

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter X. Zhou. *Collecting Asia: East Asian Libraries in North America, 1868-2008*. Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 2010. xxi + 342 pp. \$125.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-924304-56-9.

Reviewed by Tao Yang (Rutgers University)

Published on H-Asia (March, 2011)

Commissioned by Sumit Guha

Breaking New Ground in East Asia Library History

Published by the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) in 2010, *Collecting Asia* is a much-welcomed and very timely addition to the history of the library. In the following, I will refer to these “East Asian libraries in North America” simply as East Asia libraries, to distinguish them from the libraries in East Asia. Berkeley historian Mary Elizabeth Berry wrote the foreword and believes this book to be “the first effort to track the history of acquisitions, across a big time and a big space, in one or more languages foreign to that space” (p. i). Today, as East Asia libraries, along with their parent institutions, are being transformed by digital technologies and economic realities, this book provides a rare opportunity for both practitioners and scholars using the libraries to position the current changes in the historical background.

Collecting Asia originated in 2007 at a symposium on the same topic at the University of California Berkeley and was edited by Peter X. Zhou, the director of the East Asian Library at Berkeley. Often written by the respective head librarian, each of its twenty-five chapters explores the history of a major East Asia library: at Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Cornell, and Princeton universities, along with the universities of Pennsylvania and Pittsburgh, and the Library of Congress in the Northeast; Duke University and the University of North Carolina in the Southeast; the universities of Chicago, Michigan, Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Kansas, and Minnesota, as well as Indiana and Ohio State universities in the Midwest; University of California at Berkeley, Los Angeles, and San Diego, along with Stanford University as well as the universities of Washington and Hawaii in the Pacific Region; and the universities of Toronto and British Columbia in Canada. Therefore, the magic number twenty-five, which happens to be about half of the institutional members of the Coun-

cil on East Asian Libraries, has ensured both a wide geographical coverage and a balanced representation of private and public institutions. Given the number of contributors involved in the project, it is understandable that some chapters may appear not as comprehensive and detailed as others. The individual chapters are chronologically arranged, starting with a piece on arguably the oldest, the Yale collection, and ending with the one on the much younger (and fast-growing) UC San Diego collection.

The year 1868 marks the beginning point of these twenty-five collections, apparently because it was recently discovered that in this year two Tokugawa-era Japanese books and eight issues of *Chinese Repository* (an English periodical published in Canton) were donated to the Yale library. Before this discovery, the general consensus had been that the Yale collection began with the Yung Wing donations in 1878 and that the earliest record of East Asian books in America was a sizable gift of Chinese books received by the Library of Congress from the Chinese emperor in 1869.[1] Therefore, this new finding at Yale broke two records at once! The remarkable discovery was made possible by the meticulous research of Ellen Hammond who wrote the first chapter and the tradition of exceptional record keeping in the Yale library.

In her narrative of the Yale collection, Hammond further suggests that the year 1855, when the American Oriental Society (AOS) Library was deposited at the Yale College Library, was the beginning of East Asian books on Yale campus. This suggestion apparently implies that the AOS Library had East Asian books by 1855, which would make it an even earlier pioneer in collecting East Asian books. This claim certainly needs to be verified due to its historical significance. The supporting evidence is available in the earliest library reports published in the *Jour-*

nal of the American Oriental Society. For example, an 1847 library report listed a donation of Chinese books by a “Rev. W. Jenks” as its very first gift since the establishment.[2] In the ensuing years, the AOS Library continued to receive donations of East Asian books, along with books in other Asian languages. This seems to place the AOS Library as the earliest known library to continuously collect East Asian books in North America. Therefore, would it be appropriate for the future history of East Asia libraries to have a chapter on the AOS collection?

The only benchmark I can think of that can be used to measure the progress made by *Collecting Asia* is a 1979 article written by Tsun-Hsun Tsien, an authority in Chinese bibliography and East Asian librarianship, in which Tsien summarized the development of East Asia collections from 1869 to 1975.[3] As aforementioned, *Collecting Asia* extended the beginning of East Asian books in American libraries further back in time. In addition, this new book told substantive stories of many collections for the first time: these include most East Asia libraries established after World War II and some unique subcollections, such as the McCartee Library at the University of Pennsylvania and the Laufer Collection at the University of Chicago. Even when a collection is relatively well known, the authors in *Collecting Asia* sometimes provide interesting new details based on archival research, one example being a refreshing and vivid account of the impossible journey of the Gest Collection to Princeton.

To many members of H-Net, *Collecting Asia* will also prove to be a treasure trove of information for the study of cultural relations across the Pacific and a valuable guide to top research collections concerning East Asia. In the foreword, Berry commends Zhou and his fellow authors for their efforts “to explore through their libraries the bonds between cultures” (p. i). She situates the growth of East Asia collections in the context of “cosmopolitan ideals” and “intellectual expansiveness” that have characterized American research institutions. On the one hand, these higher ideals can be found in Thomas Jefferson’s letter to Congress (quoted on page 23) after his personal collection was acquired by the Library of Congress and in Ezra Cornell’s address at the inaugural day of Cornell University (quoted on page 93). On the other hand, more utilitarian, geopolitical or financial, concerns also punctuate the narratives in the book. These include the failed attempt at Yale and Columbia to create a “School of Colonial Administration” when the United States became a colonial

empire after the Spanish-American War, post-WWII growth of area studies programs supported by the National Defense Education Act (referred to in seven places throughout the book—see the index entry on page 339), and the establishment of the Institute of Japanese Studies at Ohio State in response to the arrival of Honda and other Japanese companies in the 1970s. *Collecting Asia* provides abundant helpful leads on books, people, and events for further research along both idealistic and utilitarian lines.

Zhou, the editor, did not intend for *Collecting Asia* to be “an exhaustive guide to East Asian collections in North America” (p. xi), but nevertheless most contributors aim for a balance between a historiography and a practical guide to collections in their writing. The concise and informative essay on the East Asian collections of the Library of Congress is appropriately subtitled “A Bibliographic Guide” (p. 23). But even chapters with more historical details will be valuable as guides, because they either describe some of the most prized collections like the Gest Collection or answer practical questions such as why Duke has a stronger Japanese collection and its neighboring University of North Carolina has a bigger Chinese collection.

In sum, *Collecting Asia* is a wonderful book that breaks new ground in East Asia library history and provides valuable information to scholars who use these libraries. Needless to say, simply putting together this volume is an amazing feat for the editor, considering the number of contributors involved, and also the individual authors, many of whom, as head librarians, have sizable collection, budget, and staff to manage on a daily basis. The book is beautifully produced with many relevant pictures and very few typos. Speaking of pictures, in the photo assortment of pioneering library practitioners and benefactors at the beginning of the book, only five out of twenty-four photos depict women, but nineteen out of thirty contributors to *Collecting Asia* are women, which speaks of progress in itself!

Notes

[1]. Tsun-Hsun Tsien, “Trends in Collection Building for East Asian Studies in American Libraries,” *College and Research Libraries* 40, no. 5 (1979): 405-415.

[2]. “Donations to the Library,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 1, no. 3 (1847): xii-xxiv.

[3]. Tsien, “Trends in Collection Building.”

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Tao Yang. Review of Zhou, Peter X., *Collecting Asia: East Asian Libraries in North America, 1868-2008*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. March, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32231>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.