

Being a Chinese Studies Librarian at Monash University Library

by Dennis Kishere

When I was appointed as Chinese Studies Librarian at Monash University Library in 1991, I was thrilled to get into the field of Asian Studies librarianship. This was a newly created position and was the second such position in Victoria, the other one being in the East Asian Collection at the University of Melbourne. There were only two or three other similar positions in Australia. As this position was a joint “Technical Services and Reference Services” position, my job interview was conducted by seven people from different parts of the library. Professor Bruce Jacobs from the Chinese Department was also present and questioned me in Chinese. It was one of the more intense and exhausting interviews in my working life.

As the new Chinese Studies Librarian I joined the Southeast Asian Studies Librarian Helen Soemardjo. Helen had been at the library for many years and, in fact, was responsible for all aspects of Asian studies library resources. Helen “taught me the ropes” when I was but a novice in the field of Asia related library resources. Earlier in her career, Helen had gleaned much knowledge from Paulette (Bob) Muskins who had built up a huge Dutch language collection on Indonesia for the library. Not long afterwards, appointments were made for the positions of Korean Studies Librarian, Japanese Studies Librarian and Senior Asian Studies Librarian.

The existing, small Chinese Collection in the library had been built up with some donations from the Chinese government and with purchases of books recommended by Dr Michael Godley, a lecturer in the History Department who specialised in Chinese history. Some of the books had been catalogued by casual staff and then later by Bick-har Yeung before she moved to take up the position in the East Asian Collection at the University of Melbourne Library.

After my appointment, I started to acquire Chinese materials on a regular basis. I was helped in this collection building by several large donations from the Chinese government and from local Taiwanese community organisations. An ongoing gift exchange program with the National Library of Taiwan has also strengthened our collection.

This sudden increase in specialist staffing for Asian Studies was due to the vision and foresight of Ho Chooi Hon (the Associate University Librarian). Chooi Hon always spoke out vigorously for the library to have the proper level of staffing expertise and resources necessary for providing a professional service in Asian studies. Her advocacy was strong both at in-house library forums and at national conferences.

Like other librarians in the Asian Studies Research Collection I looked after Chinese Studies resources whether they were in Chinese or other languages. Although this is a huge task in terms of collection building, it really gives one a unique and broad insight into the constantly developing world of publishing in Chinese studies.

Up till 1995, the Asian language collections were kept in the library's Main Collection. However, in 1995 when the Main Library (now Matheson Library) building was extended a whole floor became available to house a projected Asian Studies Research Collection. Once again, this was made possible by the forward planning and drive of Ho Chooi Hon. Print materials in Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese and Thai were transferred to the new ASRC. In addition the large collection of old books in Dutch about Indonesia was brought together into one area belonging to the ASRC. Also, various archival and special collections were housed in a locked compactus area. These include rare and fragile books and special collections such as the Norodom Sihanouk Collection, the David Chandler Cambodia Collection and the Southeast Asian Pamphlets Collection. These latter collections include much material relating to Chinese Studies, such as documentary films on China in the 1960s and 19th century Dutch books about ethnic Chinese in Indonesia.

The four specialist Asian Studies librarians were joined by two assistants (who had expertise in either Chinese or Japanese). We also have had funding for the employment of extra casual assistants who had knowledge of one of the relevant languages. More than six staff was squeezed into the long narrow L-shaped office area.

The office area has a service point for enquiries. Each year at the time of the Lunar New Year the service point is decorated with traditionally auspicious objects which celebrate the change of season. Along with the nearby display window and the exhibition showcase, the ASRC is undoubtedly the most attractive place in the library. We have strived to create a warm and welcoming approach for visitors to the collection. The ASRC official visitor's book keeps track of the impressions of our many, varied and important visitors.

Chinese books were at first catalogued using the Wade-Giles Romanisation system. This was because Australian libraries basically relied for their cataloguing on bibliographic records from the Library of Congress which used the Wade-Giles system at that time. Debate over whether to change to the Pinyin system had simmered for many years. Eventually the Library of Congress and the National Library of Australia changed to the Pinyin system. Some libraries had already started using it before then. The introduction of automated CJK



Photo: Display of "Traditional Chinese stories" in 2005 & Dennis Kishere



Photo: Chinese collection in ASRC

encouraging. In the 1980s a new Chinese Studies Department emerged from the previous single lectureship which was attached to the Japanese Studies Department. Dr Bruce Jacobs, Taiwan specialist, became Professor of Asian Languages and Studies in 1991. Bruce as well as other staff in the department, such as Dr Gloria Davies and Dr Warren Sun, took a keen interest in the building of the new Chinese library collection.

These days, although people in national leadership positions say the right things about Asian studies, the situation for Asian studies in libraries and generally is being affected by an atmosphere of financial stringency. There are pressures for outsourcing of functions and for doing more with less resource. In some institutions specialist Asian studies librarians are increasingly required to carry out duties outside their fields of interest and expertise.

As we know, these are challenges facing libraries generally, not just special collections. Indeed universities need to examine their whole modus operandi in the digital age.

Nevertheless, we know that specialist librarians with Asian language ability are still essential for enabling users obtaining information which they need. Not only do specialist librarians have a profound knowledge of relevant collections and resources around the world, they are also able to alert researchers to new resources which they may not have known about.

Asian Studies librarians Monash University have always tried to promote their valuable collections by holding library seminars and exhibitions, contributing articles to library newsletters and journals and speaking at conferences. They have also endeavoured to promote cooperation between collections.

Since 1991 the range of users of the Chinese collection has steadily broadened. Whereas twenty years ago, the Chinese collection had a Arts and Humanities focus, in the subsequent years researchers particularly from Business and Economics but also from Science and elsewhere have drawn on Chinese language resources, particularly databases. These days, users in the Chinese Department form just part of our wide clientele. Perhaps this points to where we need to direct our efforts in the future.

Some of my most enjoyable moments in the job have been talking to students and researchers about their experiences, delights and frustrations in seeking out knowledge and dealing with unusual situations here and overseas. I have kept in contact with some of them and it is interesting to track their careers.

Another happy aspect of my working life in the ASRC has been the sense of identity and devotion to our mission amongst our staff. Recently in the ASRC we started a small archive of documents relating to our history. Hopefully this will one day provide the raw material for an expanded history of this part of the library.

Now that I have retired and can calmly review the past twenty years and more, I am gradually coming to appreciate the huge achievements built on the ambitious beginnings of our Asian studies collection. Looking at the energy, intelligence and commitment of the staff there I believe the future is full of hope and potential.