

Back Talk — Librarianship Is Hot Again!

Column Editor: **Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson** (Library Director, University of Hong Kong; Phone: 852 2859 2200; Fax: 852 2858 9420) <ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk>

Most men my age have accumulated a closet full of ties: wide ones, thin ones, bow ties, striped ones, ones with pictures on them, and I even have a leather cord cowboy bootlace or bolo tie with a silver and turquoise clasp/toggle (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bolo_Tie). While I don't dare wear many of them, I have found that if you hold onto them long enough they will come back into style. Of course that may take more than a decade or so to happen. I guess this sort of thing might be true for women's shoes, handbags, and skirts of various lengths.

Apparently occupations are the same and so I shouldn't have been surprised when I read in the 18 February 2008 online issue of *U.S. News & World Report* that librarianship was listed as one of 2008's Best Careers. But I can remember going to a few Charleston meetings in the early 1990's where more than one speaker was bemoaning the end of libraries and the dinosaurs that worked in them. **Marty Nemko**, writing for *U.S. News* noted that we should "forget about that image of a librarian as a mousy bookworm. Librarians these days must be high-tech information sleuths, helping researchers plumb the oceans of information available in books and digital records. It's an underrated career."¹ He went on to say that special librarianship was particularly hot these days: "All sorts of organizations need librarians, not just universities and local governments. They work for law firms, prisons, corporations, and nonprofit agencies. In fact, special librarianship is the field's fastest-growing job market."

This is certainly true here in Asia. **Phoenix Lin** from **Shih-shin University** in Taiwan and I have been working on a chapter dealing with special libraries in Asia for a book that will hopefully come out later this year. Taiwan and Hong Kong both provide many opportunities for training in librarianship at undergraduate and graduate levels and I have been guilty of thinking they were graduating too many students since there have been few new jobs in Hong Kong's university libraries. But my

research on special libraries has educated me to the fact that jobs in special libraries abound.

The **Hong Kong Library Association's** online directory of libraries listed nearly 600 such libraries for our city alone, e.g., government, hospital, etc.² Taiwan has a similar though somewhat larger number of special libraries.

I will have to admit that I don't know that much about special libraries in North America and so some of the differences I noted between the libraries in which I have spent my career, and the special libraries I have examined here in Hong Kong, might be unique to Asia or they may be true of all special libraries. For example, I was interested to find that all of the special librarians I interviewed gave what I would call premium service to some of their clients which typically meant "here is the information you requested," versus the "let me teach you how to find what you want" level of service, more common in university libraries. Another major difference was the degree to which the special librarian had to serve as both archivist and librarian since the information needed was likely to be found in the reports, minutes, etc., of the organization they served.

The importance of a special librarian's ability to perform as a "one man band" was really evident in the area of collection development. I interviewed a beleaguered hospital librarian who had to collect at significant depth in areas like surgery, dermatology, nursing, hospital administration, etc., on a very limited budget — and to do this while also providing public service, cataloging books, sending things to the bindery, etc. The difficulties associated with the need to cover so many bases at the same time is then again reflected in the professional development needs of these librarians. In a university library like mine, even with a small professional staff of 33, we can still maintain

functional specialties with some people needing to keep up with the trends in information skills training, others for reference work, others for collection development, and still others for preservation, etc. But the special librarians I talked with felt overburdened with the need to try to at least keep up with the major changes in all of these areas.



Most of the challenges faced by special librarians in Hong Kong are familiar to an academic librarian like me: insufficient staffing, the lack of collection development funds, the lack of space for collections and patrons working on their own, demanding patrons, supervisors who think that with the Web

the budgetary demands of librarians and their libraries should be lessening, and the need for professional development training opportunities. But I was amazed by how much more "personal" and immediate all of these challenges were to special librarians. While I might complain about the lack of sufficient subject specialist librarians, reference librarians, catalogers, conservation staff — for most of the special librarians with whom I talked, the issue was how to divide up their own 40 to 50 hours of work time to perform all of these functions.

So, while librarianship may be "hot" again, working in this fast growing segment of our profession is definitely not for the weak of spirit. Yet, I was impressed with how upbeat these special librarians were about their work. They were certainly not bored nor did they fear the loss of employment. While they might lose one job because of difficulties with management, the need for and the difficulties of recruiting special librarians willing to take on large challenges seemed to mean that there were always jobs for the "stout of heart." Consequently, I continue to be optimistic about the future of librarians and the people who work in them — and optimistic about the future of the publishers and vendors who serve libraries and individual readers. 🌟

Endnotes

1. **Nemko, Marty.** "Librarian: Executive Summary." *U.S. News & World Report*. Online version posted December 19, 2007. Retrieved February 19, 2008, from <http://www.usnews.com/features/business/best-careers/best-careers-2008.html>.
2. **Hong Kong Library Association.** Hong Kong Libraries Gateway. Retrieved September 29, 2007, from http://dir.hklla.org/Browse_by_type.php.