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ENHANCEMENT OF THE LIBRARY PROFESSION: AN ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

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PAPER

1.0 SCOPE OF PAPER

Daunted by the vastness and variety of the ASIA listed in the World Geographical Encyclopaedia and hampered by the lack of information on the library profession in the component countries, this paper will not provide details of any one country unless they are relevant to the issues raised in the discussion of the topic.

The focus of this paper is the library profession, particularly the enhancement of its image and status. The topic will be discussed in the following manner: (i) Scope of paper (ii) The Asian Background (iii) Defining the Library Profession (iv) Enhancement of the Library Profession (v) The Library Profession in the Virtual Library environment.

2.0 THE ASIAN BACKGROUND

In many countries in Asia, libraries have existed for thousands of years although very little has been written about them. Even in India "a nation known for its ancient and medieval, as well as more modern library establishment"[1] - accounts of libraries in the Vedic, Buddhist, Medieval and Muslim periods of Indian history have yet to be accomplished.[2] In China, the earliest libraries existed in the form of "an aggregate of documents"[3] or book collections in the keep of royal families, temples and scholarly institutions.[4] In Southeast Asia, libraries in most of the countries are the product of the 20th century, with the exception of Philippines where the National Library owes its roots to "the fewer than 100 volumes of books gathered in the Museo Biblioteca de Filipinas established on 12 August 1889".[5]

But modern library movement in Asia really took root in the 1970's with greater impetus in the 1980's, followed by a growth in professional literature.

A survey of the literature reveals great diversity in the library development among Asian countries, reflecting the vastness and variety of Asia itself. However, underlying this diversity are some common features that characterise library development in Asian countries:

- Inequitable distribution of libraries. Libraries are not well distributed throughout the country, with some parts being more well endowed than others.
- The earliest libraries are scholarly libraries or religious collections.
- Most of the modern libraries are dependant on Government resources.
- University and special libraries are more developed and privileged than public libraries.
- Libraries operate under decentralised management systems.
- There is often lack of cooperation, coordination among libraries, giving rise to duplication of materials as well as incompatibility of operating systems.
- Library development is spurred by economic growth, especially in cases of agricultural countries that need to industrialise quickly.
- Tendency to liberalise library use whereby closed access collections are subsequently open to public.
- Libraries become direct victims of wars or political upheavals in countries that suffered such tragedies.
- Library development is seen in connection with other aspects of national development social, cultural, economic, etc.
- Greater awareness of importance of libraries among governments in recent years.
- There is access to library education, with some more established than others.

Although as a whole, library development in Asia is impressive, enhancing the image and status of the library profession has been a matter of concern to most librarians over the last two decades. It has been discussed and written about in seminars and conferences in most parts of Asia since the 1970's. And so it should be — because the process of professionalisation should be continuous. Professional literature on professionalism has shown that no profession can be completely professionalised it can only be **more** professionalised as the profession treads along the path of professionalism. The process of professionalisation can also be applied to various aspects of the profession at different levels and pace so that at any one time certain aspects of the profession can be more professionalised than others.

The need to enhance the library profession has assumed greater urgency in the 1980's because of:

- greater competition posed by the proliferation of information services that are not library based.
- acceleration of IT use in library functions.

- increased professional awareness of issues related to librarianship because of greater networking among librarians.
- increase of library schools resulting in better educated librarians who opt for a career in librarianship **by choice**.

Altogether the 1980's saw some immediate reaction, manifested in the change in nomenclature. "Librarians" became "information professionals" or "information specialists", "library science" became "information science" and "Department of Library Science" became "Department of Library & Information Science" or "Department of Information Science". The only term that has not suffered a name change seems to be "library profession" as we witness today. Seen from a positive viewpoint however — these changes reflect the ability of the librarians to react to change and adapt to changes.

But the enhancement of the library profession entails more than just a change in nomenclature. It entails having a deep understanding of what constitutes the library profession, what aspects of the profession should and can be enhanced and how they can be enhanced, bearing in mind that the goal of enhancement is increased professionalism. Professionalism in turn breeds excellence.

3.0 DEFINING THE LIBRARY PROFESSION [6]

What exactly is the library profession? Is librariansh ip a profession? Can we call the work we do — acquisitions, cataloguing/classification, indexing, abstracting, information retrieval (with or without technology), user education, reference — professional? Is library work "nothing more than the application of sets of skills and techniques"[7] or just "a study of systems"?[8]

It cannot be denied that the term "profession" is difficult to define. It has been given various definitions by various people at various times. It is an elusive term and various people have attempted to define it using their occupations as a basis, resultin in definitions that are coloured by occupational bias and vested interest. When Melvil Dewey stated that

"The time has at last come when a librarian may, without assumption, speak of his occupation as a profession"[9]

little did he realise the struggle for professionalism that he had begun would continue today.

Contemporary understanding and usage of the term can be said to date from 1915 when Abraham Flexner[10] suggested some criteria as the basis for determining whether or not social work could qualify as a profession. He suggested that a profession is:

- Intellectual and carried with it personal responsibility for the exercise of choice and judgement.

- Learned because its exercise was based on a substantial body of knowledge which could be passed on from generation to generation from practitioners to students.
- Practical in that its corpus of knowledge is put to a practical use of benefit to others.
- Organised into associations of practitioners.
- Characterised by an idealism which in theory, if not in practice, puts the aims and practice of the profession above mere money making.

Since then, Flexner was followed by several other exponents of the "traits" or "attributes" method of defining a profession, such as Carr Saunders & Wilson (1933), Morris L. Logan (1953), T. Parsons (1959), G. Millerson (1964), etc.

Together the attributes that they had put forward as worthy of a profession themselves could fill a thesis but the recurring attributes could be summarised as below:

1. Possessing a corpus of professional knowledge comprising theories and techniques/skills, preferably of a multidisciplinary nature.
2. Formal system of education and training, sufficiently long to enable the mastery of theories and techniques. This system should incorporate continuing education programmes and emphasise research and publication.
3. Possess a service principle that places the welfare of society above personal gains.
4. Be governed/regulated by a Code of Ethics, to ensure accountability in the performance of duty.
5. Maintain standards in all aspects of professional activity, such as work standards, educational standards, personal integrity, etc.
6. Be represented by a professional association.
7. Possessing legal and public recognition of professional status.

These attributes of course are not listed in order of priority and one is not more important than the other. A profession may have all or some of the attributes, depending on the level of professionalisation.

The 'attributes' above correspond to a large extent to the attributes of other professions, and in general have been accepted as a popular means of assessing the level of professionalisation that a profession has undergone.

In the same manner, these attributes will serve as a basis for the discussion of the topic — enhancement of the library profession. On the assumption that these are the attributes of the library profession, how could they be used to enhance the profession? In the language of management today, these attributes can be said to be the Critical Success Factors (CSF's) of professional development.

4.0 ENHANCEMENT OF THE LIBRARY PROFESSION

4.1 Expanding and developing the corpus of knowledge

Every profession needs its own body of knowledge (theoretical foundation and specialised skills) to be exclusive, such that it sets it apart from other professions and establishes its identity as a profession. Medicine, Law, Engineering, Education, etc. have their own core of knowledge and mastery of their specialised core set them apart from each other and from the para professional group within their own category. This core makes them so exclusive that, as an example, even if the doctor were to sit under the coconut tree with his stethoscope, he can still practise his profession. Can we say the same for the librarian? Can a fresh graduate without library qualifications undertake cataloguing and classification, indexing, abstracting after being trained for a week? I say yes! All he needs is intelligence, subject knowledge, general knowledge and the ability to look up AACR II and LCSH. Now with OCLC and Bibliofile CD ROM databases, why does one need the librarian? And if the fresh graduate can do what any librarian is trained to do, what then, is so special about librarianship?

The lack of the intellectual foundation has long been the weakness of the lbrary profession. This has to be rectified if the library profession is to be enhanced. If we were to scrutinise the intellectual core of other professions, we will realise that they are generally multidisciplinary in nature and that they comprise theories and skills. In education for example, the theoretical basis is very broad encompassing psychology, sociology, management and administration, development, history, while at the same time pedagogy provides teachers with specific skills in teaching.

What about librarianship? Would it not be sensible for us to broaden our intellectual base to include Psychology (to study user behaviour, educational psychology, research psychology), Sociology (to understand the cultural/social environment/framework within which the library operates) Philosophy, Local History, Fine Arts, Communications, Languages, Law, Management, Computer Science/IT (including programming) while Research Methodology, PR, Indexing, Classification, Information Retrieval are examples of the professional/technical skills that could be taught.

The intellectual core in any profession does not merely provide facts but trains the person to reason, rationalise, solve problems — in other words, to think. Independent thinking is one dimension that, for now at least, the computer has not been able to substitute. Taking for example, the study of History, it is not the facts that are so important but the lessons learnt from the past. One learns to reason out the causes and events, understands how people think and behave at that particular moment in time and evaluate, with the wisdom of hindsight, whether or not certain events could have been avoided.

Expanding and developing the corpus of professional knowledge would place the library profession competitively with other professions. Mastery of it would provide librarians with identity, authority and autonomy — no one else could encroach into their domain. The lack of recognition that librarians in Asian countries suffer from is partly because they are constantly being compared with the more prestigious professions, such as medicine and law and engineering. In most parts of Asia, the status of librarians suffer vis a vis doctors, lawyers, engineers. Even at universities, librarians have not been granted parity vis a vis the academic staff although India [11] has been somewhat fortunate albeit

not without a struggle. In Philippines, the status of librarians is safeguarded by legislation [12] but these are only two out of the numerous others. In Japan, although libraries have had a long history, "librarianship has never been viewed as a professional in the European sense. Such is the case even now." [13]

Enhancing the profession through the expansion and development of the corpus of professional knowledge is tedious but if medicine can survive the years of development, why can't librarianship? The fastest way of developing the corpus would probably be through the educational system, particularly through research and publication.

4.2 Upgrading Library Education and Training

If librarianship is to be accepted at par with other professions, library education must be undertaken at tertiary level. Advocating librarianship as a university discipline, at least in Asia, is not for snob appeal. It is a pragmatic and logical step to take because in most Asian countries, the salary scale is tagged to the qualifications obtained. Another reason why librarianship should be taught at universities is because research and publication activities are part of the lecturer's contractual obligations. Through research and publication the profession will be developed and enhanced. Yet another reason is the opportunities provided for continuing education at universities, such as postgraduate programmes (Masters, Ph.D.), seminars and conferences, study leave, etc.

University education could enhance the profession by controlling the entry qualification and providing the accreditation so crucial to maintaining standards within the profession. Library education in India, China, Japan and the ASEAN countries has developed tremendously over the last decade. [14] Mainly conducted at universities, they undertake curricular reform to keep up with the latest developments. As example is China, where "traditional subjects [were] being deleted and new ones such as Information Theory, Library Automation and Cybernetics [are] being introduced". [15]

If developing the corpus could enhance the profession, upgrading library education and training would provide librarians with the means to propel the profession to greater heights.

4.3 Review the Service Principle

The altruistic "no profit" service ideal that has governed library services for far too long is obsolete. It will be replaced by another the "cost effective" principle. For the idealists, it will be the end of a scholarly tradition for the pragmatists, it is not too soon.

In countries where libraries are heavily dependent on the Government Treasury for every cent, it would seem logical to not only find alternative funding but to introduce fee based services as one alternative. While to the purists or idealists levying charges for library services is tantamount to blasphemy, most library managers must realise that the exorbitant cost of maintaining good collections and service for free cannot be justified.

4.4 Enforcing the Code of Ethics

Most professions are regulated by the Code of Ethics but unless enforced, the Code of Ethics will not acieve its objectives. Will the Code of Ethics enhance the library profession? If it succeeds in helping the profession to gain the respect and confidence of the public at large and its clients in particular, then the Code of Ethics will help to enhance the profession. But the difficulty with the library profession is that information work does not have the same "clout" as medicine or law. It is logical to assume that, using medicine and law as role models, accountability hinges on the protection of life and property. We do not protect life or property and who bothers about wrong information? Especially if given free! However, in the event users are charged for services/information rendered, then library clients would presumably demand value for his money. Librarians would then have to be accountable.

4.5 Setting and Maintaining Standards

Standards are crucial in the process of professionalisation because they represent quality and excellence. Like in other professions, standards for the library profession should not be static but should be upgraded as the profession becomes more professionalised. Standards are expressed in various ways. The mission statement of any institution itself is a standard. Standards can be set for work, behaviour, services, productivity, management, education, etc. Standards breed excellence, trust and respect and eventually earn librarians public recognition and confidence.

4.6 Professionalizing the Professional Association

The role of the professional association in promoting the profession is well documented in the professional literature. It serves as the mouth piece of the profession, its representative and depending on its strength, provides leadership. However, whether on not the association can effectively undertake its role depends on several factors — level of professional awareness and support among its members, legal and public acknowledgement of its role, its political clout and most important — its ability to influence members of the profession as well as the public of its authority and ability to control matters of professional interest. One way of assuming control and authority is to establish systems of control such as accreditation or qualifying board. In most countries in Asia however, the professional associations do not have the ability or capability to assume a leadership role and this renders the association incapable of enforcing the standards it may want to impose. Another weakness is the inability to command loyalty from its members because the institution employing librarians usually expect and do get their loyalty from their employees.

If the association is not in the position to command loyalty and assume leadership, can it be effective in the enhancement of the profession? In Asia, the strength of professional associations lies in its promotional role. They have been very successful in promoting continuing education (courses, seminars, talks, training) as well as producing publications. In some countries, despite the dynamism of the associations, they are not able to provide leadership. The Malaysian Library Association is one such example. Dynamic though it is, registered as a society, under the purview of the Registrar of

Societies, it has to function as a society unlike the Malaysian Medical Association, the Malaysian Bar Council or the Malaysian Institute of Accountants.

4.7 Attaining Legal and Social Recognition of Professional Status

Attaining legal and social recognition of its professional status would definitely enhance the library profession. However, except for Philippines, thus far the only country in Asia that has achieved legislative status, it has remained elusive for the others.

While legal recognition is clear cut, social recognition depends on how society views the contribution of librarians and library work. In this aspect a lot would depend on how librarians project their role.

Currently, librarians call themselves "information professionals". To get society to recognise this role, librarians will have to prove that they actually undertake information work.

The onus is thus on the librarians to show what they are capable of.

This is where librarians must use whatever tactics they have to project themselves, based on ability and quality. There is evidence of the librarians' willingness to change and adapt to the challenges posed by developments. Many have adopted new concepts from other professions and applied them to librarianship. " Strategic Planning" is one, "Performance Measurement" is another. Both have currently became part and parcel of library management.

5.0 THE LIBRARY PROFESSION IN THE VIRTUAL LIBRARY ENVIRONMENT

The electronic library is a reality in Asia and to what extent they can be networked to form the virtual library with the rest of the world depends on will and wealth. In many of the countries, the electronic library network is already in existence. Through Internet the whole of Asia will be networked.

Would global networking however enhance the library profession? To those who believe in the power of technology they believe the future of the library profession lies with technology. To those who believe computers are just means to an end (meeting user needs) they fear that the library profession would die a natural death when libraries are replaced by professionals who, via computers, can do the librarians' work faster and more effectively. To the latter, technology is something that they fear. Ironically, doctors welcome laser surgery and computerised diagnosis/prognosis as new methods that would advance and refine their skills. But librarians view computerised indexing and cataloguing as new methods that would gradually replace their conventional skills and displace them. In a way they are correct if librarians believe that indexing and cataloguing are all that is librarianship.

In the final analysis, whether libraries are digitised or not, the image and status of the library profession depend on what librarians perceive the library profession to be. The future of the library profession rests with us librarians.

NOTES

1. DAVIS, Donald G. Jr. and Mohamed Tahar, Library history in India: historiographical assessment and current trends, **Third World Libraries**, v.3-2 (Spring 1993) pp. 40, 44.
2. Ibid.
3. DU Ke, **The past, present and future of libraries in China in Library in the 90's: selected papers** ... Eds Sun Chengjian and Jiang, Bingvin. Beijing, International Academic Publishers, 1993, p.1.
4. Ibid.
5. MORAL, Monica Luisa I., Special libraries in Phillippines in **Introduction to ASEAN Librarianship: Special Libraries**. Kuala Lumpur, The ASEAN Committee and Information, 1993, p.79.
6. The concept of professionalism and its attendant issues are discussed at greater length in my Master's dissertation and articles listed in the bibliography.
7. BOWDEN, Russell, Professional responsibilities of librarians and information workers, **IFLA Journal** 20 (1994) 2, p. 121.
8. Volunteered by the former Dean of the Law Faculty, University of Malaya, Professor Visu Sinnadurai.
9. Taken from my thesis.
10. Ibid.
11. Professor P.B. Mangla described in detail the struggle for parity for university librarians since 1919 in his paper entitled University libraries and librarians in India: an overview, **Asian Libraries**, (March 1993), pp. 33-45.
12. As detailed in ARLANTE, Salvacion M. and Rodolfo Y. Tarlib, The Professionalisation of librarians: a unique Philippine experience, **Asian Libraries**, (June 1993), 3:2, pp. 13-22.
13. KON, Madoko, Education for librarianship in Japan, **Asian Libraries**, (December 1993), 3:4, p. 76
14. Articles on library education in these countries are found in the December 1993 issue of **Asian Libraries**, volume 3, no. 4. The information on China is found on page 78. Details of courses are on pages 89-93.
15. Ibid.