

The Theory and
Practice of the East
Asian Library

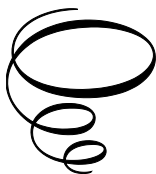
The Theory and Practice of the East Asian Library:

A Marginal Science

By

Hong Cheng

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—Hong Cheng (程洪)

CHAPTER ONE

DEFINITION AND FEATURE

East Asia is increasingly a hot spot in the world! Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, people have paid much attention to the region. As the eye of a typhoon, East Asia affects the rest of the world even if the region itself remains calm on the surface. A better and accurate understanding of East Asia is not only essential to the East Asian people but also to the rest of the world. Obviously, this better and accurate understanding of the region needs to be built on the solid and unbiased research of East Asian studies. In supporting such solid and unbiased research, the East Asian library collects and provides a comprehensive and unbiased research resource on East Asia, and this potential influence on East Asian studies shall not be underestimated.

This research is on the East Asian library, a category of academic libraries which specialize in East Asian resources but are located outside of East Asia. In a major university library system especially in North America, the East Asian library, or the East Asian collection, is often a branch library of a general research library system, along with other specialized libraries such as a law library, business library, medical library, art library, etc. In comparison with other specialized libraries, the East Asian library has three distinguishing features: focusing on a geographic region rather than on specific disciplines, collecting resources in East Asian language scripts rather than in Latin scripts, and operating as a relatively independent unit rather than as a departmentalized function.

However, the significance of the East Asian Library is not only due to the distinguishing features of the library, but more to the academic fields that the library covers and the influence and reach of the library's collection and service. From such a perspective, the study on the East Asian Library actually covers the subject of East Asian studies and the profession of the library and information service, and opens an unprecedented research area

of cross-disciplinary marginal studies. In conducting this research, it is necessary to start with the background, the definition and the status of the research.

Background: the Purpose

The primary purpose of the book is to systematically unveil the theory and practice of the East Asian library for the first time. The core object of my research is the East Asian library, which serves the studies on East Asia. In fact, without an adequate knowledge of East Asian research resources, it is hard to conduct reliable East Asian studies, and in turn difficult to have an accurate understanding of East Asia. East Asia, East Asian studies and the East Asian library are so connected together as a chain in this research project; therefore, I will mention East Asia and East Asian studies in the study of the East Asian library from time to time.

Why East Asia?

East Asia is the primary geographic region for the collection of the East Asian library. It is clear that East Asia makes the East Asian library important in the academic library system and in turn, in academia. In other words, it is East Asia that attracts more attention to the East Asian library. Why does East Asia become so crucial to the East Asian library? The influence of the region on the world stage is a primary consideration of my research. As described in the recent research on East Asia, “East Asia is home to a rapidly rising superpower and the two largest economies in the world after the United States; its global impact, therefore, is qualitatively different from that of all other regions outside the Western world. However, global East Asia is much more than these truisms of international politics and global political economy suggest it is. Many aspects of global East Asia are less obvious or apparent, yet they are equally important, and many questions remain.” “East Asian people, cultures, religions and even ideologies have woven themselves into the tapestry of our global square—sometimes thanks to but quite often regardless of the region’s

prominence.”¹ These words have indicated the position of East Asia in today’s world. As commonly known, East Asia has played a noticeable role for many centuries in world history; however, the political and economic influence of East Asia was more or less limited to the region itself until after the Cold War. Nowadays, any major incidents happening in the world would have a shadow of East Asia involved, in addition to the Euro-American powers. East Asia is no longer a limited regional power, and its importance extends far beyond the geographic region. East Asia certainly gains much attention in world affairs.

Nevertheless, in the research, I am not going to authenticate how important East Asia has become, as this is studied by many scholars and researchers in East Asian studies. My research aims at emphasizing the importance of understanding an authentic East Asia through its history, culture, economy, society and much more, by accessing authoritative resources and serious research, not by a nationalist and ideological imagination, nor geopolitical assumptions. As the nationalist/ideological imagination and geopolitical assumptions exist everywhere in East Asia and in the rest of the world, academic and educational institutions are obligated to stand out in clarifying any misleading, misunderstanding, and misinterpreting East Asia, which poses a huge threat to the peace and prosperity of the world, although we know the politicians are hardly listening to scholarly research or learning from authentic resources.

Why East Asian Studies?

East Asian studies is multidisciplinary study with a focus on East Asia. As a distinctive multidisciplinary field of scholarly enquiry and education, East Asian studies promotes a broad humanistic understanding of East Asia past and present. The scholars of East Asian studies are normally not the policymakers for national security and international affairs, or the decision-makers for business strategy and financial management. However, East

¹ Pieke, Frank N. and Koichi Iwabuchi. “Introduction: The Many Faces of Global East Asia.” In Frank N. Pieke and Koichi Iwabuchi eds. *Global East Asia: Into the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021) 10. Accessed January 31, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520971424>.

Asian studies is not akin to cultural relics for people to appreciate in their leisure time. History tells us that, when a governmental leader treated East Asian studies humbly and took East Asian study scholars' research findings seriously, the international strategy towards East Asia became effective and successful, and vice versa. Many missteps in East Asian policies often start with a misunderstanding of East Asia and ignorance of East Asian studies. A similar situation happened in the business world. Bad investment in East Asia usually came from a lack of knowledge of East Asian culture and society. People value the importance of East Asian studies since it is more likely the most comprehensive approach to understanding East Asia without preset assumptions.

Of course, East Asian studies is not a thinktank of the government, or a market research section of a major business corporation. East Asian studies emphasizes fundamental research for discovering the basic characteristics of East Asia and its individual members, providing a base for mutual understanding, cultural exchange and communication. The true value of East Asian studies is to present an authentic East Asia, based on available reliable research resources rather than imaginary assumptions or ideological bias. Academic research shall not serve any political or other non-scholarly purpose, and the same principle applies to East Asian studies too.

East Asian studies is divided into theoretical schools, or academic schools, and there are disagreements and debates among the schools. "Schools and circles have been a major force in twentieth-century intellectual movements. They fostered circulation of ideas within and between disciplines, thus altering the shape of intellectual inquiry."² A theoretical school shares common internal concepts, which could be contradictory or opposed to those of other schools. No matter how divisive the summarized opinions of the research findings, the studies are valuable if they are based on reliable factual resources with reasonable logics. Instead of exploring the conclusions or opinions of the studies, my research pays more attention to the fact-finding process of the researches, since such a process is more related to the East Asian Library.

² Grishakova, Marina and Silvi Salupere. "Preface." In Grishakova and Salupere, eds. *Theoretical Schools and Circles in the Twentieth-Century Humanities: Literary Theory, History, Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2015) ix.

Why the East Asian Library?

The main focus of my research is the East Asian library. East Asia is the research object of East Asian studies, and East Asian studies is the service client of the East Asian library. If a better understanding of East Asia relies on the successful research of East Asian studies, which in turn relies on the quality collection of East Asian resources; then, the East Asian library is the base of an academic pyramid.

Certainly, scholars of East Asian studies do not get all the needed materials from the East Asian library of their own institutions. In a particular university, the East Asian library provides basic teaching and research resources on East Asia, and virtually no library is able to satisfy all the faculty and student needs. However, when considering that the East Asian library as an organically connected system with internal cooperation with other East Asian libraries and external collaboration with other libraries and institutions especially in East Asia, the East Asian library system indeed contains a vast resource for East Asian studies.

An argument might be that, there is so much information on East Asia on the Internet, why do we need such a tiny collection from the East Asian library? It is true that the Internet contains much more information on East Asia. In counting the amount, the physical collection of all the East Asian libraries may be just 1-2 per cent of the Internet information, and an absolute majority of information would not be collected by the East Asian library. So why do we still emphasize the importance of the East Asian library? Conceptually, information is the message (utterance or expression) being conveyed. It could be the communication or reception of knowledge or intelligence; the knowledge obtained from investigation, study or instruction; intelligence, news; facts, data; or the attribute inherent in and communicated by one of two or more alternative sequences or arrangements of something (like nucleotides in DNA or binary digits in a computer program) that produce specific effects.³ We may be able to use a simpler term for information, everything that communicates. Obviously, the East Asian

³ “Information” in *Dictionary and Thesaurus, Merriam-Webster Online*. Accessed March 14, 2014, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/information>.

library does not aim at collecting much information, and the value of the East Asian library never relies on the amount or quantity of information provided.

Another common assumption is that the East Asian library collects knowledge of East Asia in any form. Knowledge can be recognized as a theoretical or practical understanding of a subject. Knowledge generally refers to the fact or condition of knowing something with familiarity gained through experience or association; or an acquaintance with or understanding of a science, art, or technique.⁴ Knowledge is a familiarity, awareness or understanding of someone or something, such as facts, information, descriptions, or skills, acquired through experience or education by perceiving, discovering, or learning. Theoretically, the collection of the East Asian library can be categorized as knowledge; however, knowledge is not a sufficient condition for the library collection. In fact, no library would claim to collect all the knowledge even just in a particular field of East Asia. The value of the East Asian library is not in the fact that the library collects knowledge.

In an ocean of information or knowledge, a library collection does not aim at containing as much information or knowledge as possible; rather, it selects and deselects, collecting the knowledge and information that the users of the particular library need most. The East Asian library collection contains just a tiny portion of the general human knowledge or information, which must be a useful, accessible, accurate and timely part of the particular human knowledge related to East Asia studies. Such a process gives the selected information or knowledge an authoritative stamp of the library. As more and more information sources become available to the public, the ability of establishing and recognizing an authority for the most useful, accessible, accurate and timely knowledge and information makes the library valuable and indispensable over time especially during the information exploration. As a logical inference, the East Asian library contributes to academia for guiding the way towards information authority.

⁴ “Knowledge” in *Dictionary and Thesaurus, Merriam-Webster Online*. Accessed March 14, 2014, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/knowledge>.

As people used to believe, information authority often comes from certain sources such as news media, government, community leadership, and even religion. Due to the problems of contemporary society, losing credibility becomes very common and the public hardly trusts information from most official channels. An unfortunate reality in our society is that news media and government are often involved with political propaganda and interest groups, while local communities and religious entities have their own interests to pursue. Once false and twisted information spreads everywhere, the loss of credibility is certain. However, a library has its special place in the contemporary society. As it is not at the forefront of power or moneymaking, a library is less likely to be favored by the interest groups, which gives a library the possibility of pursuing and collecting accurate, accessible and timely information and knowledge. In competing with commercial information resources, the power of the library on the “collection” issue is the “information authority.” The East Asian library does not necessarily collect, or have access to, all the information resources, but it does have the responsibility to ensure comprehensive and unbiased sources, reliable and confirmed information, and research-based knowledge. The value of the East Asian library is not relying on the size of the collection or the scope of the access, but on the quality of the collection and access; in other words, the information authority. In coping with such a base, the East Asian library provides an approach towards the accurate, accessible and timely information and knowledge on East Asia, a distinguished value of the library.

In general, my research is echoing the significance of the field: the increasing influence of East Asia in the world, the critical importance of East Asian studies, and the information authority of the East Asian library. This significance becomes the dynamic to my research in exploring the theory and practice of the East Asian library.

Definition: the Concepts

The East Asian library is the object of my research. A good definition of the object is a premise of the research. As a definition, the East Asian library is an academic library specializing in East Asian research resources, particularly in the form of East Asian vernacular scripts, and the location of

such a library is outside of East Asia. There are a few essential concepts of the definition of the East Asian library to be emphasized.

Concept I: Specialty

A specialty in East Asian studies is a key concept in defining the East Asian library. Specializing in East Asian research resources and providing related services are the primary reason for the existence of the East Asian library. The field of East Asian studies includes multiple disciplines mainly in humanities and social sciences; therefore, as a service to East Asian studies, the collections and resources of the East Asian library are mainly in East Asian language and culture, history, literature, art and art history, philosophy and religions, archeology, anthropology and sociology, political science, economics, etc., and extend to some fields of sciences and professional studies such as law, medicine, music, theater and film, business management and more.

The keyword for the specialty of the library is East Asia, the region, which includes anything related to the region as well as international relations with the region. However, some research areas such as general global studies or Asian-American studies are not included in the specialty of the East Asian library, unless involving East Asian languages. The defined specialty of the East Asian library is relatively flexible and may vary from library to library.

Concept II: Language

The resources collected by the East Asian library are primarily or solely in East Asian languages, i.e., Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Mongolian, Tibetan and other languages and dialects of the region. Chinese, Japanese and Korean language resources are commonly collected by most East Asian libraries, and only a very few libraries also collect other East Asian language materials.

English and other non-East Asian language materials on East Asia are an important resource for East Asian studies, included in the collection of some East Asian libraries but not others. No matter whether or not English and

other non-East Asian language materials are included in the collection, they are not the emphasis or the strength of the East Asian library.

There are quite a few area-study or international-study libraries or collections co-existing with the East Asian library in the higher education sector of North America; however, the distinguishing feature of the East Asian library is its language identity. The collections of most area-study and international-study libraries are principally in English and other Western languages, but the East Asian library collects the resources in the languages of the research objects.

The work languages of the East Asian library in North America are English and East Asian languages. Although the primary collection of the East Asian library is in East Asian languages, the public and technical services of the library are mainly in English, in coping with the general library system in North America.

Concept III: Location

In this research, the geographic scope of the East Asian library is limited to the libraries outside of East Asia, practically referring to the East Asian libraries in North America. The principal reason for this geographic limit is that this research is exploring the role of the East Asian library globally, particularly in the Western academic world. Although scholars in Asian studies may travel to East Asia for accessing research resources, the East Asian libraries in their own institutions are still the main source for their teaching and research.

In addition, certainly, the academic libraries in East Asia have great research resources related to East Asian studies, which are much more comprehensive than the collections outside of East Asia; however, in serving the study of their own country or neighboring countries, these libraries have quite different systems and their collections and services are significantly affected by the policies and interests of their governments and societies, bringing too many complications for this research to handle.

While this research generally deals with the East Asian libraries outside of East Asia, it particularly focuses on the East Asian libraries in North

America. Although most of these East Asian libraries or collections share features in common, there are still many differences. A majority of such libraries are located in North America and Europe, with some in Southeast Asia and Oceania and sparse numbers in South Asia, the Middle East and other regions. The European research libraries on East Asia have a long history with characteristic traditions, and many of these are not using the name of the East Asian Library. Even though I tried to read more about these libraries in Europe, Southeast Asia and Oceania, I admit I do not have direct experience and a thorough knowledge of these libraries. Thus, my research is based on the East Asian libraries in North America, but mentions the libraries in other regions occasionally.

The greatest advantage of the East Asian libraries located outside of East Asia is that, distanced from the political and economic interests of the East Asian countries, these libraries are able to collect authentic and comprehensive resources from all countries and regions in East Asia with fewer barriers in comparison with the libraries in East Asia. Therefore, the East Asian library owns the information authority of accurate, accessible and timely resources on East Asia, so that even the scholars in East Asian countries make special trips for accessing the resources in these East Asian libraries outside of East Asia. Such a situation makes the East Asian library enjoy a high reputation in information service.

The three defined concepts, specialty, language and location, have well described the object of this research. Although each East Asian library can differ in collection size, staff number and service categories, they share these essential concepts in common. I believe having a clear definition of the object is helpful and crucial to make the research pertinent and distinctive.

Feature: the Status

While East Asia becomes increasingly influential in world affairs and East Asian studies tends to be more attractive, the status of the East Asian library is not impressive to many scholars and to the public. Even in major universities of the world, most faculty and students are not aware of the

existence of such a library. It is no concealed secret that the East Asian library is a marginal field.

Reality of a Marginal Field

Different from a general library, the East Asian library is not required in higher education. Most colleges and universities in North America and other regions have no East Asian libraries as part of the education system, even though some library materials in the Chinese, Japanese and Korean languages are available in the general library. Only in major universities with established East Asian study programs does the East Asian library, or the East Asian collection on a smaller scale become a standard part of the library system.

The East Asian library's status as a marginal field is reflected in multiple aspects of higher education.

- At the **margin of academic disciplines**, the East Asian library involves itself in various disciplines in humanities, social sciences and even STEM (science, technology, engineering and medicine), but is not considered as an essential resource for these disciplines. Only the department of Asian languages and cultures would recognize the East Asian library as a crucial research resource, but the department itself is a marginal field to mainstream academia.
- At the **margin of professional services**, the East Asian library provides a professional library service to faculty, students and researchers; however, for the general library, the service provided by the East Asian library is just too minor in comparison with other library units. For a long period, drafting standards and guidelines for the library profession often neglected the East Asian library. There is virtually a glass ceiling for the East Asian librarians to be promoted to the leadership of the general library system.
- At the **margin of the educational system**, the East Asian library seems to be invisible in the educational system. Most faculty and students do not know whether or not there is an East Asian library on campus. Even to students in East Asian studies, the East Asian library is not much different from any classroom on campus. As an

example that I experienced in person, a PhD student in Asian Languages and Cultures worked on a dissertation almost every day at the East Asian library, accessing the library collections and consulting with the professional librarians. When the dissertation got published, in the acknowledgements, the author named professors and friends one by one, as well as the departments, centers and offices no matter whether in the attending university or in other institutions, with the only exception being the East Asian library. I cannot say this former PhD student intentionally ignored the East Asian library, but I believe the reality is that the East Asian library is so marginal in the educational system that it is virtually not much different from a classroom that students go to every day.

It is a reality that the East Asian library is a marginal field, and its influence is very limited in the higher education system. However, a marginal field does not mean having no characteristics.

Characteristics of a Marginal Field

As a marginal field, the East Asian library has some special characteristics different from the mainstream.

- **Interactivity**

As the East Asian library is at the margins of disciplines and professions, it becomes more interactive and multidisciplinary. In other words, the East Asian library tends to support more marginal studies dealing with multiple disciplines and cross-field studies among the humanities, social sciences and STEM. In contrast to a hardcore discipline, the marginal studies often require research resources that are not simply and clearly categorized with a single discipline, and what the East Asian library provides is likely to be such interactive and multidisciplinary resources.

- **Passivity**

A core field of a discipline is often decisive to the theory and methodology of the discipline, which leads and guides the direction of the disciplinary development. On the contrary, a marginal field lacks