

# The Birth and Creation of a Leading Collection of Asian Materials at Princeton University

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## Introduction

As one of the eminent institutions in North America, Princeton University's East Asian Library (EAL; Fig. 36.2) collects materials in practically all subjects in Chinese, Japanese and Korean, as well as works on Chinese, Japanese and Korean linguistics and literature in Western languages. Although the Gest Library originally began only with the acquisition of many rare books, it has become a growing collection that supports all kinds of research done in the Department and Programme of East Asian Studies. As a librarian whose tenure at Princeton University has been long and fortuitous, Dr. Martin Hejdra (Fig. 36.1) explains the makeup of the East Asian collection, which reflects the strengths of the academic department. Thus, the Library's East Asian collection is comprehensive in works particularly on literature and history.

Can we begin this interview by first introducing yourself, that is, your training, your background and your major roles and duties now that you are the head of the EAL? But you can also speak to your previous role as a librarian at the Princeton University Library.

My name is Martin Hejdra, and as for my background, I am not American; I am originally from Holland. I earned a master's degree in Chinese and Japanese studies at Princeton University.<sup>1</sup> I studied in China in 1977 and 2 years in Japan from 1979 to 1981. I came to Princeton University in 1983 as a graduate student, and I have stayed in Princeton ever since. During the later years of my studies at Princeton, I also worked at the Library. As they were in need of some help, I started as a graduate student, and eventually I was appointed as a Chinese Studies Librarian, or the Chinese Bibliographer, as it was called then.

Probably until a year ago, my main task was as a Chinese Bibliographer, which means I was responsible for collection development and offered research assistance to students,

<sup>1</sup> Princeton University – Homepage. Available at: <https://www.princeton.edu/main/>.



**Figure 36.1** Dr Martin Heijdra.



**Figure 36.2** East Asian Library – Princeton University Library.

graduate students and faculty. I was also the Head of Public Services, which meant I took care of the general aspects of the Library. When the previous head of the EAL retired last November, I was appointed Acting Head Librarian, and now I have officially become the Director. Since we are still looking for a replacement Chinese Bibliographer or, rather, Chinese Studies Librarian, I am also still concurrently performing the duties of the Chinese Bibliographer. My role as Director is really more generalized outreach: more contacts with colleagues elsewhere and getting local projects going.

How many different languages have you mastered? How much of that do you use those different languages in your day-to-day work?

As I am from Holland, I know Dutch, English, German and French; I use these daily, since in my work, I am responsible for Western-language collections development in East Asian Studies. Since many universities in the US do not prioritise East Asian studies in Western languages outside English, I think it is important that some universities keep cognisance of non-English Western languages. It is not quite coincidental that the one place that also still does much collection development for East Asian Studies in European languages is Columbia University,<sup>2</sup> where they also have a Dutch person for that. I also know Chinese, Japanese, some Russian, Italian, some Swedish, languages like that, which I very occasionally use. In my daily work, I use both Japanese and Chinese, but Chinese is, of course, my most frequently used language.

Do you see yourself as a scholar librarian? Given your strong research capability and your extensive research output and reputation in the field of Chinese studies, were there any reasons why you chose a career in librarianship instead of as a full-time academic in which you could have devoted more time and energy into research and teaching?

I see myself as a facilitator between scholars and librarians. I became a librarian really by happenstance: I remained in the US after not having finished my thesis yet and needed to work on campus at Princeton as an international student in order to continue with my student visa. So in a way, I happened to fall accidentally into my work for the Library. I eventually received a green card and 'continuing appointment', which is basically the equivalent of tenure, so that is how I finally decided to stay here.

As a librarian, I have been able to indulge myself in a lot of different fields because to be a good librarian, you have to have a very broad point of view, and I feel that it seems that at every moment, I have to jump into a new field. Having a scholarly background is very important. Even though we might not need to be a particular specialist, you need to have some experience in different fields, and most of all, one has to know what doing research is all about. I am by training a historian, and somehow I have come to think that historians are the broadest of all specialists; they are the most interdisciplinary. But even so, helping students with data and economics is something different than helping them with written sources, and here at Princeton, graduates and undergraduates do not do the same kinds of studies. Because of one's scholarly

<sup>2</sup> Columbia University – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.columbia.edu/>.

background, you can also be an intermediary person between vendors and scholars. Often with databases, I tell database vendors what we are looking for: what is lacking in the field, what I think scholars are looking for and what does not exist yet.

On the other hand, I get frequent telephone calls from scholars who tell me they just got this amount from their department or from their university in order to buy some database, but it is limited. Thus, they ask me what they should get and what they are able to afford, and I can help them. With that said, I am also still a historian, and I am currently the treasurer for the Society of Ming Studies.<sup>3</sup> I also work on the history of the book in China and Japan, and I am the book review editor for the journal *East Asian Publishing and Society*.<sup>4</sup>

You mentioned your background as a Ming Dynasty specialist and also the history of the book in China. How does your research interests inform your work as a librarian and now particularly as the head of an EAL?

Princeton is known for rare books, and I happened to learn a little bit on the job about Ming Dynasty era books. I have had a constant interaction with those books. Thus, I do tend to get some questions from Ming historians who want to know about particular Ming studies resources. For book history, I have specialised in the history of East Asian typography, both in the modern period and in the Ming period. I try to study both Chinese and Japanese typography; it's the one subject in which I really try to go beyond Chinese studies, so that has very much influenced my work as a Chinese studies librarian. My understanding both Japanese and Chinese languages helps me with rare book projects. It is important to remember that dealing with rare books is not the only thing that the East Asian librarian should do, but having that background will help with general reference work. I have already been asked to be an advisor for a particular Ming studies biographical database. I do not know whether I will do much for it, but of course, one often gets that kind of request, and it keeps informing my work as a librarian.

Could you provide a brief introduction to the collections of the EAL at Princeton, and could you also give us the collection highlights?

We are one of the major collections in North America. At the moment, the Chinese collection is ranked fourth according to the Library of Congress and is tied with Berkeley in size. Our Japanese collection is relatively smaller. When people generally think of Princeton University Chinese, they think of two things: rare books and electronic databases. We have around 5000 titles of pre-1911 books, with some 100,000 volumes. We also really invest in e-resources that advance the research of our students and faculty. But it is not electronic books we concentrate on, but databases, which really change the way scholars can do their work. For example, we now can search the full text of old gazetteers, which really has completely changed how you search that

<sup>3</sup> Society of Ming Studies – Homepage. Available at: <http://mingstudies.arts.ubc.ca/>.

<sup>4</sup> *East Asian Publishing and Society* – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.brill.com/publications/journals/east-asian-publishing-and-society>.

type of materials. That is why having access to such types of databases is much more important than whether or not you have an electronic copy of a book.

What are some of these databases that are more often used by scholars?

We have a whole range of databases. We have hundreds of Chinese studies databases alone, but we are working to expand our current Japanese ones as well. People sometimes ask for materials from the Qing archives, the Academia Sinica (AS)<sup>5</sup> or the National Library of China.<sup>6</sup> Of course, then there are also requests for statistical databases, used by completely different kinds of users. One recent database we just got is an image database because there are so many requests for visual material as an object of study. Such a database was really lacking until recently, but even the new one is actually unsatisfactory; it's not on the level of US databases for art at all, so we still have to wait for better ones.

Who are the majority of the Asian collection users? Are they mostly professors or students from higher education, or are they people who are outside the secondary centre?

Princeton, in general, is a very undergraduate research-oriented library. East Asian studies, however, are an exception, partly because of language. Thus, I can say that for me, we built our collection for graduate students. Professors actually already have a specialised field and some of them use the Library frequently too, but they normally get some of the things they need themselves, unlike graduate students. We also have outside users, people from other institutions in the neighbourhood. When I get requests from others, I try to help them if I have time. People in Ming history will come to me, of course. But I would say that my priorities in the selection process are the needs of graduate students.

Could you give examples of typical reference inquiries issued by the researchers or scholars at the EAL during your time there?

In Princeton, undergraduates need to write junior and senior theses, and the questions of these undergraduates are very different from those of graduate students. In the last few weeks, I had received questions about Ai Weiwei's attitudes towards the earthquake, leftover women in China's rural areas, the history of the Akutagawa Prize, Yu Mi Ri, who is a Korean author in Japan, a question about a policy shift in meritocratic membership appointments post-1989 in the Chinese Communist Party, as well as the reception of K-pop in English. For graduate students, I have answered questions on the history of city maps in China, where to find legal case studies for the Ming Dynasty and questions about dictionaries and textbooks for Manchu learning. Those are the kinds of questions that I get. So as you see, the questions are diverse. What happens here is that the professors want the students to come to me to talk about their proposed thesis topics to see whether it's a doable question; even

<sup>5</sup> Academia Sinica – Homepage. Available at: [https://www.sinica.edu.tw/main\\_e.shtml](https://www.sinica.edu.tw/main_e.shtml).

<sup>6</sup> National Library of China – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.nlc.cn/newen/>.

when it's doable, it may not be doable for undergraduates, and then sometimes it's not doable at all. At other times, the research question needs just some tweaking to make it into a researchable question.

What are the major advantages or practical operational reasons for Ivy League institutional libraries in the US to hire scholars with PhDs majoring in sinology and Japanology to manage the EAL collections?

At Princeton, with my duties as a liaison librarian, I will occasionally teach a part of a class session. However, I do not teach a whole course. That is the responsibility of the professors. Librarians at Princeton rarely teach courses for credit. As for bibliographic instruction, I have been doing that more in some years than others. When professors prefer to teach bibliographic instruction themselves, I will defer to them; at other times, I will do more. But most students have their very own research interests, so those I deal with one-to-one. However, as an academic librarian, I do think that you need to know what scholarship is about, and you need to know that there exist different kinds of scholarship within your own subject area. Thus, having a PhD is good. On the other hand, I do not really think that having a PhD while never having any experience in librarianship is what an academic librarian is all about either; you need both.

That said, I think it is very important for academic liaison librarians to have subject expertise. For such positions, we normally at Princeton tend to look at people who have the subject background. Still, I do think that I was very lucky into being hired without a master's of library science (MLS) degree and having no library background at all. But they had been looking for a subject librarian for 2 years before they took me on as a graduate student, and they could take their time in evaluating me. But I do occasionally get graduate students or professors who send their students up to me and say, 'We think this student might be happy as a librarian'. Then I tell them it's better to get an MLS degree. If you have the right attitude, you will learn a lot; if you do not have the right attitude or background, it really does not matter whether you have the degree or not. An MLS degree is used at a lot of places as a kind of entry barrier. Only the very highest Ivy League library might take a chance with somebody with a PhD rather than an MLS degree. In most cases, the MLS is required, but it's not that difficult to get one. Or so I hear...

It sounds like you had a lot of experience doing research in academic libraries, but did you also work in one?

No. When I was hired, I had to be trained from the beginning; I had no other library experience than as a user, so I was lucky to be in a situation where they took a chance on me. In the beginning, I did not plan to become a librarian at all. It was only in order to being able to stay at Princeton and finish my PhD. That being said, looking back way before I was a graduate student, I remember having been in Hong Kong in 1978, where I collected catalogues from bookstores and I was going through them, and I still



remember when I was looking through them I thought, 'Of course I cannot buy this book, but somebody should buy it because of its historical importance, someone will need this for their study'. And from the very beginning, I always read bibliographies. It is one of the first things I read in a book. So somehow I always had had a librarian's attitude already.

Do you feel that in some situations, librarians with PhD degrees usually receive more respect from their academic counterparts? Are they more open to suggestions from librarians with PhDs as well as more likely to involve them as research and teaching partners?

The sad thing is, yes. I cannot tell you the number of times I have been introduced as 'He's somebody from the library, but he's not just a librarian'. There has been a bit of change in recent times because there are professors who realise that they need help with databases, on how to use them. They also need help with how to manipulate big data. So there is now a kind of realisation that there are people with specialisations that the professors themselves do not possess. I do think that having gone through the same process of doing research for a PhD, knowing what scholarship is about and having a PhD does qualify you as being kind of an equal for some of the professors. What I sometimes notice is that people from other institutions, when they come to Princeton, might have different or lower expectations of librarians. It takes some time for them to realise that at Princeton, there are subject librarians who can be seen as their intellectual peers or have something of their own to teach them, and they might come from a background where that was not the case, where the librarian was the person whom the professor told to buy a book and where they were basically book buyers reacting to the recommendation of the professors. It takes time for them to relearn that type of expectation.

Are librarians considered faculty at Princeton, and what is the probation period for librarians to be tenured?

Although we do not really have tenure, we have something similar to it. There is a kind of a 3-year or 5-year process. After that, you come up for continuing appointment, to be decided on by your peers in a committee comprised of librarians. Librarian appointments are screened heavily at the beginning of hiring; some positions take a long time to fill. If you are considered to be right person, especially as a subject librarian, it might actually not be as difficult to get continuing appointment as it is to get tenure. But then again, there are those who do not get continuing appointment and who then have to leave.

As the Chinese Librarian, how do you acquire and evaluate your collection?

Basically, Chinese books are selected individually, one by one. Princeton is one of the very last holdouts in the library world where it is still considered that it is the subject

librarian's personal responsibility to build your collection; it cannot be completely automated. That is what you will be judged on; you are selecting with your own mind and what you think is valuable to the research collection. Therefore, it's not just what people need right now; it's not just patron-driven acquisitions, it is what you think the current and future library needs 20 or 30 years from now. We start feeling that we are one of the few libraries in which librarians are evaluated that way. If a professor comes to me and says, 'Can you buy this book?', I sometimes think I did not do my job well; I should have bought that book before she or he even knew about that title.

How do we evaluate our collection? I would say that would probably be currently one of my weakest aspects in my position. I do not really have the time to evaluate backwards how we are doing. Of course, I react to the requests from users, fill what we do not have, and I try immediately to adjust myself to a need to expand into a new direction. It is our job as subject librarians to be proactive.

You talked a bit earlier about databases. In the past few years, the EAL has been engaged in the digitisation of some of its rare books, most recently as a part of the Chiang Ching Kuo Foundation Funds. Could you tell us more about it?

The Chiang Ching Kuo Foundation Funds project was in collaboration with the AS. The thing is, we digitised 200 rare book titles selected by us and them; the previous director of the Library made a lot of specialised, informed selections for that project. The AS was supposed to make this available in some way or enough for a combined database, but that actually never materialised. Thus, now we decided to make this available ourselves, in some cases having to redo some work within our own systems. That work now has been done, and we are close to finishing it and releasing the digitised works from within our own Princeton University Digital Library (PUDL) framework (see <http://pudl.princeton.edu/>). Thus, what we digitised is much more than what you can see currently. At the EAL, we always had a page where we made available a few specially requested items in an easy format which were not available yet on the main PUDL site in order to give already electronic access to a subset of our material, those which had been asked by individual users (see <https://library.princeton.edu/eastasian/diglib/>).

So the EAL electronic text site is not the main site where the whole collection will be released; the main site is the PUDL, where all Chinese digitised titles will be made available soon. What we have on our own EAL site are a few medical texts and some other books we digitised upon demand. We said, 'Hey, people need this. Let's make a scaled-down pdf with watermarks so that users can use it immediately'. These works on our site don't have what I think in many libraries is called 'structural maps', which allow people to jump easily from Chapter 1 to Chapter 2 or Chapter 3, or to Illustration A, B and C. Making those 'strucmaps' takes a lot of time, and even though that work was done for the AS site originally, it wasn't released to the public, and we now have to do it again ourselves on our own platform.

In addition to that, unfortunately Princeton is not really set up to digitise works for people, even when they have grants. If I get a request for something and I decide it is not yet available elsewhere, but worth digitising, I can often get it into the general digitisation workflow at Princeton. I can perhaps have 10 or 20 titles digitised a year.



The unfortunate fact is, people can't immediately get it because it takes time to get it through the pipeline. The good thing is: it will be free. That is how things are done here. So the digitisation of East Asian books is continuing on a small scale; every year, we can digitise about 20 texts or so.

In East Asian libraries, it is a balancing act in terms of priorities between the various areas of languages, expertise and collections. What are your experiences as a librarian, both as a Chinese-language librarian and now as head of the EAL in terms of balancing and prioritising those tensions that may exist?

You talk about tensions, and you are totally right; in a lot of libraries, I hear there are those tensions. Thankfully, we traditionally have not had those tensions that much here. Even as a Chinese Studies librarian, I was already responsible for electronic databases in both Japanese and Chinese because of my technological experience and because I have both a Japanese and Chinese background. Also, my research in typography goes really across both languages. I have a Dutch MA in Japanology, and although I am a sinologist, most of my dissertation was based upon the work of Japanese sinologists. Some tensions may always be there, but as Director of the EAL, I already have been trying to develop our Japanese rare books holdings, together with our Japanese librarian, and with our Korean librarian, I also maintain an interest in Korean rare books. Thus, I very much wish we can continue not to have those tensions in the future. The same is true of our professors: the professors in Chinese and Japanese studies work very well together, and I think I work well with all of them too.

How does the collection catalogue provide access to users? With the non-Roman script, what challenges does this present to cataloguing?

The cataloguers do not report to me, but we have a very close relationship. The main question is: how do you provide access, especially to books in storage? Almost every set of records needs a talk between the Chinese Studies librarian and the cataloguer. While they do not report to me, they are on site, so we have constant interaction, and that is very important.

For non-Roman scripts, in cataloguing, here that is not very much a library issue (even if occasionally a technical one). There was a time when I was the primary non-Roman script specialist on campus, and that included helping Arabic, Hebrew, Syriac users, anything you could think of. That has become a little less necessary as operating systems have become much more capable, and so has the new generation of system specialists, so I do not necessarily have to do much of that anymore. At the Library, for a long time, I have been basically on every committee that involves a part of the library systems that uses non-Roman scripts. Princeton has always been trying to pay attention to non-Roman scripts. Our Head of Cataloguing is an Arabic specialist, and our Head of Collection Development has a South Asian background, so we never have to defend the position that non-Roman scripts are important.

Which part of your job at the EAL do you find most rewarding?

It's difficult to say because I clearly like all aspects of my job. One of the difficulties of becoming the Director is having to get rid of some parts that I very much like doing. Perhaps the most rewarding part is being able to translate between the technology, the people, and the scholars; the scholars and the databases and between the vendors and the students in order to make sure that all things work between these parties, and being able to relay the requirements for our field of study, which are not necessarily the same requirements as, say, my subject librarian colleagues in economics or so, to vendors and system specialists. I do think that even if I am not primarily defining myself as a scholar anymore, but as a librarian, I like to make contributions to the field by bringing people together or like being the person who brings into contact people who should be talking to each other.

I understand that there are librarians from many countries who are managing significant Chinese collections in their libraries, yet they are without your qualification, namely, the PhD degree, knowledge, research capabilities and output. In your opinion, for a person who happens to be a good administrator, but without your level of scholarly knowledge or interest in Chinese history, to work at the EAL or at other Ivy League institutions, would this work at all?

Nobody can know everything, and having some knowledge and some background and not using it also does not work, but I do think you need to know what scholarship is and you need to know what people are doing in your field: what questions do they ask, what sources do they use and what needs do they have? Otherwise, just being a good manager is not enough; you need to have those other skills. Thus, I think a background in scholarship is necessary. If you are just a manager or do everything with approval plans, or just use a PDA, it might be okay for certain types of libraries, but it would not be OK for a place like Harvard, Princeton or another great research library. I think at those institutions, people will be expected to have more knowledge (which is not to say that people at other places do not have that too). At this moment, you also need to have a technological background; you have to know how databases work or should work. Just being a scholar is also not sufficient.

How does your work as a librarian and your work as a researcher in Chinese studies differ from those that are carried out by librarians and researchers in the same field in Taiwan and mainland China?

I must admit I do not know too much about this area, as I do not have as much interaction as I should with librarians in those areas. I think the main difference is we do Chinese studies, East Asian studies and Japanese studies; East Asia is our subject, and yet, for our colleagues in Asia, they use their languages for everything, not just East Asian Studies. It's different for them; they are also studying us!

Thus, I start feeling that what we need from them is not the same thing as what they need from us, and we have to realise that fact. Another difference is that when we give presentations and we introduce, for instance, our database development or digitisation projects, they are surprised at our level of interaction with scholarship and scholars.

The librarians there do not have as much direct relation or contact with the students or professors. A librarian there is a much less integrated in liaison work, and they do not have constant interaction. Of course, I also think sometimes that's true in the US as well; I know that sometimes Acquisitions does not have as close a relationship with subject librarians or with Public Services as we have here in Princeton. Yet, I think that if you lack one of these three parts, a librarian can't do his or her job really well.

I think that – I know much less of Taiwan – it's not that in China there are not a lot of people with great subject expertise, but they do not have that constant interaction with the user. Therefore, they also do not see their results. Their goal is that they want to incorporate that. But it takes time for a library culture to change. But of course, their experience with Chinese vendors, publishers, etc., is superior to our own, and one always learns a lot when talking to Chinese colleagues, so we all learn from each other.

Speaking of librarians from different areas in the world, East Asian librarians in Europe versus East Asian librarians in North America, in terms of their professional status, all in all, how are they different from each other?

Although European, I've never worked in Europe, but what I do know from some of my good friends from over there is that they are often more of a one- or two-person organisation. East Asian librarians tend to do everything themselves there. While I do a lot of different tasks here, I do not do everything. I have never catalogued nor know how in detail cataloguing works because I have never done that.

What I see as a major difference is the size of the collections. We in North America have so much more money to spend. I think that is really the big difference. I'm glad to be at an institution where I do not have to fight with my colleagues about money. I have to write reports if I want to buy special things, but it is not a fight for the last dollar.