

Notes on Operations

Acquisitions of Hard-to-Find Backfiles of Chinese Periodicals from the People's Republic of China

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This paper describes the University of Iowa Libraries' experience in purchasing hard-to-find backfiles of Chinese periodicals from China. It sheds light on how small foreign-language collections in North America can be greatly enhanced by using a novel acquisition strategy and by understanding the different book market conditions in third-world countries. The experience summarized here is unique in some aspects and can be used by other libraries in similar cooperative projects in the future.

A good Chinese collection must have a strong serials component of journals, periodicals, government publications, and conference proceedings that are classified in the following three categories:

1. National publications: those published by major academic publishers, national universities, national research institutions, and government agencies. Such publications are distributed nationwide in China.
2. Provincial-level publications: those published by research institutions at the provincial level, colleges and universities of various provinces, and provincial government agencies, which are usually circulated within provinces in China.
3. Local publications: those published at the municipal or county level, usually with a limited circulation, such as county gazetteers or municipal statistical reports.

Due to historical reasons and the condition of publishing in the People's Republic of China, backfiles of such serial publications in Chinese are mostly out-of-print today. Microfilms of Chinese periodical backfiles are usually limited to only a few titles with limited spans. The rampage of China's Cultural Revolution was also a cause for the rarity of such materials, as it took a toll on all Chinese periodicals published from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s and earlier. It is almost impossible today to get complete backruns of Chinese periodicals in large quantities through the commercial book market.

From 1993 to 1995, the University of Iowa Libraries successfully acquired complete backruns of more than four hundred hard-to-find Chinese periodicals in more than seven thousand volumes with the help of four major Chinese libraries. With China's open-door policy and broadening economic reform, libraries in China today

are more independent, entrepreneurial, and accessible to the outside world. This has created an opportunity for cooperation between U.S. and Chinese libraries.

In this article, the University of Iowa Libraries' experience in purchasing hard-to-find backfiles of Chinese periodicals from China is described. Our experience sheds light on how small foreign-language collections in North America can be greatly enhanced by using a novel acquisition strategy and by understanding the different book market conditions in third-world countries. The experience summarized here is unique in some aspects and can be used by other libraries in similar cooperative projects in the future.

BACKGROUND

From 1992 to 1995, the University of Iowa Libraries received two U.S. Department of Education Title VI grants for foreign periodicals, with a total funding of nearly a quarter of a million dollars, earmarked for the purchase and processing of hard-to-find Chinese and African periodicals including current titles and their backruns. With this funding, the University of Iowa Libraries planned to add more than four hundred current Chinese periodicals and their complete backruns in humanities, social sciences, and Chinese health sciences. Many of the backruns of those Chinese periodicals dated back to the 1950s.

We first contacted the three largest commercial book vendors in China—China National Publishing Industry Trading Corporation, China International Book Trading Corporation, and China National Publications Import and Export Corporation—and solicited their help in getting these materials for us. We learned that they could get us only small segments of backruns from used book stores in Beijing. Those Chinese vendors indicated that it was impossible to acquire the complete backruns of all four hundred-plus periodicals we wanted, because such materials were not available on the Chinese book market. It was obvious that the limited fragments of Chinese journals that vendors could provide us were of little

help, because our plan was to systematically enlarge and enhance our Chinese periodicals collection by acquiring the complete backruns of all four hundred-plus titles, which at that time could only be found in major Chinese libraries such as the Chinese National Library (Beijing Library), Shanghai Municipal Library, and some national Chinese university libraries in China.

Cost was another factor. One commercial vendor offered to microfilm the Chinese backfiles for us from the collections of the Chinese research libraries, but the cost for microfilming far exceeded the funding we received for Chinese periodicals, and the time required for a microfilming project would have been much longer than our grant period.

Given these factors, we believed that the most cost-effective way of obtaining the Chinese backfiles was to acquire them directly from the existing collections of some major Chinese libraries. We learned that Chinese libraries have a tradition of buying and storing multiple copies of Chinese periodicals: one for circulation, one for back-up of circulation, and one for permanent preservation. It would be most desirable if we could purchase some of those duplicate collections from Chinese libraries.

We searched library literature, but could not identify from existing literature any citations for similar projects, as this model of acquisition perhaps had not been previously reported. Thus, we had to design the mechanisms of acquisition by ourselves from scratch.

METHODOLOGY

We made a proposal to ten Chinese libraries, in which we stated our interest in purchasing their duplicate periodicals at a price reasonable to both sides. Those ten Chinese libraries were:

- The Chinese National Library (Beijing Library)
- Beijing University Library
- Fudan University Library
- Wuhan University Library
- Zhongshan University Library
- Jilin University Library

Northwest University Library
Hubei University of Medical Sciences
Library

Beijing Xiehe University of Medical
Sciences Library

Beijing Medical University Library

Most of the libraries responded positively to our proposal and expressed their willingness to participate in the project. We then sent them our "shopping-list" of Chinese periodicals, requesting them to search it against their holdings and report the search results to us. This bibliographic checking revealed that most of the ten libraries had the materials we wanted. We then selected four of the ten libraries as our partners, based on how complete their duplicate collections were. The four libraries were: Beijing University Library, Fudan University Library, Wuhan University Library, and Hubei University of Medical Sciences Library. By inviting these four libraries to participate in this project, we created a competition among them to help lower the cost through a bidding process. We also made it clear from the beginning that we would only be interested in purchasing their duplicates, not their single master copies, and that the prices for those materials would be fair to them.

During the summers of 1993 and 1994, the University of Iowa Libraries sent its representative to the four libraries to meet with their administrators, negotiate terms of the contracts and prices, inspect the physical conditions of their backfiles, and sign the contracts.

The "shopping-list" from the University of Iowa Libraries was divided into four portions, and each of the four libraries took up one portion through competitive bidding and negotiation. The contract contained a list of titles and years of the backruns, together with a block price for the materials, labor, and shipping. We required that all periodicals be hardbound before they were sold to us. Cost of reproducing missing issues found in the collection was included in the block price. We also set a six-month deadline for delivery, and agreed to make a payment upon receipt of the materials. In the end, all materials arrived on time.

RESULTS

Altogether in the project, we acquired over seven thousand volumes, which comprised complete backruns of over four hundred Chinese periodicals. The following is a cost analysis.

As shown in table 1, by buying directly from the Chinese libraries, we achieved an average savings of \$15 per bound volume, compared with the conventional purchase of such materials through book vendors. That amounts to more than \$105,000 for over seven thousand volumes of Chinese periodicals, not to mention the fact that those out-of-print materials could only be found in the existing collections of a few Chinese libraries. On the other hand, to the Chinese libraries who were our partners, though their unit

TABLE 1
COMPARISON OF COSTS AND TIME

	Purchase through Vendors	Purchase through Chinese Libraries
Acquisitions rate	30%	99%
Time required for completing the project	unknown	within a year
Price per volume/year	\$20	\$12
Binding cost per volume/year	\$5	None (included in price per volume)
Shipping and handling per volume/year	\$2	None (included in price per volume)
Total: (cost per volume)	\$27	\$12

price per volume was low, the total proceeds for these voluminous backfiles were large and profitable because journal subscriptions for research libraries in China from the 1950s to the 1980s were cheap. They could easily offset the cost of acquiring and maintaining those materials over the years and still come out with a large profit margin.

This retrospective acquisition project was unconventional in several ways. It bypassed vendors and directly accessed the sources of such materials. By buying duplicate collections directly from Chinese libraries, we not only saved money and labor, but time. In addition, we developed a good working relationship with our sister libraries in China. Our Chinese partners all expressed their satisfaction in this mutually beneficial project. They made hard cash by weeding and selling us their duplicate collections, and, in turn, used the proceeds to buy some much-needed Western language publications for their collections. Furthermore, by weeding duplicates, they reduced their storage and preservation costs. They also used the proceeds to send their staff abroad for training and upgraded their library facili-

ties by adding much-needed equipment such as photocopiers, fax machines, and computers.

The University of Iowa Libraries plan to make backfiles of Chinese periodicals available to scholars and researchers in the United States by entering bibliographic information for them into the national databases of the Research Libraries Information Network and the OCLC Online Computer Library Center, Inc., including complete holdings information. In addition, we plan to digitize the tables of contents of some of the rare Chinese journals, such as those in Chinese health sciences, and put them on the World Wide Web through the homepage of the East Asian Collection at the University of Iowa Libraries (<http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/eac/>).

Building a strong serials collection for area studies is costly, and it usually takes a long time. We found a quick and efficient way to retrospectively build a solid Chinese periodicals collection within a short period of time. In this case, improved understanding of the libraries and book markets in a third-world country led to an innovative collection development strategy.