



International Collaboration to Reveal Rare Chinese Materials Hidden for Half a Century

Zhijia Shen, Director, East Asia Library, University of Washington

Jing Liu, Chinese Language Librarian, Asian Library, University of British Columbia

Abstract

This report discusses Discovering Modern China, an international collaborative project supported by CLIR (Council on Library and Information Resources) and conducted by the University of Washington Libraries and the University of British Columbia Libraries (Canada) to reveal the hidden treasures of Chinese language materials. These include rare books, special collections, archival materials, and so on, printed from the fourteenth century to the early twentieth century. We address collaborative project planning and management, resource sharing, and staff exchanges and training among the University of Washington, the University of British Columbia, and academic libraries in China. We also demonstrate how international collaboration can optimize libraries' capacity and resources to accomplish difficult tasks, and we illustrate the challenges of working with the policies, laws, and regulations of different countries.

Among the best libraries specializing in East Asian studies in North America, the University of Washington (UW) Libraries and University of British Columbia (UBC) Library are major regional, national, and international bases of information and research about East Asia. Through more than half a century of collection development, the two libraries have built outstanding collections including unique Chinese rare books, archives, and other special materials. Many of these special materials, however, have yet to be cataloged because of lack of funding and staff expertise.

In 2013, UW and UBC received jointly a grant from the CLIR Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives program to conduct an 18-month project called Discovering Modern China: University of Washington and University of British Columbia Collections. The goal was to catalog these hidden treasures and make them discoverable to users and scholars worldwide.

This project was also one of the first two CLIR-funded international collaborative efforts involving a Canadian university library. The grant enables UW and UBC to collaborate on project planning and resource sharing, staff exchanges and training, and collections and user services sharing. It also enables us to receive expert consultations and personnel from academic libraries in Asia. As a result, UW and UBC libraries will create 2,000 original bibliographic records in OCLC WorldCat and in the Union Catalog of Rare Books of the China Academic Library and Information System (CALIS), an academic library consortium in China. Since its launching, the project has already created several hundred records and increased the awareness of and access to these treasures, which benefits not only the scholars of the two institutions, but also scholars worldwide. In an international joint effort such as this, the process is just as important as the result. Collaboration has been the core of this project from the start.



Identifying Hidden Treasures

The UW and UBC library collections contain rare and unique materials originally owned by private individuals, families, scholars, and collectors. Many special collections came to our libraries through various routes during troubled times in early twentieth-century China. Throughout the past half century, however, access to the proposed collections has been extremely limited, and materials have been kept in storage, unorganized. On-site browsing has been the only method of access.

The two institutions' Chinese collections identified for this project complement each other in their uniqueness. For example, the UW collections include rare historical archives and unique special collections such as wooden fish books, while the UBC collections are known for several noteworthy private collections of traditional thread-stitch-bound rare books. Both collections are rich in rare or unique books and are recognized for their significant research value. To plan for this project, we connected with world-renowned scholars who have browsed and benefited from the hidden treasures in the two libraries. They are familiar with both institutions' hidden collections, which have benefited their research. These scholars—from the United States, Canada, China, and Europe—not only provided strong recommendations but also helped with selection and planning. Some of them are currently leading international research teams and are excited to see that we are taking an international collaborative approach to unveiling hidden treasures to the world.

Our project comprises three phases. Phase I (6/1/2014 to 11/30/2014) focused on hiring and training student assistants to search collections, hiring project catalogers and a rare book


consultant, and setting up project equipment and space. Phase II (12/1/2014 to 3/31/2016) has focused on cataloging and assessing collections. Phase III (4/1/2016 to 5/31/2016) will focus on project evaluation.

At the time of this presentation, we have completed phase one. In that phase we searched numerous uncataloged materials to identify unique and highly valuable titles. We hired and engaged graduate students of Asian studies and history to conduct bibliographical searching and sorting, to create an inventory list of unique titles, and to mark their preservation needs. For both institutions, especially UW, phase one of the project has yielded a significant number of potential rare books for the CLIR consultant librarian to evaluate.

Collaboration in Applying Cataloging Guidelines and Rules

The UW and UBC project teams closely follow the Research Library Group's (RLG) *Cataloging Guidelines for Creating Chinese Rare Book Records in Machine-Readable Format* as well as the Program for Cooperative Cataloging RDA (Resource Description and Access) hybrid bibliographic records guidelines. Created to reconcile Anglo-American cataloging rules with cataloging practices of centuries-old traditional Chinese rare books, these guidelines presented an international collaborative model before us. The East Asian library community in North America has been working to apply these rules to the MARC 21 format. Because we do not plan to confuse the guidelines with the RDA's new cataloging rules, we were mindful about maximizing sustainability and interoperability by adding hybrid RDA fields and relationships in the online bibliographic records created for the project.

Charlene Chou, head of technical services at the UW East Asia Library, has prepared questions and



comments derived from the rare book cataloging practices of the project, and submitted them to the Committee of Technical Processing of the Council on East Asian Libraries. Charlene is leading the committee and its rare book working group.

The Importance of Communication

Both the UW and UBC project teams selected unique and rare materials from the hidden collections to create original bibliographic records. We established a clear scope of work and workflow through close communication. The two teams take day trips to visit each other and to inspect collection conditions and work space setup. We conduct regular Skype meetings and use instant messaging and image sharing. Both teams launched project websites¹ and posted project status reports, exciting discoveries, and scholarly engagement activities. We also use Google Drive to share working documents. Although we follow our respective library's cataloging policies, we also conduct vivid discussions about best practices. The collaborative experience has enhanced the quality of our work. The well-documented working papers we have created will be an important reference for future efforts and collaboration.

Sharing Staff Expertise between Institutions

The UW East Asia Library has a very strong technical services unit led by Charlene Chou, an internationally known cataloging librarian. The head librarian, Zhijia Shen, specializes in Chinese history and international scholarly engagement. To ensure high-quality work, UW provides training for all CLIR project staff via telecommunication and in-person visits. Training and technical workflow are fully documented and available


¹ Available at <http://depts.washington.edu/ealclir/wordpress> and <http://guides.library.ubc.ca/clir>.

on the [UW technical services staff website](#). The project also has sought international expertise including top-notch scholars from China as core project staff. Professor Boyue Yao, a renowned Chinese rare-book specialist and librarian at the Beijing University Library in China, joined us at UW's East Asia Library in January 2015 for a 13-month appointment as the CLIR project librarian for Chinese rare books and cataloging. He also joined UBC's Asian Library as a Chinese rare-book consultant for two months in April and May 2015. Mr. Ya Min Wu, former assistant director of Liaoning Provincial Library and a seasoned Chinese rare-book librarian, was appointed CLIR rare-book cataloger at UBC for 12 months as of December 2014. Both librarians are well-known Chinese rare-book experts. They bring in-depth knowledge and expertise to our CLIR project.

To maximize the impact of the project on cataloging, the principal catalogers in central technical services at UW and UBC Libraries have discussed training in NACO (the Library of Congress's Name Authority Cooperative Program), to enable the project to contribute name authority records.

In fact, this project has prompted partnerships that reach beyond our Chinese hidden collections. More broadly, it has enhanced communication and collaboration between the two libraries in areas such as preservation and conservation, digitization, staff exchange, training, and future grant proposals.

Although copy cataloging is not part of the CLIR project that we proposed, both UW and UBC libraries have encountered tough decisions about how to deal with it. For this project, both institutions did searching, selecting, and inventory listing of all the unique and rare materials that have no holdings showing in OCLC WorldCat. At UBC, copy cataloging is done by union-member



catalogers, and cannot be handled by student assistants or non-union members. Because the UBC library has no Chinese copy catalogers on staff, those books must be left behind locked doors. This is a challenge. The library needs to come up with a new strategy to tackle the copy cataloging resulting from the CLIR project.

The UW experience in handling copy cataloging provides a good model. In phase one we developed a parallel plan for the CLIR hidden collections project. While searching for hidden treasures, copy cataloging is performed by highly trained student assistants and paraprofessionals. Copy-cataloged materials go right into circulation and become available for interlibrary loan requests. Thanks to the strong technical service unit at UW's East Asia Library, searching, selecting, and copy cataloging are smoothly integrated into the workflow, and satellite projects have been created in support of the core CLIR project. This integrated working environment has optimized the project's impact, which reaches well beyond the original proposal to catalog 1,000 Chinese rare books.

Resource Sharing Worldwide

Thanks to Professor Yao, the CLIR project librarian from the Beijing University Library, the UW-UBC CLIR project has joined the Union Catalog of Rare Books of CALIS (the China Academic Library and Information System). The UW and UBC libraries have become its first members outside China. Twenty-five of China's top academic libraries belong to CALIS. Many records in the system are not available in OCLC WorldCat. Valuable bibliographical information can be easily derived from a similar edition in the CALIS Union Catalog for our original cataloging. Its customized interface for rare-book-specific information is user friendly. Records can be converted

between CN MARC and MARC 21. Joining CALIS's Union Catalog not only has sped up the cataloging for our CLIR project, it has also promoted our newly unveiled hidden treasures to scholars in China. At the same time, it has allowed UW and UBC professors and students access to the Chinese rare-book collections held by 25 of the best academic libraries in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Macau through a half-million online rare-book records and more than 270,000 images.

In phase two of the project, we have encountered many issues of forgery and authentication. To achieve our goal of creating accurate cataloging records and preparing for sharing the hidden treasures widely, we plan to scan one to three images from each rare book to provide crucial information for edition authentication. The images will be linked to the online cataloging records, which will enhance the research potential of these materials and benefit scholars and researchers worldwide. Meanwhile, we hope to receive user-contributed information and metadata about these rare books, which will not only help with our cataloging tasks, but will also make connections to other similar holdings.

The UW-UBC project has optimized our libraries' capacity and resources to accomplish difficult tasks through international collaboration. As of February 13, 2015, the second month of the second phase, we already had cataloged hundreds of unique and extremely rare titles, contributed authority records, and triggered several conservation plans. We discovered rare sets, some volumes of which were held in libraries in China and others in our libraries. For example, a rare book set held at UBC was missing a few volumes, which were considered permanently lost. They have now been identified at Beijing University Library. The genealogy of our rare books and



their collecting history over the centuries have attracted the research interest of professors and graduate students. It is now possible that scattered volumes of original collections may be identified and linked together virtually. Once the project is completed, we hope that some of the efforts of the original collectors will be realized, albeit across a long time span and wide geographic distance. This project has allowed our hidden collections at UBC and UW to enter a new world, gain new life, and enjoy continuity of heritage.

Challenges of International Collaboration

The benefits and impacts of our international collaboration are profound and long-lasting. However, such collaborations can also be challenging. We have run into obstacles working with different countries' policies, laws, and regulations, and with communicating within different administrative and organizational structures and reporting systems. For example, we selected for UBC a seasoned cataloger from Taiwan National University Library, but failed to obtain her permit

to work in Canada. We anxiously waited for Professor Yao's application for a Canadian visa, which ended up being complex, and delayed his arrival in Seattle. When the UBC team brought Professor Yao to UBC for a one-day visit after visiting UW, he ran into tough questions from border immigration officers such as "Why can't you work remotely for UBC by video conferencing?" and "Do rare book consultants really need to touch the actual items?" These are just some examples.

The CLIR project has enabled us to discover and make available to users the treasure collections in our libraries. Even more importantly, it has provided us an invaluable opportunity to learn about international collaboration. As libraries and information services become increasingly globalized, there will be more need for international collaborations. We hope the lessons learned and experiences gained from our project will benefit future CLIR applicants and projects internationally.