New Perspectives for
Chineses-American Librarians

Editorial Note: The 1978 Annual Conference of the Chinese American Librarians Association held on 28 June 1978 in Chicago featured a timely and forward-looking theme—New Perspectives for Chinese-American Librarians. Three papers were presented at the meeting, which was chaired by Dr. Hwa-Wei Lee:

“Opportunities and Challenges in Being a Chinese American Librarian.” By Ms. Gloria H. Hsia, Chief, Catalog Publication Division, the Library of Congress.


In order that the papers can be read by others who could not attend the 1978 Conference the Journal has obtained permission from two of the authors, Ms. Hsia and Ms. Wu, to publish their papers in the issue.

Opportunities and Challenges
in Being a Chinese American Librarian

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As you are undoubtedly aware, there are special problems for the Chinese Americans who at present function in the

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libraries of the United States or who wish to find a satisfying career within them. The difficulties cannot be brushed aside. It is the purpose of this talk to analyze them and suggest useful perspectives and solutions. To do that we must first consider the problem of finding employment itself.

**Job Market**

The period from 1974 to 1976 proved to be a particularly difficult time for many workers—including those belonging to minority groups and those not subject to job discrimination. Unemployment rose throughout 1974, and the 1975 jobless rates, on an annual average basis, were the highest since data had become available by race in 1948. Although over-all unemployment fell somewhat in 1976, unemployment rates were higher than in the post-World War II era.¹

The economy did not turn around fast enough to ease the job squeeze in libraries. For twenty years prior to 1969 the picture had been a rosy one for those planning to enter the library science profession, but in 1969 the demand for librarians reached a plateau from which it has steadily declined for almost a decade. Basing ourselves on the 1971 Bowker Annual report, we can project a fairly general reduction in needs for professional personnel in virtually all types of libraries for some years to come. The difference between supply and demand clearly lessened. Where decreases in demand are reported, the most typical reason given is "financial constraint." Without a doubt, the country's economic situation is reflected in library employment.² Vacancy freezes have remained in effect in many libraries for long periods of time, and nonprofessionals have often had to fill in and assume more professional duties. At present there is a lull in library placements in the federal community. Hiring has been reduced. In a report aimed at estimating job opportunities and manpower needs in the library field through 1985, the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that employment in libraries will grow more slowly over the 1970-1985 period than during the decade of the sixties. Presumably, the job market will not open until after 1985.³
The tight job market can be further demonstrated by a news item in the *LC Information Bulletin* of 19 August 1977. The item states: "The Library received a total of 12,652 applications for employment from July 1, 1974, to June 30, 1975. During the same period, 13.8 percent of those employed decided to leave. From July 1, 1976, until June 30 of this year (1977), however, there were 25,797 applications received, while only 6.8 percent of those employed left the Library. Thus in two years, applications have approximately doubled, while the percentage of separations has halved." 

Between now and 1985, according to *Money* magazine’s November issue, librarians have the second-poorest career opportunities as newcomers. Using Bureau of Labor Statistics projections, the magazine devised a rating system to sort out which professions offer the greatest and which the fewest possibilities for recent graduates.

The fact that the job market is no longer good for librarians in general inevitably affects Chinese American librarians. To determine to what degree the decline in demand has affected their opportunities, I have made a mini-study of the enrollment in library schools and the employment in public, research and academic libraries. Questionnaires were sent to libraries and library schools where there is a concentration of Chinese Americans. Unfortunately, most of the responses included Chinese Americans in the broad categories of Asian or Oriental. The absence of any data specifically on the Chinese American group presented serious drawbacks in arriving at a precise conclusion. At best, the study can be characterized as tentative or preliminary. It shows that for the past ten years there is a slight decrease in total enrollment in library schools and a slight increase in minority enrollment.

Some university and public libraries are able to maintain their status quo in employment, although one large library system has not hired any new librarians since 1973. Analysis of the data does not reveal any significant change in minority hiring. However, the dismal job market for future librarians must have discouraged Chinese Americans from choosing library
science as a profession. According to Dr. Li Tze-chung’s report on Chinese American libraries in the United States, since 1970 there has been a sharp decrease in the number of Chinese Americans enrolled in library schools. It is definitely nonproductive to attempt to attract able people to a profession that fails to offer them the kinds of jobs they want; this can lead only to frustration and disappointment before men and women are really launched on a career for which they have carefully trained and prepared themselves.

Library schools have come under fire increasingly for glutting a shrinking job market. However, enrollments are dropping, and some schools face a fight for survival. There is a growing consensus that library schools must reduce enrollments and concentrate on quality instead of quantity; their objectives should be better-prepared graduates and the upgrading of skills of practicing librarians.

**Thorny Road for Chinese American Librarians**

If the job market is rough going for all librarians, what opportunity do we have as a minority? Racial discrimination is one issue that many Chinese Americans avoid discussing. Why? Because we are embarrassed by it and feel that it is too painful a wound to be constantly poked at. Unfortunately, racial discrimination is like a toothache—ignoring it will neither lessen the pain nor make it go away. So it is best that we face the issue, understand it, and try to find a solution for it.

The injustices inflicted upon Chinese immigrants and their families are woven into the history of the United States. When America needed cheap labor to help build a new nation, the Chinese came and willingly provided the manpower to work the mines and create the network of railroads that would bind the nation together. When their work was done, they were told to go back where they came from. In 1887 only ten Chinese emigrated to the United States. During the next sixty-one years fourteen separate pieces of legislation were enacted by the U.S. Congress to keep the Chinese out. The intent to discriminate against the Chinese was spelled out in the im-
migration laws by the national-origins quotas. Before 1943, Chinese immigrants were not permitted to become citizens no matter how long they had resided in this country, so they had no political backing. They were forbidden by the Alien Land Acts to own land. To discourage Chinese men—the cheap labor—from putting down roots, Chinese women were not allowed to come into the United States. The abolition of the openly prejudicial national-origins quota system in 1965 has resulted in a substantial increase in Asian immigrants.

With the enactment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 and the issuance of presidential executive orders, equal employment opportunity has become the law. However, the law cannot assure truly affirmative and equal hiring practices. Only vigorous positive attitudes and sincere efforts on the part of the management group can do that. Discrimination against women and members of racial minority groups may not be as blatant as it was seventy years ago, but it still exists. Many studies based on statistics have presented strong evidence that immigrant professionals may often experience employment discrimination in the competition for jobs in the American labor market.

How do Chinese Americans cope with the situation? Generally, the coping strategy exhibited by the Chinese American in a new country has been that of accommodation and patient acceptance of fate.

On the other hand, we must recognize that there has been a substantial increase in economic opportunities for minorities within recent decades. The progress has not been uniformly distributed nor equally applied, but significant changes for the better have come about. Nevertheless, there is the ever-present fear that under adverse economic conditions there may be a backsliding and a reversion to racial intolerance and prejudice. In 1975, for instance, creeping anxiety and insecurity gripped the nation. The unemployment rate for blacks was twice that of the whites. Since the Bureau of Labor Statistics did not issue separate figures for Chinese Americans, we have no way of knowing how we have fared.
There is no question that antidiscrimination legislation has been a strong instrument in raising the status of minorities; and, among them, the Chinese also have benefited. But, as Bayard Rustin said, "An affirmative action program cannot find jobs for the unemployed or help the under employed into better jobs if those jobs do not exist." Racism and discrimination cannot be dealt with outside the context of the U.S. economy.

**What Can Be Done?**

How shall we survive when the economic climate is unfavorable? Selecting a profession and then breaking into it is going to be more difficult in the next decade than it has ever been since the great Depression.

Foreign-born Chinese Americans appear to be predisposed toward pure applied science rather than toward the humanities. The shortage of scientists has made entry into these professions somewhat easier than entry into others for the Chinese in the United States. For a foreign-born Chinese American, a career based on scientific or technological competence alone is a more reliable choice than a profession which requires social and political skills that are elusive and, sometimes, foreign to their experience.

Because there was a great demand for librarians in the 1960s, library science became one of the favored professions for the many newly arrived Chinese immigrants. The majority of them are in professional jobs, performing highly skilled tasks in cataloging, reference, and other library operations, but when it comes to promotions into the supervisory or managerial ranks, they are often bypassed.

Most of the foreign-born Chinese Americans who have attained administrative positions in the library profession have utilized specialization in East Asian studies and linguistic competence to their best advantage. While there is steep competition for administrative and supervisory positions, there is less racial discrimination in hiring for positions in specialized area
collections than in the rest of the library world. At present, practically all of the East Asian libraries with the largest Chinese holdings in the U.S. are headed by Asian-born Chinese Americans, e.g., Harvard-Yenching Library, the Asian Library of the University of California (Berkeley), the Gest Oriental Library of Princeton University, and the East Asia Library of the University of Washington. It is the linguistic competence in both classical and modern Chinese of the incumbents of these prestigious directorships that has proved to be the sine qua non for successfully building up East Asian resources at these academic institutions. On the other hand, there is a recent and alarming trend toward ignoring this essential language competence requirement for administrative positions in some of the Country's large East Asian libraries, making it difficult for more Asian-born Chinese Americans to secure administrative appointments—even in their own fields of specialization.

The native-born Chinese American, who does not face the same problem of transition as his foreign-born counterpart and has little difficulty with the English language, usually performs competently and plugs away in the same position year after year. All too often, the Chinese Americans perform their duties efficiently and never voice dissatisfaction with their position. They are quiet, reliable, docile; in effect, they penalized for their performance rather than rewarded, for there is a tendency on the part of employers to retain such people in their positions as long as possible. Tragically, few people are aware of the extent to which many Chinese Americans are underemployed, because any inability to communicate well in English—their second language—serves to typify them as the silent minority, and at the same time hampers them in asserting themselves.

Lack of opportunity to succeed often acts as a damper on ambition and depresses one's self-esteem. Chinese American librarians who are placed in dead-end jobs cope with career limitations by giving up hope. When employees lower their aspirations, their employers logically conclude that they don't have the right attitudes for promotion. The employing or-
ganization decides to invest less of its resources in developing people who seem uninterested, and this decision reinforces the employees' perceptions of blocked opportunity. The vicious circle is complete.

How Do We Break This Circle?

First, Chinese American librarians must recognize that the people-contact professions, which include librarianship, require verbal facility and self-expression, which must be cultivated at an early age. Second, we must subject ourselves to a truthful and objective self-analysis: What does one have to offer? What goals are in line with one's talents and abilities? What practical steps can be taken to excel in the aspect or aspects of librarianship one has chosen to pursue? Third, we must broaden our horizons, rather than extend our specialization in a chosen academic field. When there is heavy concentration of a particular group in a limited number of professions, that group is extremely vulnerable to economic or social change. Why not prepare two careers, one that one really wants to pursue and one that is practical and marketable? Two complementary skills, such as librarianship and automation technology, can certainly improve a job-seeker's prospects. Positions in publications, personnel, business management, for example, might well be filled by persons who have received their educations in the appropriate disciplines. Fourth, though administration is perceived to be among the desirable advanced areas of specialization, we may have to relinquish certain aspirations in that direction. Since the typical organization is built like a pyramid, there are, naturally, fewer jobs at the top than there are aspirants for such jobs. Furthermore, administration is only one of many equally valuable specializations toward which the librarian can aspire. There are many scholarly librarians, such as curators of rare books, reference and information specialists, and so on, whose expertise may bear little relation to the skills of management and administration. These careers are deserving of rewards and prestige equal to those now afforded the administrators.
One must learn to see beyond the pervasive myths that surround career development and come to grips with career reality. Few persons have steady career progression throughout their lifetime. Because of the much greater likelihood of landing on a career plateau, one must develop a personal definition of success, one that is not tied to job progression. One should recognize that staying in the same job does not necessarily mean stagnation, since one can change both oneself and the job through enrolling in continuing education programs. Chinese Americans must learn not to assume that if they work hard they will continue to climb the career ladder. To make the most of a potential, each Chinese American must develop personal objectives, expand job horizons, continue education, and seek information about job possibilities both inside and outside an organization. Those of us who still aim to move on to administration should obtain additional preparation for this specialty by improving our ability to manage human and technological resources, including the development of personnel or the integrative use of media and technology.

A career in librarianship can evolve in many directions. The challenges to a Chinese American librarian seem to have no bounds. At some point, however, it becomes imperative for the Chinese American librarian as well as all minority librarians to come to terms with both professional responsibilities and personal concerns regarding a career in library science. To do this requires examination of one’s personal service philosophy, one’s career expectation in terms of peer recognition, and one’s social consciousness and ethical standpoints.

To be a successful librarian one must, first and foremost, be concerned with people and their problems. If one wants to serve the Chinese people, for example, one should possess a broad background in Chinese life and sensibility. This calls for both the proper educational background and the ability to deal with people. Knowledge and understanding of the differences between people and the underlying causes of their friction can pave the way toward solutions. The constant improvement of library service overall—and not just the main-
tenance of library service at its present level—must be the long-term objective of the profession. Chinese American librarians can enrich the libraries with their own special backgrounds.

The Chinese American have the privilege, the duty, and the obligation to protect their interests and their image from false or offensive representation. It has been said that moral outrage is a vital fact of life—as real as military hardware and occasionally even more explosive. Chinese American librarians must have the courage to express their moral outrage. We must make ourselves heard in dissent when we see discrimination. But we must also refrain from crying "Wolf!" when the wolf is not there. The way to help any minority and to help ourselves, especially during this period of tremendous upheaval brought on by the upsurge in immigration and by a heightened ethnic consciousness, is to establish beyond question that an act of discrimination exists before we make such an accusation. We may, unless we are alert to the possibility, use such a charge as a crutch or a rationalization for our own inadequacy.

Conclusion

The United States is often referred to as a cultural melting pot, and it has benefited from diversity and suffered from intolerance of diversity. Each nationality that has come to these shores has made some contribution to the growth of the nation. Some of our ancestors came to this country to build the railroad. We should be proud that, in spite of prejudice, intolerance, and difficult living and working conditions, they made a substantial contribution to the growth and development of this country. We Chinese Americans of the present day should follow in their footsteps by striving to make our own contribution. Our accomplishments will be recognized by our Chinese American descendants and all Americans of the future. Not only will future generations of Chinese Americans face less discrimination because of the role we have played, but all Americans will benefit because our technological expertise and
cultural heritage will have helped to build a stronger, culturally richer, more tolerant nation. As John F. Kennedy said, "Our task now is not to fix the blame for the past, but to fix a course for the future."

References


