

## Chinese American Librarians in the 21st Century: Profile Update

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*ABSTRACT: There is an increasing need to understand the role of Chinese American librarians as one of the largest ethnic librarian groups in American library communities and a renewed interest to demonstrate and prove a critical role they play in the Library and Information Science profession. With first-hand insights, this study reports the current status of Chinese American librarians. It helps develop our knowledge about the Chinese American librarians in the 21st Century. A sequel study in a separate paper reports the findings of career development of Chinese American librarians and documents strategies they adapted to meet challenges and barriers facing them.*

### I. Introduction

Based on the most current U.S. census from 2000 to 2005, the wave of Chinese immigration remained strong, resulting from a great increase in Chinese immigrants from Mainland China (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2004). Chinese Americans continue to exert significant influence by their numbers and their contributions to American society in the 21st century. Since the U.S. census no longer provided a detailed breakdown by occupation for Asian American groups (Liu, 2000), it becomes difficult to know what Chinese immigrants do and how many of them have been in the LIS (Library and Information Science) field. There is an increasing need to understand Chinese American librarians as one of the largest ethnic librarian groups in American library communities and a renewed interest to demonstrate and prove the critical role they play in the Library and Information Science profession. However, little systematic and current research has been done in this area. This study is intended to fill the research gap. A sequel paper will document strategies the Chinese American librarians have employed for success and share lessons learned. This study is also intended to help Chinese Americans' professional development by enhancing the understanding and further building the knowledge base of Chinese American librarianship in the 21st Century.

## II. Literature Review

Chinese American librarians have made great contributions to the profession with years of professional endeavor (Liu, 2000). However, few systematic studies appear in the literature. Only three studies examined the status and characteristics of Chinese American librarians in the United States. They are: Li's survey (1979) as the first profile study of Chinese American librarians in the 1970s; Yang's (1996) job survey among the Chinese Americans Librarians Association members; and Liu's (2000) review article on the brief history of Chinese Americans in the United States and their contributions to librarianship. Those studies investigated the status and characteristics of Chinese American librarians in the United States.

## III. Method and Data Collection

Building on the two previous profile studies done by T. C. Li (1979) and Z. Y. Yang (1996), a survey instrument has been designed and developed. Changes were made to the earlier study questionnaires in order to tailor them to Chinese American librarians in the 21st Century. The approval of using human subjects in this study has been obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign after the authors received the Sally C. Tseng Professional Development Grant from the Chinese American Librarians Association (CALA). The Illinois Fire Service Institute at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign provided strong in-house and financial support to maintain a team of Chinese graduate students and volunteers to assist with data collection.

CALA's current U.S. members were the target survey population. The survey began with a random selection to ensure the quality and validity of data collection. The graduate and volunteer students used the CALA members whose e-mail accounts are listed in the *2004/2005 CALA Membership Directory* and they followed up with those who did not respond after initial e-mail. Out of 487 valid e-mail accounts, 126 respondents participated in the project and their responses were used for data analysis. The response rate is twenty-four percent.

## IV. Findings and Discussion

### *1. Personal Background*

The survey questionnaire consisted of two parts. Part I had thirteen questions for personal and education information and Part II fifty-six questions for work experience. As shown in Figure 1 (Q1), 59% of respondents (n=75) were born in the People's Republic of China, 15% (n=9) in Taiwan, 12% (n=15) in the United States, 6% (n=7) Hong Kong, 2% (n=2) Canada, and 6% (n=8) in other places. Yang's survey (1996) on members of the CALA found that 96% of Chinese American librarians were born outside the United States in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong and was a female-dominant group (82%). These findings were similar to Li's study (1979) and

this current study. Following national trends, female librarians dominate in this group, as 75% (n=95) are female and 25% (n=31) male (Q2). For those who were not born in North America, 51% (n=64) came to the United States in the 1980s and 1990s (Q4). More than half of Chinese American librarians continue to be first generation immigrants from outside the United States. Second-generation Chinese Americans start to enter the profession at a younger age. As many of the first generation is at retirement age (Liu 2000), it is important to have new blood entering the profession to strengthen the group.

**Q1. Where were you born? (n=126)**

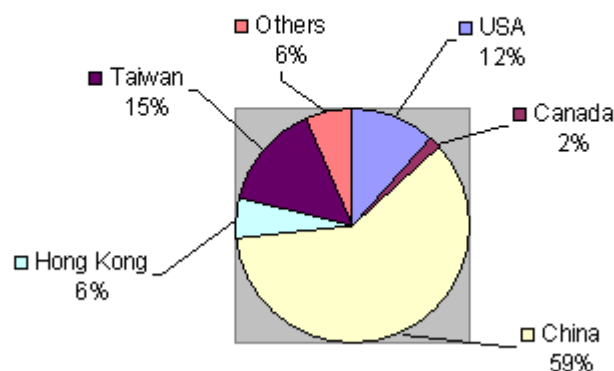


Figure 1. Birthplaces of Chinese American Librarians

As shown in Figure 2, 43% of respondents (n=54) reported that they were over 50 years old, 34% (n=43) between 40 to 49, 17% (n=22) between 30 to 39, and only 5% (n=6) under 29 (Q3). The finding indicates that the ages of Chinese American librarians follow the national trend that there is an accelerated rate of librarian retirement in the United States and the profession needs more young librarians to enter and fill in the retirees' positions.

**Q3. Indicate the age group you belong to (n=126)**

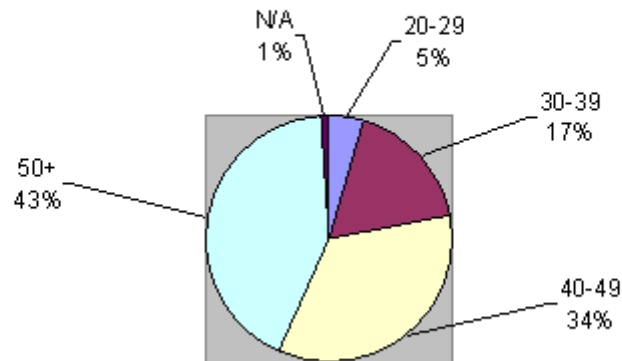


Figure 2. Age group for Chinese American librarians

*2. Educational Background*

The next of nine questions were asked to gain respondents' educational background information. When asked in which subject field(s) respondents hold a degree and their undergraduate major, an overwhelming majority were in social science (101) and the rest (22) in science (Q7). Of respondents who obtained a second master's degree, forty-three received another master's degree in social science and twenty-five in science (Q8). Seven respondents received a doctorate in science and four in social science (Q9). A master's degree was the highest educational level attained in their subject field by 67% (n=85), a Ph.D. by 6% (n=7) and a bachelor's degree by 13% (n=16) as shown in Figure 3 (Q10). Advanced degrees in other subject areas continue to assist Chinese American librarians' performance as subject specialists as in the past (Li, 1979; Yang, 1996).

**Q10. What is the highest education level you have attained in your subject field? (n=126)**

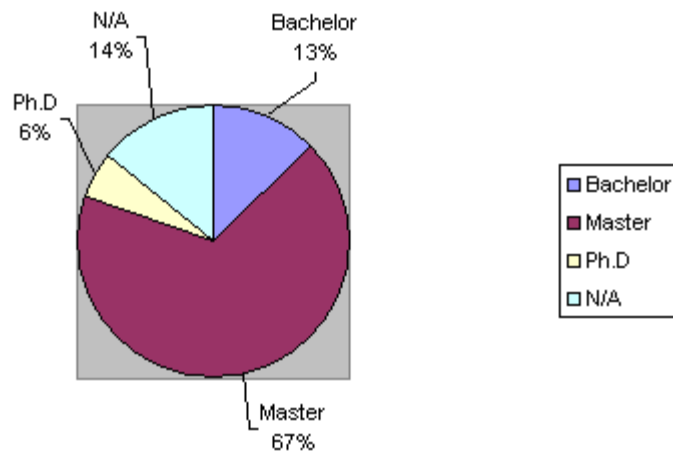


Figure 3. Highest education level attained in subject field

Among 126 respondents, 82% (n=104,) reported to have a Master’s degree in Library or Information Science, 4% (n=5) a doctoral degree and 2% (n=2) a bachelor’s degree (Q11) as shown in Figure 4. The findings show that by an overwhelming majority, Chinese American librarians are professional librarians.

**Q11. What is the Highest education level you have attained in library information sciences? (n=126)**

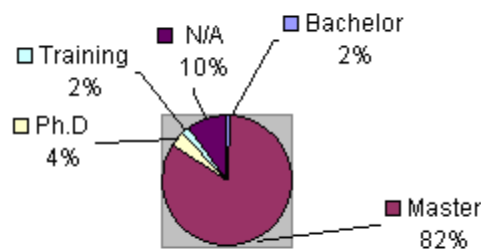


Figure 4. Highest education level attained in Library or Information Science

A majority of respondents (108) received their master’s degree from universities in the United States, one in China, and three (3) in Canada (Q12). Six respondents received Library and/or Information Science doctoral degrees in the United States and one from Canada (Q13).

### 3. Work Experience

A large number of questions (56) in Part II relate to work experience. As of October 1, 2005, 82% (n=105) were full time employees, 5% (n=6) part time, 4% (n=5) retired, 2% (n=2) students (IIQ1), 1% (n=1) unemployed, 2% (n=2) not employed but seeking employment (see Figure 5). Only 3% (n=4) of respondents were involuntarily unemployed for any period between October 1, 2004 and October 1, 2005 (IIQ2). A total of 21% (n=26) worked on a contract basis at their primary jobs (IIQ3). The findings show that the unemployment rate among Chinese American librarians seems relatively low, and a majority has stable full time positions.

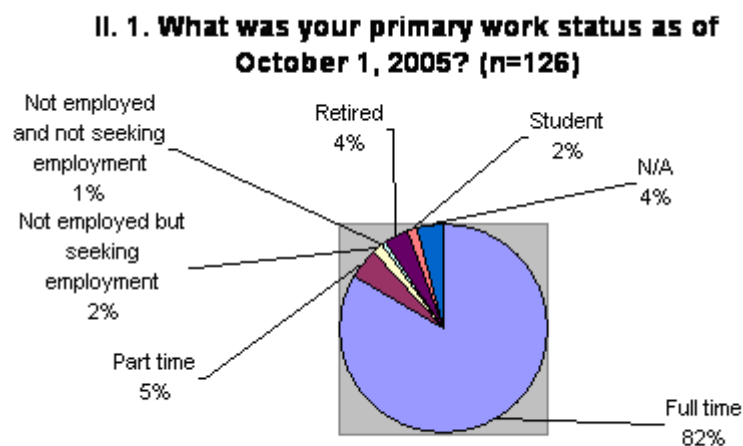


Figure 5. Primary work status

A majority of respondents (86%, n=108) work for someone else and/or an organization. Only 2% (n=2) are self-employed (IIQ4). As shown in Figure 6, 51% (n=65) work for an academic library, 21% (n=27) for a public library, 13% (n=16) for a special library, 3% (n=4) work at a library school, and 2% (n=2) at library-related work (IIQ5). None works in a school library. Li's report in 1979 found that a great majority of Chinese American librarians (76.2%) worked in academic libraries, and a large number of them were engaged in Asian studies. Li (1979) gave a reason that a majority of Chinese American librarians worked in academic libraries was because "a heterogeneous cultural background is perhaps more acceptable in academic circles." Yang's study findings (1996) exhibited striking similarities. The largest groups of Chinese American librarians worked in academic libraries (47%) or public libraries (31%) with 14% working in special libraries. None of the surveyed librarians worked in school libraries (Yang, 1996). All findings indicate that academic libraries were and continue to attract a majority of Chinese American librarians.

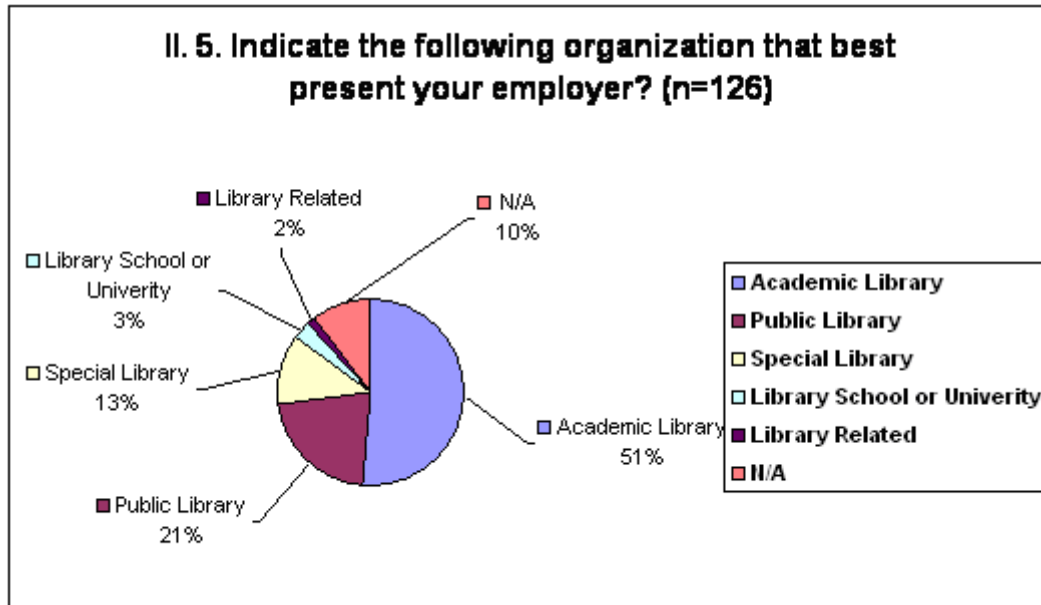


Figure 6. Primary employers

Two questions were asked to obtain information on years of work experience (IIQ6, Q7). As of October 1, 2005, presented in Figure 7 (IIQ6), 25% (n=31) worked twenty and more years, 14% (n=18) worked sixteen to twenty years, followed by 20% (n=25), eleven to fifteen years. A total of 48% (n=60) of the respondents reported that they have worked for their current employer or for themselves, if self-employed, for ten consecutive years (IIQ7). Almost a third of the respondents, 32% (n=31), have worked for over ten and more years. New-comers account for only 9% (n=11) of the respondents. The findings exhibit that Chinese American librarians have rich working experience and tend to remain at one place of employment for an extended time.

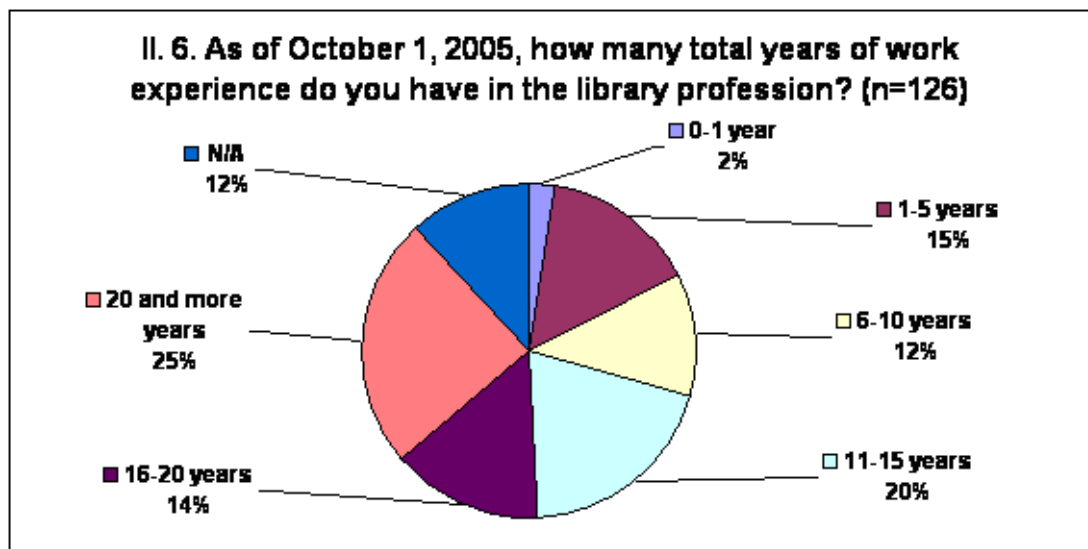


Figure 7. Total years of work experience

In question seventeen, respondents were asked if they have ever changed their library job. Forty-four respondents have never changed their library jobs (IIQ17), twenty-six changed once. Thirty-seven respondents changed their library job twice or more. Although Chinese American librarians tend to stay with the same employer, job changes within the organization did happen. Staying in the same job does not necessarily mean stagnation, since one can change both oneself and the job by enrolling in continuing education programs and active professional development activities.

The findings demonstrate that the sizes of staff and the sizes of libraries where the respondents work are dramatically different, ranging from fewer than three librarians to two thousand librarians, from no paraprofessionals to over two thousand (IIQ8). Including themselves, seventy-nine respondents have from one to one hundred full-time librarians working in their libraries, and sixteen have over one hundred full-time librarians. Fifty-three respondents have full-time paraprofessionals ranging in number from one to one hundred in their libraries, and twenty-three respondents have over one hundred paraprofessionals as revealed in Table 1.

<b>Number Range of Full Time Employee</b>	<b>Number of Librarian</b>	<b>Number of Paraprofessional</b>
1- 5	23	13
6-10	20	17
11-15	10	7
16-20	7	4
21-30	8	7
31-40	4	2
41-50	4	0
51-100	3	3
100+	16	23

Table 1. Full time employees (n=126)

A few respondents reported that they also work with graduate students, volunteers and system administration staff. Almost a third of the respondents, 31% (n=40) have libraries of ten thousand users. Among the remaining respondents, 14% (n=17) have users from one thousand to five thousand, and 13% (n=16) have one hundred to five hundred users. 14% (n=17) have fewer than fifty library users (IIQ9).

In Li's study in 1979, respondents were distributed geographically almost equally in each part of the country ?Northeast, North Central, South, and West. This current study indicates that 39% (n=44) of respondents work in the libraries located on the West Coast, 38% (n=42) on the East Coast, followed by 23% (n=25) in the Midwest (IIQ11). Chinese American librarians continue to be spread throughout the United States.



#### 4. Managerial and Leadership Positions

According to this survey, 48% (n=60) of the respondents supervise or manage one to nine people, followed by 16% (n=19) who manage ten to twenty-four people, and 7% (n=8) who manage twenty-five to ninety-nine people. None of the respondents manage over one hundred people, as shown in Figure 8 (IIQ10). This means that Chinese American librarians have not reached high ranking managerial positions to oversee a large group of employees.

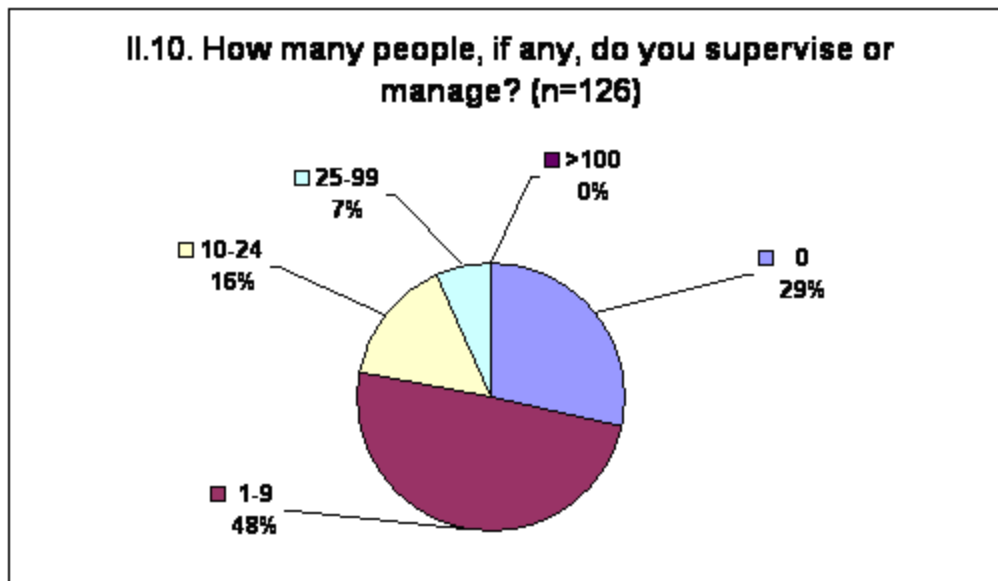


Figure 8. Number of people supervised

The survey data were inconclusive in measuring the career development of Chinese American librarians. Respondents were asked to identify job title definitions most closely matching their level of responsibility (IIQ12). There is little uniformity in titles in academic libraries. Better measures need to be designed to track career development. The definitions for the job titles were adopted from the 2004 SLA Annual Salary Survey (SLA 2004) as described in Table 2.

Job Title	Definitions
Chief Information Officer, Vice President, Executive	Overall responsibility for multiple departments or areas
Director, Manager, Head Librarian	Full responsibility for budgeting, supervising and administering department operations; may include project management, designing and implementing information services or web content
Supervisor, Assistant Manager, Department or Section Head	Responsible for administration of a specific area within the department
Librarian, Information Specialist, Researcher, Analyst	Performs professional information services and research with little or no administrative

	responsibility; may include answering reference questions, cataloging, analyzing and interpreting data
Webmaster	Responsible for designing web sites and managing web content
Support staff	Under general or direct supervision, performs work to assist and support a manager
Professor	Instructs students, conducts research
Consultant	Self-employed in own business

Table 2. Job Titles and definitions (Source: SLA 2004)

Figure 9 indicates that 38% (n=48) of the respondents are in the Librarian, or Information Specialists, Researcher, and Analyst position. The "Director, Manager, Head Librarian" job title accounts for 25% (n=32) of the respondents. 20% (n=25) are Supervisors and 2% (n=2) are in the "Chief Information Officer, Vice President, Executive" position.

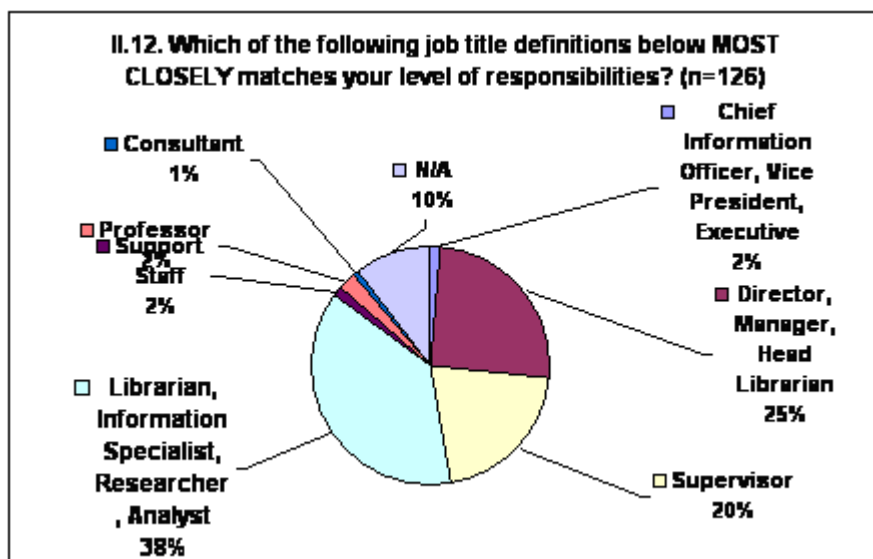


Figure 9. Job titles

When asked which areas reflect their responsibilities, 64% of the respondents (n=81) listed their responsibility area as librarian, 32% (n=98) as managerial, 2% (n=6) as IT, and 1% (n=4) as research and teaching, as shown in Figure 10 (QII13).

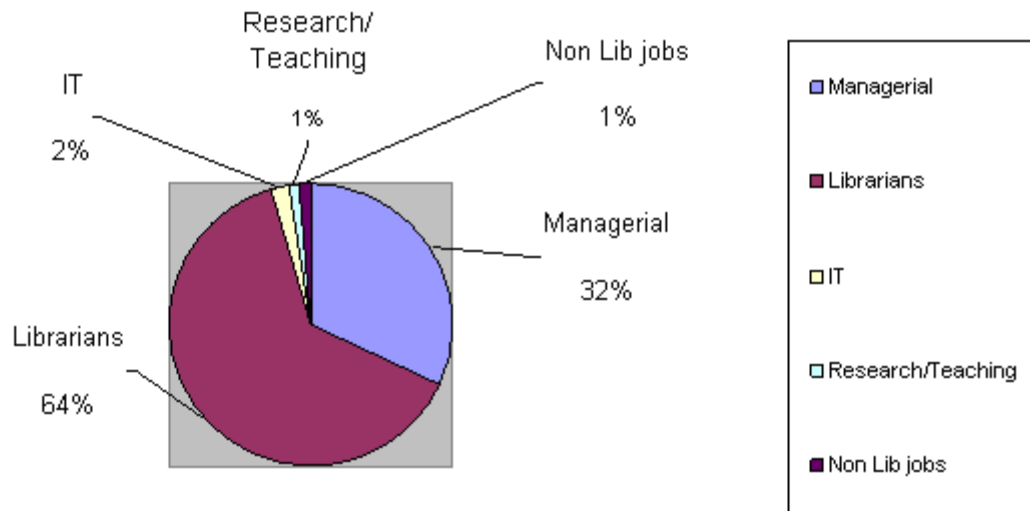


Figure 10. Responsibility areas

In their organization reporting relation, 21% of the respondents (n=27) indicated that they report to the Director of the organization, 7% (n=9) to the University Librarian, 34% (n=42) to the Head Librarian, 15% (n=19) to the Department Head, 3% (n=4) to Associate Dean of the library, 2% (n=2) to the Deputy Director, and 1% (n=1) to Contracting Officer as shown in Figure 11.

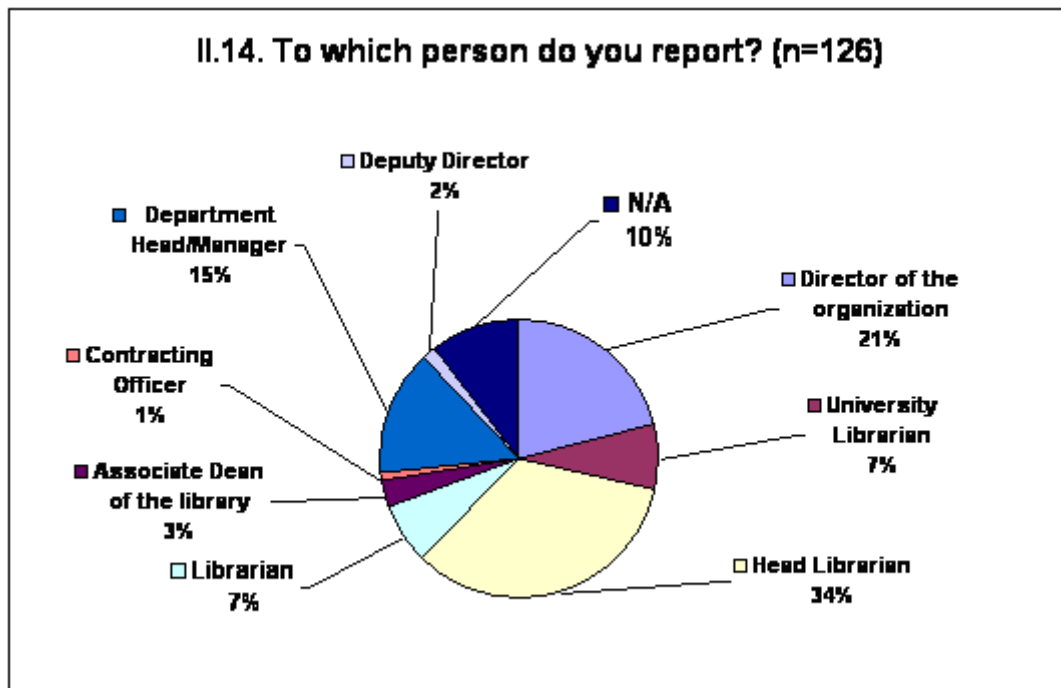


Figure 11. Reporting relations

As listed in Table 3, twenty-three respondents reached their highest library position as Department Head, seven as Head Librarian, nine as Senior Librarian, twenty-three as Librarian, ten as Director, and one as Co-director (IIQ18). This impressive list demonstrates many respondents have moved up to managerial positions.

<b>Position</b>	<b>Number of People</b>
Department Head	23
Assistant Director	2
Associate Director	1
Director	10
Co-director	1
Assistant Librarian	3
Associate Librarian	6
Librarian	23
Senior Librarian	9
Head Librarian	7
Assistant Manager	1
Coordinator	2
Assistant Professor	2
Associate Professor	1
Professor	2
N/A	34

Table 3. Highest library position respondents have reached

As shown in Figure 12, it has taken twenty-five years for 4% (n=3) of the respondents to reach their highest position after graduating from library school, 5% (n=4) over twenty years, 8% (n=6) over fifteen years, 15% (n=12) over ten years, 29% (n=23) over five years, and 39% (n=31) fewer than five years (IIQ19). In other words, it has taken fewer than ten years after graduation from library school for 68% (n=54) of the respondents to reach their highest position. The speed with which Chinese American librarians have advanced up their career ladders is encouraging.

**Part II. 19. How long (years) did it take you to reach the highest position after graduating from library school?**

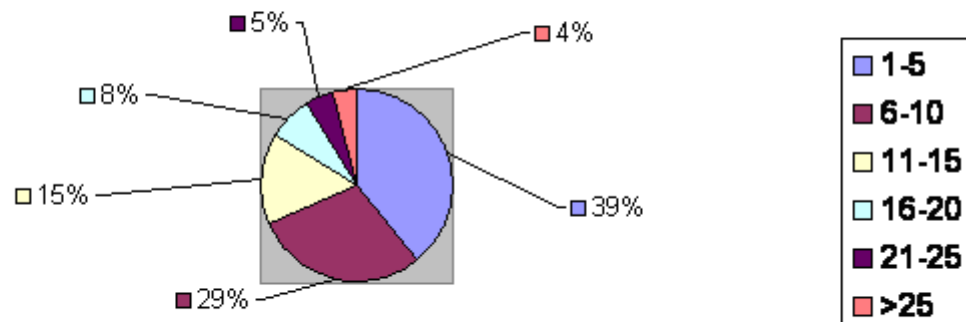


Figure 12. Years to reach the highest position after graduating from library school

Concerning Chinese American librarians' job assignments, the number of Chinese American librarians working in technical services was almost four times more than those in public services (Li, 1979). In Yang's profile (1996), they were nearly equally distributed, with the number in reference slightly higher. Also in Yang's profile, three-quarters of Chinese American librarians surveyed were in managerial positions, with a majority at the middle management level with job titles of branch manager or department head. The ratio of males to females in the highest level of administration continues to be unequal. While 29% (8 out of 28) of male Chinese American librarians are directors or deans, only 6% (8 out of 129) of females hold a similar title. Many Chinese American librarians perform highly skilled tasks in cataloging, reference, and other library operations with wholehearted devotion. But they are often bypassed when opportunities for promotion to management arise (Liu, 2000). Most of the foreign-born Chinese Americans who attain administrative positions have to utilize their linguistic competency to their best advantage in East Asian libraries. Very few Chinese Americans have reached top administration levels at academic or public libraries. Most Chinese Americans are at the middle management level and have difficulty in breaking the glass ceiling (Liu, 2000). Lack of opportunity to succeed often acts as a damper on their ambition and self-esteem. After decades of hard work, Chinese American librarians continue to stay in middle managerial positions. Only a small fraction of them has emerged to assume leadership (highest) positions in their institutions (Tan, 1998). The "glass ceiling" persists as a challenge for many of Chinese American librarians to break.

Concerned about the professional growth of Chinese American librarians, Tan (1998, 2004) asked what made it difficult for Chinese American librarians to make it to the top. She pointed out that this could be a complicated and sensitive question, with a variety of answers. To serve in any American library, Chinese American librarians undoubtedly possess competitive library skills and knowledge, along with the

required credentials, just like their fellow American librarians. One aspect of Chinese American librarianship that has not been discussed, but in some respects is paramount, is the rare presence of leadership. Like many other professions, the library field has been very reluctant to open up its leadership ranks to Chinese Americans. Howland (1999) echoed Tan's concern and claimed that the increased presence of librarians from diverse backgrounds in the profession has not been paralleled by a corresponding increase in their representation at upper management or directorship levels. He also pointed out that the reasons behind this phenomenon are countless, varied, and, to a certain degree, unexplainable. Even in libraries that have made a concerted effort to emphasize diversity awareness and training, one sees a lack of upward mobility beyond the lower management ranks (Howland, 1999). R. Roosevelt Thomas (1990), President of the American Institute for Managing Diversity, argued that minorities no longer need a boarding pass and that what they need is an upgrade. The problem is not getting them in at the entry level, but it is making better use of their potential at every level, especially in middle management and leadership positions.

Like others, Tan (1998, 2004), Liu (2000) and Wu (1979) believe that leadership is a reachable goal for Chinese American librarians. They strongly encouraged Chinese American librarians to actively pursue the leadership role. Julie Li Wu (1979), former Commissioner of the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, characterized Chinese American librarians as intelligence and diligence, and with ability to assimilate American culture. Outstanding performers in the profession have tremendous upward mobility. Chinese Americans must learn not to assume that if they work hard they will continue to climb the career ladder. To make the most of their potential, each Chinese American must develop personal objectives, expand job horizons, continue their education, and seek information about job possibilities both inside and outside an organization (Hsia, 1979). A few outstanding leaders like the legendary Ching-chih Chen, Hwa-Wei Lee, and Tze-chung Li are examples to follow.

It is beyond this article's scope to determine the reasons for the presumed situation where Chinese American librarians are under-represented in leadership roles.

##### *5. Value of Library Services*

Over half (59%, n=74) of the respondents rated the value of their library services as very high (IIQ15), followed by 25% (n=32) as valuable (see Figure 1).

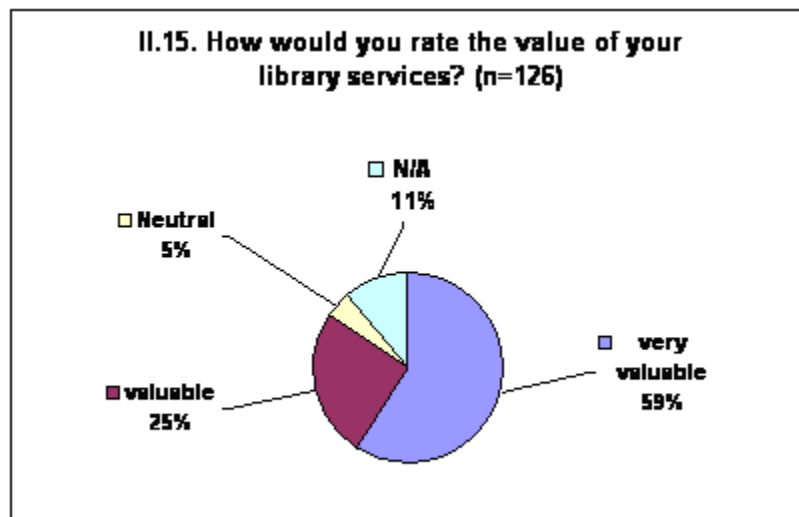


Figure 13. Value of the library services

Almost half (43%, n=53) of the respondents rated their users' usage of the library service as very good, followed by 35% (n=44) as good, and 6% (n=8) as neutral, and only 1% (n=1) as not very good, and 2% (3) as not good at all (IIQ20) (see Figure 14). Chinese American librarians were positive about their library services and the usage of patrons. The high percentage of Chinese American librarians regarding their library services as valuable or very valuable is consistent with the high satisfaction of Chinese American librarians in their work, which supports Brown's value theory (Brown, 2002a, 2002b).

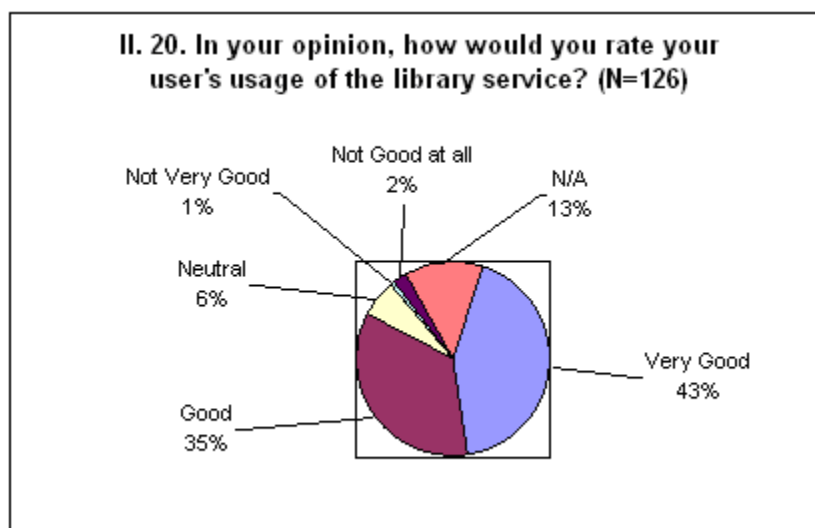


Figure 14. User's usage of the library service

## V. Conclusion

This article is intended to emphasize the importance of studying Chinese American librarians in the 21st century. The survey findings demonstrate that Chinese American librarians are valuable members in the library and information science fields. This

study attempts at a quantitative data analysis of the status quo of the Chinese American librarians with a view to promoting Chinese American librarianship in the 21st century.

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