

Chapter 20

David Sulz, Public Services Librarian, East Asian Studies Subject Liaison, University of Alberta

Introduction

The University of Alberta, founded in 1908, is a public research university located in Edmonton. The East Asian (EA) studies department itself is relatively new, as it was established in 1981. The University of Alberta boasts a modest collection of EA resources, including collections of Chinese classics, clippings from Japanese newspapers, and resources on the Chinese experience of immigration to Canada.

Librarian David Sulz is the main contact for researchers and students working on East Asia-related topics. In this interview, Sulz discusses his varied and interesting background growing up in multicultural Canada and living in Japan, as well as his illuminating thoughts on librarianship as a whole.

Preliminary Thoughts.

Thank you for the invitation to share some of my thoughts and experiences. I am a bit hesitant because most other contributors will have backgrounds, careers, institutions, collections, and daily activities that are more directly connected to East Asian (EA) librarianship and trends. I am currently the main (or at least first-contact) librarian for many EA-related topics at a university with some very good EA faculty, students, and programs but a comparatively modest EA library/research collection compared to other institutions. At the very least, I hope I can add some perspectives from inside a system undergoing significant transformations affecting our EA collections and services as well as subject and public services librarianship too.

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Could we begin this interview by first introducing yourself, for example, your professional training and educational background? What did you study at university? Do you come from a family of educators or librarians or historians?

Actually, I became a librarian quite recently and rather late. I started my Master in Library and Information Science (MLIS) at the University of Alberta's SLIS when I was 39 years old in 2007. My father was a banker, and my mother was a teacher, so there is no direct connection to librarianship – but my family members are typically very curious and lifelong learners, so it wasn't unexpected.

Although I took almost exclusively science and math courses in high school, my BA ended up (after 5+ years) as a double major in Economics and Pacific & Asian Studies with a minor in Japanese (with lots of diverse electives). Over the years, I alternated between working and going back to school several times with a BEducation in my late 20s and an MA in History in my mid-30s.

When I finally came around to librarianship, I discovered that my varied background gives me a lot of useful perspectives, especially as a public services librarian with various liaison areas.

Could you describe your career path to becoming the Public Services Librarian at the University of Alberta (UA)?

My direct path from library school to UAlberta was quite short. I had a few part-time library-related jobs during my degree (e.g., evenings at the law and knowledge-common service desks, research assistantships, Edmonton Japanese Community Association library, and a qualitative systematic review project). My first job was a 40% permanent/60% temporary position with a branch of the Alberta Government Library, where I had done a practicum. Luckily, I got a heads-up from the director when cutbacks loomed, so I had time to start looking again. I had a few interviews (including one where the interviewer was extremely dismissive of my varied background) and ended up back at UAlberta.

As for the longer path, becoming a librarian was never in my plans. Of course, I'd used many public, school, and university libraries, but they didn't really interest me beyond getting a good mark. It's no exaggeration to say every job I've had has contributed somehow to my enjoyment, and any success, as a librarian.

Perhaps there are two paths to becoming a librarian: by always wanting to and being strategic or by accident and being open to it.

Before joining UA, you also served as Reference Librarian at the Government of Alberta. How does this part of professional experience contribute to your current work as the Public Services Librarian at UA?

Among many things, exposure to a special library where clients expect you to find the information for them (vs. teaching them how), the importance of matching dress and manner to different situations, and insight into the various needs of several government ministries (our library served nine quite different ministries).

As an academic librarian working at UA, are you also given faculty status? What are the aims and advantages of giving academic librarians faculty status?

I think the origins of our academic status lie in notions of academic freedom for faculty. If researchers need academic freedom to fully explore their topics without outside threat, libraries have to provide materials that some might find objectionable. And since librarians collect and help access those materials, they need academic status, too.

Subject/liaison librarians are an interface between the library/information world and the academic teaching/research world. Academic status gives us some credibility to initiate conversations and also the scope to teach and do research ourselves that translates into better awareness of what scholars need. We also have representation in the academic association/union, so those of us who step into those roles can have an amazing insight into, and possible contribution to, the running of the university.

I do worry that as individual librarians increasingly specialize in functional services that are provided without much two-way conversation, there will be less justification for us having academic status. We are academic when we can contribute intellectually to the educational and research missions but maybe not if we just provide and troubleshoot a few tools each.

Could you describe your typical day at work? Is there ever a typical day at work?

Every day is quite different, but there is a somewhat contained list of what could happen. That list would have some broad categories, but each category would have scores of individual situations. Here are just a few sort of organized, broad examples I can think of off-hand that have come up lately:

- Proactively contacting and meeting with faculty and students to remind them of things we could help them with (e.g., instruction, searching strategies, dissemination of their work, preserving their resource materials).
- Taking part in library, liaison, and university teams and committees.
- Maintaining subject research guides (with support staff help) and creating learning objects.
- Learning and keeping up with changes in library, research, and pedagogical tools and ideas.
- Preparing for a reading club I have been running for international students with UAlberta International colleagues.
- Helping troubleshoot access issues patrons have identified.
- Poking away at a few personal research interests.

As the Public Services Librarian at UA, could you describe your main roles and areas of responsibilities?

My roles have changed dramatically even in my short time and were set to change even more when COVID restrictions put things in temporary limbo.

When I started, Public Services Librarians were one of the main job roles with regular shifts on the reference desk and responsibility for a few liaison or subject

areas (mine were economics, religious studies, social work, and high school groups at first). Within our subject areas, we did selection/acquisition, information literacy and library use sessions, individual consultations, and various forms of contributions (e.g., committees, research).

First, the reference desk was amalgamated into a single service desk. This was initially good, as librarians and circulation staff worked side-by-side to the benefit of patrons and learned so much from each other. Now, academic librarians are essentially not allowed to be on the service desks even if they want to. Next was the centralization of acquisitions with a small team to negotiate with big vendors for big packages and work with approval plans based on algorithmic principles.

With these developments and others, the whole notion of subject/liaison and even public service librarians is seemingly on the way out in our library. For now, I still do a lot of instruction and consultations with a variety of liaison areas, which include EA Studies, religious studies, history (especially Canadian, historiography, world), educational policy studies and secondary education, media & technology studies, etc. I also work with a few groups like international students (with UAlberta International), high school IB and AP groups, and the USchool program for younger classes (e.g., grades 4–7).

Ask me the same question in a year or two, and it will probably be very different.

As the Subject Librarian for EA Studies, could you describe your main roles and areas of responsibilities?

We did have a dedicated EA Studies subject librarian for many years (Louis Chor). When he retired, it wasn't clear how quickly he'd be replaced, so I offered to temporarily help with a few things like working with non-Asian students/scholars studying Asia (as I had done myself) and Asian students studying in Canada (I know something about differing academic expectations), as well as Japanese materials in particular (to some extent) and generally being a conduit with this department and library services. My offer wasn't taken up at first, but a few years later, I was asked to add EA studies to my portfolio when it was clear there would not be a replacement. I was a little apprehensive because the department was disappointed that they wouldn't have a dedicated EA librarian expert after all, but it has turned out okay (I think) – although there are many frustrations with not having some other CJK and EA specific expertise easily available.

My role with EA Studies is mostly similar to my other areas – that is, instructional sessions and consultations on searching, library use, and information literacy, as well as acting as a conduit to other library colleagues and services to things like open access, research data management, digitization, institutional repositories, research impact, etc. In addition, I attend many departmental events, including departmental council meetings and social happenings.

When you were studying for your BA at the University of Victoria during the late 1980s, you also minored in Japanese language. Having grown up in Canada during the 1970s, how did you develop an interest in the Japanese language and culture?

At first, I didn't understand this question because it doesn't seem at all unusual to me. I then realized that many people don't have the experience of growing up in

a multicultural country and often have a stereotype of small towns being rather monocultural and backward. This was not true for me.

The several not-so-urban towns I grew up in (bankers got transferred often) were small and diverse for various reasons, and I had lots of friends from all sorts of backgrounds – for one thing, there were too few people to have much of an insular bubble as might happen elsewhere. It doesn't seem strange to me that my sister's godparents are Japanese-Canadian – as is the father of my family's closest friends and neighbors (the mother is originally Australian). Or that a Japanese rugby team came to our town in grade 9 to play us, and we went to Japan in grade 11 to stay with them. Or that the local college offered a conversational Japanese course that would let a high school kid join. Or that another family friend had a Japanese friend who invited me to go to Japan for three months. Somehow, opportunities related to Japan kept coming up after that.

From 1991 to 1994, you went to Japan and served as a teacher on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program. Does this part of your overseas working and cultural experience in Japan in any way contribute to your current work as the Subject Librarian for EA Studies at UA?

In a general sense, connections between JET and my job come up regularly because I met so many interesting people in such a variety of settings who let me experience so many things. I was both a coordinator for international relations (CIR) and an assistant language teacher (ALT). I lived in an urban city (Sendai) and a rather remote rural town (Towa-cho). I worked in a prefectural government office, a town hall, and junior high/elementary schools. I hung out with hockey players and coaches, musicians, craftsmen (especially edo-koma spinning tops), artists, bureaucrats, business owners, and farmers – both children and adults.

The most direct connections to my librarian career are probably a novel about Japanese immigration to Canada (*Mikkousen Suian Maru [Stowaway Ship Suian Maru]* by Nitta Jiro) and a few Miyawa Kenji works I translated (with lots of help from friends). They connect at the level of academic historical and literary topics and – because I used the translation for an MA in history using Canadian archival sources, experimented with turning it into a self-published bound book, have written articles and given presentations, and have a box of research materials in various formats – I can often use them when I need personal examples for copyright, digitization, using foreign sources, research data, research impact, and so many other library topics.

Could you describe the size of the EA collections at UA and the collection highlights?

Our EA Collections are quite modest and a bit idiosyncratic (in both good and bad ways) for a few reasons. The EA Studies department itself is relatively young (1981) and is a small department with diverse interests across many fields. Until recently, we had very good budgets, so we were able to acquire almost anything that researchers and students asked for in addition to what our liaison librarian selector identified or, latterly, came up in approval plan algorithms. We have had great ILL partners in Canada (e.g., UToronto, UBC) and beyond, so we have been able to ride their CJK coattails in some sense because we have extensive

collections in other fields that are useful to their scholars. Until a few years ago, we had quite a robust donation program that brought in many items we would not otherwise have acquired and great book exchanges with university library partners around the world, including several in China and Korea.

It is very difficult to count holdings in these days of ever-changing electronic access, digital collections, and package subscriptions that could include e-books, e-journals, primary sources, streaming audio/video, art reproductions, and may not be in our catalog, or other discovery tools. For some sense of scale, here are results from a simple CJK language search of holdings in our consortial catalog (NEOS):

- Chinese: 48,230 (4,679 online)
- Japanese: 21,392 (8,804 online)
- Korean: 7,115 (2,886 online)
- Pre-1900 CJK: about 400 (but 13,000 of the above show “unknown” for date)

For some sense of books **about** East Asia in English (and some other languages), I tried an OR search in the title and subject fields (i.e., [Japan or Japanese] in title OR [Japan OR Japanese] in subject). Not perfect, of course, but at least a sense.

- China OR Chinese: 88,330
- Japan OR Japanese: 44,025
- Korea OR Korean: 13,026

Collection Highlights:

Because I am further removed from acquisitions and, to be honest, many student/faculty research topics seem to be conceived more through personal interest independent of our holdings, I can only offer a few collection highlights I happen to know. According to one professor in the Chinese literature area,¹ we have some useful older scholarship in Chinese and a good representation of English scholarship augmented with some subscription databases and good ILL services. He does say we are somewhat lacking in recent Chinese-language scholarship and critical editions.

A few others I happen to know about are:

The Hightower Collection:

In 1985, we purchased the private collection of a prominent Sinologist to build up supporting materials for the recently formed EA Studies department. According to some original correspondence I came across recently, the collection was about

¹Dr. Daniel Fried (I put out a call to faculty members for comments, but people are so busy these days with so much upheaval right now with COVID, budget cuts, and radical restructuring occupying their thoughts).

3,000 titles in 11,000 volumes broadly on Chinese classics, philosophy, religion, history, language, and literature. A few things the appraiser noted were: “Ssu-pu ts’ung-k’an” reproduced in 1920s from rare Sung and Yuan editions, an 1884 lithograph edition of the dynastic histories (“Erh-shih-ssu-shih”), two seventeenth-century, seven eighteenth century, and 59 nineteenth-century editions, and some multicolor woodblock editions from eighteenth–nineteenth century. Admittedly, I can’t say I’ve followed up on how significant these still are today. The Hightower Collection is dispersed throughout our libraries, but most should have a MARC 590 note to identify them (although our current discovery system does not really allow useful MARC field searching).

近代美術關係新聞記事資料集成:別冊 (“Kindai bijutsu kankei shinbun kiji shiryō shūsei” bessatsu) [Modern Art-related Japanese Newspaper Clipping Collections 1891–1941]

During a recent transfer of microfilm to offsite storage, this 70+-reel collection came to light as possibly unusual in North America and not likely to be digitized. Fortunately, I learned² of its still-current value and that researchers relied on knowing the in-library physical location because our catalogue records were sparse. Because of the difficulty of offsite retrieval with sparse information, I have digitized and annotated the finding aids. As an aside, I think this is a good example of the value added by local librarians with knowledge of academic methods and connections with both researchers and the library system.

Chinese Experience in Canada Collection:

This collection explores the Chinese experience through immigration, entrepreneurship, schooling, and other elements of daily life. Among other things, it is made up of photographs, scrapbooks, business documents, personal correspondence, immigration records, magazines, books, phonograph records, and event programs. A great deal of credit is due to Helen Kwan Yee Cheung, who encouraged donations from the local Chinese community thus helping to build a uniquely community-based collection. (from our Bruce Peel Special Collections website: <https://bpsc.library.ualberta.ca/collections/chinese-experience-in-canada>)

What are the new trends, opportunities, and challenges in EA librarianship, especially for libraries that have large collections of special materials (e.g., rare books, manuscripts, and archival materials in history, etc.)? Please provide detailed examples.

I will mostly leave this to others more specialized in the field, but I will note a few things of my own.

I think the dual forces of digitalization and neoliberal capitalism (for lack of better words) will have profound impacts, both positive and negative, and I don’t

²From Dr. Walter Davis

think we've given them enough deep thought. I think we've been caught a bit off-guard by the shift from information scarcity to information abundance. At one level, recent developments are just part of a long line of making information available across time and space that started with writing and evolved through books, photography, audiovisual recording, photocopying, etc. At another, I think there was a dramatic shift from human scale and speed to inhuman.

There are many opportunities for making resources more available to more people and great opportunities for librarians to be valuable intermediaries. In the short term, there are probably great opportunities specific to CJK materials as the lower-hanging fruit of arguably simpler and closer-at-hand "Western" sources have been largely done and the simpler technological challenges overcome so we can start working on more challenging scripts and further afield sources. Perhaps there is even an opportunity for some institutions and special collections to acquire valuable physical materials from those divesting in favor of digital. I think special collections also have opportunities to digitize and share their own unique materials. It could very well be that the future of the academic librarian as we knew it will exist mostly in special collections, where the emphasis is on the unique and individual, as opposed to the resources available to everyone in a standardized system.

However, we have to be careful since we've drawn the attention of those interested in profit opportunities and the related forces trying to rationalize post-secondary education. To increase profit/revenue, one can reduce the input costs (e.g., pay people less, reduce quality, provide fewer options, rely on duplication, standardize services) or increase revenue (e.g., charge more, eliminate competition, sell opportunities for advertising, or even allow surveillance).

So far, librarians have seen the advantages of increased material at reasonable prices along with generalized budgets/salaries where we have the autonomy to deal with patrons in diverse ways and our varied skills are valued. But, I think we need to be vigilant about outsourcing, deskilling, loss of control over content and patron information, productivity metrics, and other things we haven't considered yet.

As for advice, I think future librarians will have to make some tough decisions between specialization (with maybe a greater chance of a better paying job in the short term) or diversification and variety (which might mean difficulty finding a niche at first but might increase your value and personal satisfaction) in the longer term.

Could you describe your management and leadership style?

I don't really have a management or leadership role per se with the authority and expectations that go with that but, in general, I strive for transparency and fairness. I like to be clear about whether a project has pre-defined parameters that just need to be done or whether there is real opportunity for input and innovation. There is nothing worse than a hidden agenda for wasting people's creativity and goodwill.

I believe in nuance and complexity; very few things are simple and shouldn't be portrayed as such. I'd rather under-promise and over-deliver than the opposite.

I think fairness also fits in here because people have different abilities, outside responsibilities, and expectations of their roles in a task. Clarity is important.

How do you go about designing library user education and information literacy skills workshops for students, researchers and teaching staff of EA Studies?

Much of my approach to information literacy and library use through instruction, workshops, and consultations is more generalized – with discipline or language specifics as necessary. As an early librarian, my approach was generalized (i.e., here are databases you can use and some techniques to be efficient – Boolean, wildcards, phrase markers). I also tended to go in with a well-defined progression and searches that would work.

Over time, I've moved more to why, what, and when approach before hitting the where and how. Through hundreds of classes and thousands of consultations, I've observed that some very foundational knowledge about academe and information is not exactly top-of-mind for many searchers. I like to discuss things like why you might use specialized tools and sources, being aware of what suitable results will look like when you find them, and why everything is so complex. These days, I usually make search examples up on the spot or from participant suggestions; it's definitely more stressful but allows me to model the thought process and unexpected happenings realistically. I really appreciate the ACRL information framework threshold concepts; even if I don't explicitly mention them, they underpin a lot of what I do – especially that information is a commodity.

I suggest that searchers need to understand the mentalities of both scholars and information organizers. For the scholar angle, I have developed what I call a scholars' schema model for how academe works differently and to help avoid the problematic but common term “peer-reviewed sources.” In this schema, academics start with curiosity about a seemingly mysterious phenomena and then ask, “What do we already know?” followed quickly by “How do we know it?” Then, they look for “What's wrong with what we know?” and finally, “What can I add?” For information organization, I stress the importance of determining how transparent a collection or database is and that the worst is an overpromised “black box.”

I used to use a lot of slide presentations (PowerPoint, Google, Prezi), but it was always so time-consuming to choose between hundreds of slides on many topics to come up with a sequence suitable for a given presentation. These days, I use a Google sheet with a very condensed version of almost everything I could talk about. I can share more easily, zoom in on any section in any order, and ignore parts. A few added bonuses are that participants see the whole gamut of what I could talk about and the link gives them access to my latest updates (which I try to keep to a minimum and only when necessary).

As for metaphors, I like toolboxes (a few simple tools vs. more specialized tools) and a tangram (rather than a jigsaw) to represent the puzzle aspect – a tangram can end up as anything – a jigsaw always has the same ending.

More specifically to EA studies, I usually talk about the importance of using as many variations as possible (e.g., both traditional and simplified characters, pinyin, Wade-Giles in Chinese and equivalent concepts in Japanese and Korean)

and how even sometimes distasteful or obsolete terms must be considered because search engines are literal, and it's very difficult to change all the world's texts and catalogues as terminology evolves.

The need to manage diversity and multiculturalism – has it become a concern for you when conducting public services programs and activities, particularly programs associated with library user education and information literacy skills workshops for students?

Grappling with accommodating diversity and multiculturalism is not really new in Canada (even if we haven't quite figured it out perfectly yet). I think most challenges I can think of for this question come down to dealing with nuance, complexity, and expectations.

We often talk about tailoring services for international students, but when we come down to it, we struggle to figure out what enough international students might have in common with each other that would lead to useful service tailoring. Our students come from so many different countries with different languages, they are in so many programs each with different library needs, and their experiences with libraries and academe are all over the map from undergrad through to world-class researchers of all ages. And, when we come down to it, "Canadian" or other English-speaking students don't understand many of the same things either.

I think a lot of the struggle is ameliorated when libraries and librarians are less concerned about scale and efficiency (i.e., group needs) and more about serving individuals in the best way possible. To paraphrase what I believe came from Margaret Atwood: $1+1+1+1\neq 4$, each one is an individual no matter how much they might seem part of a group. And this, yet again, all comes down to individual librarians with varied backgrounds, a love of learning, and the institutional support for transformational learning for individuals rather than transactional approaches to the masses.

What parts of your job as the Subject Librarian for EA Studies and Public Services Librarian at UA do you find most rewarding? And which do you find most frustrating?

I think a lot of my frustrations and joys are embedded above, but I can try to summarize a bit and maybe add some additional thoughts (frustrations first so I can end on a higher note).

I'll admit I get a bit frustrated when students and scholars come to the library with a definitive topic (and sometimes even a pre-determined conclusion) and are disappointed that we don't have the same resources (especially CJK) that other places might have – or that their arguments are not always supported in the way they want. It would be great if we could convince them to use our existing resources more in the early parts of topic choosing.

Another frustration (more of a "sadness" actually) is there is very little Canada in EA studies here. I think this might be due to a mutually reinforcing interplay between not having many faculty with Canadian backgrounds in EA studies,

few Canadian students in the program relative to Asian international students, and the bulk of the discipline influenced mostly by American/European scholars on one hand and Chinese/Japanese/Korean scholars on the other who have their own cultural reference points and interests. I do want to say how personally and intellectually warm and generous people in EA studies are – I just wish academe in general had a bit more scope for Canadian perspectives.

As for Public Service Librarianship, my frustrations seem to boil down to the dramatic shift toward techno-specialization and away from libraries as a human relationship endeavor with the transformational learning of individuals as the focus. I don't think these need to be mutually exclusive and indeed weren't until recently. Unfortunately, it seems decisions seem to be increasingly made without much in the way of transparent, and critically engaged, discussion.

Above all, however, is the frustration of too much talking and not enough doing. For the last few years, we have been expending so much energy on what we should do, how to convince others that we are important and relevant, what we could change, and worrying about the future that we have less time to spend on actually teaching and helping people with their research. We are so focused on being great that we are ignoring much of the good that we do.

But for all that, and on balance, I still feel rewarded in my role on a daily basis. Even during the COVID pandemic, I am able to interact personally with students and faculty on a wide range of topics that allow me to share what I do know and explore what I don't. The people in all my liaison areas, including EA Studies, are wonderful as scholars, students, and people; in fact, the boundaries between liaison areas are not so clear: religious studies, history, media studies, and education all have many overlaps of topics and people (and that is another particular joy of my job). I love the puzzle of searching in CJK languages where I get to bring my information systems knowledge, scholars bring their language and content knowledge, and we both bring our curiosity and understanding of various academic cultures. Above all, my connections mean I get to indulge my long-term interests in all things Japanese especially, and also Chinese and Korean.

The best part of academic librarianship at the University of Alberta is being surrounded by many wonderful people who are so willing to share their knowledge, skills, and curiosity. So much of what I've written above is the result of knowledge generously shared even if I can't acknowledge individuals as I should. I will specifically mention my wife (who is a professor), Tanya Berry, and my library colleague Bob Cole, who are both sources of so much of whatever I understand of scholarship, academic, and librarianship (and both read this submission and made some great suggestions).

I often say that the type of librarianship I am privileged to practice is a mix of two of my passions – teaching and research – with all the best parts of both and without many of the frustrations of each.

Finally, thank you again for the opportunity to respond. As stated at the beginning, I came to realize I have so much more to say and how challenging it is to organize and articulate nuanced thoughts. In my mind, this is just the start of more discussions and more thinking; I really hope others will feel welcome to engage with me.



Photo 1. David Sulz.



Photo 2. Rutherford Library south building and galleria, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.