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Backtalk — In Between

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Personally, I am feeling a bit “in between” lately, and I have a feeling that academic libraries are “in between” as well. I am personally “in between” in a number of ways: I am almost in between jobs. I am finishing my 15th year at **Columbia** and about to move to Hong Kong to become the Librarian, or Library Director, at the **University of Hong Kong**. It is not the first time I have changed jobs, but the feeling is somewhat bitter-sweet. You know your current job, but some parts of it you know too well. You are excited about the new position, but you are terrified of failure. Somehow it is a lot more comfortable kibitzing with friends about the failings of this or that new director, than about to be the object of such discussions.

Going to Hong Kong is a very welcome opportunity to discard some of my “in between-ness” of the past 20 or so years. I was formerly an East Asian librarian. I left that job in 1979 and became a collection development bureaucrat. For all of these years, part of my heart has been with China — and its wonderfully rich culture of art, food, language, smells, sights, and people — and part of my heart has been in my current work with library materials selectors and the people they serve. Both parts of these parts of my life are challenging and exciting, but now I have the opportunity to practice librarianship/information management in an exciting corner of China, to bring together my passion for that part of the world, and the opportunity to direct a world class academic library.

Intellectually, I am about to move from the in between state of being a student, to having “Dr.” placed before my name. I am at that point of writing my dissertation at **Columbia’s Teachers College** on the “*Library and Information Needs of the Television University Student in China*” where my focus is on making sure that I have the right number of lines before and after a chapter heading, that all the right numbers are in the URLs attached to the Webby bibliographic citations that must be found in any “with-it” contemporary dissertation, and that all the dots between the words and the page numbers line up on my table of contents pages. I am almost there, but not quite. I am in between.

The universities, libraries, librarians, teachers and students I have been studying in China are also somewhat in between where they are and where they would like to be. Television universities in China are models of distance education. Students attend lectures given by many of the most famous

teachers in China via television and video tapes. Yet, these same universities are busy building dormitories (some wired), sports fields, and libraries because to compete with traditional universities, they have to offer what Chinese students and their parents expect of a university education. To educate effectively, they also find they want to bring students and teachers closer together. Television universities are therefore in the “in between” of traditional universities and distance universities.

It has been enlightening to see how libraries in these distance universities could be so different and yet so alike the ones in which I work daily. The 20 plus libraries I visited last summer varied enormously. The new library at the **Nanjing Radio and Television University** has beautiful terrazo floors, shining woodwork, Tattle Tape anti-theft devices, computers connected to the Internet, and everything one would associate with a modern academic library. And yet, in other less affluent television universities I found what I call peek-a-boo reserves collections. Inside a large room is constructed a smaller glass walled room. The spines of the books in the glass-walled collection face outward so students can browse and find what they want. At mid point of each shelf is an inch-wide opening in the glass so that readers can poke the book that interests them slightly inward and then go to the attendant and ask to check out the book that interested them. It is a unique bit of simple technology designed to overcome the remoteness of a closed reserves system, and yet overcome the security issues that come with an open reserves system. These libraries are in between the past and the present.

China and Hong Kong both seem to specialize in being in between. China is in between recovering from decades of war and civil unrest and reemerging as one of the great civilizations, or even the “central kingdom” of all kingdoms, as its name “Zhong Guo” implies. Being in Hong Kong is like being in Manhattan but with Chinese people. Everyone has a cell phone, there are more personal computers per person that just about anyplace, except perhaps Singapore. Yet, Hong Kong is that unique bridge between East and West. The ever-practical Chinese have a vocabulary for in between-ness. One of the first phrases I learned as a young missionary in Taiwan was ma-ma hu-hu. Literally it means neither a horse nor a tiger. It communicates the message that what you are observing isn’t complete, but that is how

life is for humans. Another easily remembered, and often encountered, phrase is “cha bu duo” or the difference is not great. Again, what you are looking at isn’t complete, but the difference between 100% and what you are looking at can be overlooked: accept it, life is a work in progress.

I think academic libraries in this country are a work in progress, they are neither horses nor tigers. The current remote storage mania is a case in point. The logic of per-square-foot costs of on-campus library materials storage are less than the costs for more remote storage. Yet, what is the difference between a closed stack and a remote storage library? With a closed stack library you twiddle your thumbs for 24 minutes while the book you want is retrieved, and a remote storage library lets you do the same for 24 hours (hopefully). Remote storage is an in between concept. We have computers and scanning devices, but it is too expensive to put everything online so that the content you want is a few keystrokes away. So while we wait for the digital tomorrow, we continue to collect to store. Likewise, we hold onto print subscriptions while we move our money to digital periodical subscriptions; we hold onto costly ILL systems when user-initiated document delivery systems are more cost-effective; we complain that the journals we want electronically are not available, and then rail against **EBSCO** when they get it for us, etc. We are in between where we are and where we want to be.

So, what shall we do? I suppose I need to remember that life and libraries are a work in progress. I expect my next column will be written from Hong Kong. By the way, while **HKU** has a great staff, I have a few openings. Please let me know if there are adventurous librarians out there in search of new opportunities. 🐉

