many of **our students often are not on campus for intermediate level courses**—they are abroad, polishing language skills and taking content courses. In many majors, level two courses are a time that advanced disciplinary tools are introduced and practiced. Research methods courses are often included in the curricula of departments. But we do not often have that opportunity.

- **Our seniors come to the senior seminar needing to be reminded how to, or needing to learn how to, research in Asian studies.** Additionally, they often have little disciplinary background for the projects they wish to pursue.

During the 2003/04 academic year and summer 2004 workshops funded by the St. Olaf Libraries via Associated Colleges of the Midwest (ACM) Information Literacy monies, a comprehensive plan was developed. Members began with reading materials on information literacy²⁰ and looked at draft plans from the St. Olaf Chemistry and Music History departments. Pulling from the ACRL standards, faculty compiled a list of competencies designed for Asian studies and St. Olaf. Then, each faculty member wrote a brief description of their assignments and connected the competencies covered.²¹

As people looked at the sequencing, the level one goals fell into place quite easily and adjustments in assignments were made to make sure students progressed gradually (at least in the four course sequence). Given that the sequential courses are taught by four different people over the four semesters and that faculty are drawn from a larger pool, collaboration, lack of ego and commitment of the entire department was critical.

As we worked on the level two courses, it was clear to us that although we were committed to assignment-based, course-integrated instruction, our major problem was the lack of opportunity to include information literacy in level two courses in a consistent way. And, out of the discussion of desired outcomes for majors came a need for majors to understand the concepts of discipline-based and interdisciplinary study. And so, a .25 credit [1 semester hour] course was developed to do both.²² In brief, students will learn Asian studies research materials, will be introduced to the types of questions and methods faculty use in their disciplinary pursuits and will explore professional and academic

opportunities available to Asian studies majors after graduation. The librarian will coordinate the course, which will be required of majors, taught both semesters, and intended for students in their second semester of the sophomore year or first semester of their junior year.

An informal query on the ALA information literacy listserv and that of the Council of East Asian Libraries, and an Internet search did uncover several bibliographic research methods courses designed for undergraduates in Asian or Chinese studies,²³ although none include the disciplinary foci or the "life after graduation" sessions.

As a result of the coordinated work of the department, we expect that our students will now come to the senior seminar better prepared to work in a more in-depth way and produce a higher quality end result.

Summary

What can others hope to gain from the St. Olaf experience? First, the sharing of a librarian with disciplinary expertise between three campuses can work, providing the person taking the joint position is well qualified and willing to work both independently and collaboratively. Second, the project librarian can bring important specialized expertise to building the collections of each institution. And, third, reference and information literacy programs can benefit both by allowing for the development of specialized resources designed for each campus and by providing focus time to develop programs to meet the needs of the Asian studies (or other) departments.

Notes

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18. See the East Asian Collection Project web page at <http://www.macalester.edu/%7Eye/eastasia/>.
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21. Documents posted at <http://www.stolaf.edu/library/instruction/infolit/AsStudInfoLit.html>.

22. Syllabus also at above web site.

23. For example, University of Maryland, Haverford/Bryn Mawr, University of California Berkeley, University of Western Washington, University of Albany, University of Massachusetts Amherst.