Lists

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Almost exactly five years ago, I was dismissed on the grounds of age from my post as Curator of Chinese Collections at the Bodleian Library. I had been in office for over 41 years. The last six of those were particularly pleasurable as I was able to spend all my time organising, identifying, and cataloguing the Library's "special collections" of Chinese books. Meanwhile, Joshua, who had been appointed to take over all my other duties, did all the hard work.

My teenage years were spent in the 1960s, and we children of the sixties, as demonstrated so well by Paul McCartney at Glastonbury this year, never grow old. We simply become less young. We also have the advantage of being able to recall what to many, if not to most colleagues in this room, is the distant past.

When I first started to catalogue Chinese books in the Bodleian, the records were written on cards by hand, or with a mechanical typewriter. It was a great advance when in the 1980s the Library provided us with electric golfball and then daisywheel typewriters. At the same time, Chinese library automation was increasingly discussed at EASL conferences, and arguments about how it should be done often became very heated. The Tenth Conference in Leiden in 1990 was particularly memorable, when Lars Fredriksson demonstrated the Macintosh solution that he had implemented in Stockholm, and J-M Streffer spoke of his enthusiasm for the allegro system in Berlin.

Times change, and it's hard now to convey the excitement that everyone felt when we first saw Chinese characters on a computer screen. And arguments about how automation should be done are now over, as the MARC CJK system has become universal, despite the fact that every feature of its construction is either inadequate or completely wrong.

But something that never goes wrong, and which hasn't changed for over two thousand years, is the book list. The *Bielu* 別錄, a catalogue of the imperial library which Emperor Cheng of the Han Dynasty 漢成帝 ordered the scholar Liu Xiang 劉向 to compile in 26 BC, is simply a list. So is what I think is the best printed Chinese book catalogue ever produced, that of Kyoto University's Institute for Research in Humanities. This is very big and elaborate, and has a title and author index, but it is still basically a list.

Thus inspired, I've started to write lists myself. Actually, I started more than forty years ago. Shortly after I was first appointed to the Bodleian in 1976, I started to visit Piet van der Loon at his house on Boar's Hill to learn the facts of Chinese bibliography. He quickly infected me with his enthusiasm for the popular editions that had arrived in Europe in the seventeenth century, and I started to make a list of

them. I then expanded the list to include the seventeenth-century Chinese acquisitions in other British libraries.

As soon as the internet appeared, and the Library staff were given space on which to mount their own pages, which we were encouraged to produce, I mounted my list and further expanded it to include the seventeenth-century acquisitions of all other European libraries. When scholars interested in these matters saw it, they started to help me, so that little by little, maybe only once or twice a year, the list continues to grow and may one day be complete.

The list is expressed in the simplest HTML – it's little more than a textfile – and is most certainly not a work of scholarship. But it led directly to the discovery of one of the most important Chinese historical documents in existence, the Selden Map. Robert Bachelor had noticed that there was a Ming dynasty map on my list, and asked to see it when he visited the Bodleian at the beginning of January, 2008.

I've recently started to produce other lists, the latest being a list of the official publications of the Chinese government when it was based at Chongqing in the 1940s. The Bodleian received a gift of 151 of these from the so-called "National Library of Peiping" in February, 1946. All of them are valuable, and some are now very rare indeed. Before he left for Princeton, Joshua had located them and extracted them from the modern collection – I don't know how or why he did this – but it has enabled the Library to incorporate them into its special collections, and me to produce a list of them.

My first list gives access to materials that could never be found in online catalogues. I don't know what search-term would lead the reader to materials that came to Europe in the seventeenth century. And my latest list could only be produced from most online catalogues with much time and difficulty, and by readers who know what they're doing, who in my experience are very few and far between.

The more I work on the Bodleian's special collections, the more my enthusiasm for lists increases. When I've been unable to find texts in online databases, I've resorted to Google searches, and these have often led to lists of books which Chinese scholars have mounted on their websites or reproduced in their blogs just as I do myself. Occasionally, you notice things in their lists which turn out to be even more interesting than what you were originally looking for.

When I was still in the employ of the Bodleian, my work on the so-called "special" Chinese collections were showcased in a website called "Serica" which I was required to construct. Unfortunately I couldn't complete my work on these collections by the time of my dismissal, so I'm continuing to work on them as a private scholar.

As the Library has now closed the old Serica website, I'm presenting the data in a new one, which I'm constructing as best I can. This does something that no online catalogue could ever manage, and I will briefly explain why.

More and more, especially during the later years of my employment, scholars – mostly Chinese ones – were not asking to see specific books. These could easily be found in our online catalogue, without reference to me or any other librarian. They were asking the question, "what have you got".

It would have been pointless, and even unhelpful, for me to tell them to go and have a look in the online catalogue, as online catalogues are not designed to answer this question. They are designed to limit what is being looked for, not to show everything. And the more they limit it, the better most readers are pleased. The ideal is to find exactly the book or books that you're looking for, and nothing more, in the first hit.

And so I designed the Serica site as an attempt to give an overview of all the "special" Chinese books in Oxford, not just a few of them. It is nothing more than a collection of lists, some of them very long. The data is arranged in a modified version of the *sibu* 四部 classification, which can be seen and understood at a glance. Each category gives access to a list that can be viewed, printed out, or downloaded as required. Each list can be structured in a way that best suits the data it contains, and the data can be expressed in a way that is appropriate to it, rather than a way that has to conform to a particular set of rules.

Please consider making some lists and putting them on the web if you haven't already done so. It's a low-tech but highly effective way of providing access to discrete collections of specialised material that either can't be handled by our library systems – ephemera, for example – or which it's too difficult and time-consuming to make available by other means. For example, the Bodleian has some paintings and calligraphy in its collections. I made a list of these a while ago which Mamtimyn was able to use this year to get them all digitised. The list is primitive – I know nothing about painting and calligraphy – but it has already served at least one useful function.

Our lists are indexed by Google, and are so made searchable throughout the world. There are ways of expediting this which I'm only now beginning to learn about. Joshua told me about the "Google Search Console" which enables you to add a search bar to your site which gives access to your lists in a controlled manner. I've added one to my Serica site without any confidence that I've done it correctly, but it seems to work. It is also possible to direct Google to your files so that they are indexed quickly.

I'll now go to my website (https://serica.ie/) and demonstrate some of these things, but first one final point. The web is excellent at providing pieces of information, but not so good at offering conspectus – this is the whole point of Serica. In learning how to construct my pages, I've made much use of W3Schools and other online resources. But cutting and pasting pieces of code is not the same as learning the subject properly. Sooner or later, something unexpected happens to remind you of this. And it's just the same with students who cobble their essays together from the internet instead of reading books.

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