

## Organizational Action Increases the Visibility of Chinese American Librarians

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*ABSTRACT: Many Chinese American librarians have made great contributions to the library and information science. In their achievements, creating, leading and participating in organizational actions are part of their experience and legacy. The skills and talents of Chinese American librarians are enhanced and extended through various kinds of organizational activities. Being active in various organizations is part of Chinese American librarians' story. This article looks back to how Chinese American librarians have worked together as a force and to the accomplishments they have made through collective efforts. The Chinese American Librarians Association is used as an example in the study, which is divided into three sub-sections: organization is for Chinese American librarians working together as a voice speaking for themselves, as a force fighting unfairness, promoting Chinese American communities and bridging cultures, and as a place for supporting and promoting Chinese American librarians' work. The stories of Chinese American librarians endorse the perception that Chinese American librarians need to have and support their own organizations. A positive image of Chinese American librarians as a whole can be achieved when they make collective efforts.*

Chinese American librarians have been living, studying and working in the United States for nearly a century. Individually, Chinese American librarians have made great contributions to the library and information science. One of their contributions to the profession is their building, leading and participation in various organizations for Chinese American librarians with restless enthusiasm. Setting up the goal of serving the Chinese American community and professional associations as one of their most important life goals is inextricable from the great achievements of many outstanding Chinese American librarians. By these contributions, they have made themselves a role model for later generations of Chinese American librarians.

### I. Organization as a Voice

The pioneers of Chinese American librarians know the uneasy history of Chinese librarians in the United States and they know that this kind of struggle is far from over. By their own experiences, they realize the importance of forming an organization for Chinese American librarians. The collective voice can carry much more weight than that of individuals'.

Chinese American Librarians Association (CALA), as an example, is a leading ethnic professional organization in the United States for Chinese American librarians. Together with other 20ish Chinese American librarians, Dr. Li Tze-chung founded the Mid-West Chinese American Librarians Association in Chicago in 1973. Three years later, it expanded to a national organization as Chinese American Librarians Association. In 1983, it was merged with the Chinese Librarians Association in California and retained its name (CALA, 2011). Since then, Chinese American librarians have their own representative organization. The goal of starting CALA, as envisioned by Dr. Li, is to bring together Chinese American librarians, to provide a forum for discussion of mutual interests, and to advance the professional and social status of Chinese American librarians (Li, 2004). In the past 40 years, CALA has become a representative voice for Chinese American librarians in the profession.

In September 1990, Helen Wang, Harriet Ying and Linda Tse, three Chinese American librarians representing CALA, attended Maryland Governor's Conference on Libraries and Information Services. The Conference lasted two days with the participation of 202 delegations representing librarians, library and education board members, government officials, and citizens. The three CALA members brought concerns from the Chinese community of the metropolitan Washington D.C. area to the Conference (Tse, 2004).

Representing Chinese American librarians and as one of the 22 organizations and an American Library Association (ALA) affiliate, CALA involved in the preparation for the 1991 White House Conference on Library and Information Service (WHCLIS). In this event, CALA sent the collective voice to the government for the multiculturalism in library services and the publishing industry. CALA issued a Position Paper emphasizing the importance of multiculturalism in library services and the publishing industry, and the Resolution on "Library services to cultural/ethnic minorities." (Seetoo, 2004)

As a voice of Chinese American librarians, CALA has held many conference programs in conjunction with ALA conferences. For example, in the recent ten years, some of the [CALA annual conference programs](#) were directly related to the interest of Chinese American librarians, "From the First Chinese-Exchange of Publication in 1869" (2000), "Chinese American and Other Ethnic Librarians Building Library Community" (2002), "Library Resources and Equal Access: Serving Chinese Americans in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" (2004), "Chinese American Librarians: Identity and Professional Development" (2006), "Global Outreach: A U.S.-China Experience" (2008), and "International Outreach and Leadership: The CALA 21<sup>ST</sup> Century Librarian Seminar Series Program" (2009). The significance of these programs is to send the voice of Chinese American librarians to the profession in national conferences, to present the role and contributions of Chinese American librarians, and to provide opportunities for Chinese American librarians to speak.

In 1997, CALA prepared a position paper "CALA and ALA: Partners for Goal 2000" to be included in the ALA booklet *Equal Voices, Many Choices: Ethnic Organizations Responding to ALA Goal 2000* and distributed in 1997 ALA annual conference.

In the first annual program of the Council on Diversity in 2011 ALA Annual Conference, CALA's representatives Shuyong Jiang and Haiwang Yuan told Chinese American librarians'

stories. They explained some Chinese traditions that have made Chinese American librarians different at work in certain aspects. Their speeches made the audience learn more about Chinese culture and thus contributed to the mutual understanding. Their speeches have also caught the attention of the reporter from *American Libraries*.

## **II. Organization as a Force**

### *1. Fight against Unfair Treatment*

According to Yang's 1996 job survey on Chinese American librarians in CALA, 96% of Chinese American librarians were born outside the United States (Yang, 1996). No recent data is found available. But it is estimated that this situation has changed little since. On the way to success, almost every Chinese American librarian has his or her stories of experiencing some kinds of hardship or prejudice. They all face the challenges to adjust to unfamiliar rules and work rituals while adapting in a new country.

Eugene Wu, an accomplished Chinese American librarian pioneer, told a story that occurred in late 1940s. When he told his supervisor that he was going to enroll in a library school, the latter became very concerned and asked whether he was sure he wanted to do so because she was afraid that he would not get a job offer after his graduation. Wu said that in that time it was really a question for Chinese American librarians whether they could find employment. When facing such questions, individuals are powerless. Today, the situation has been much improved. But the unfair treatments still exist in different ways. With the presence of an organization, individuals do not have to rattle the barrier and hardship alone each time they encounter it.

For example, at the end of 1970s, a Chinese American librarian filed a lawsuit against her institution, Towson State University, for being bypassed for promotion due to racial discrimination. She also wrote to CALA asking for help. CALA was therefore involved in this lawsuit. To help that Chinese American librarian, Dr. Hwa-wei Lee, then CALA president, had made a special trip to Baltimore to provide an expert testimony with his experience as the dean of Ohio University Libraries. The case was authenticated by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the Commission on Human Relations of Maryland. The result was in favor of that Chinese American librarian but was refused by Towson (Lee, 2004). Although the Chinese American librarian did not win at the court, she later received better treatment in the institution. A lesson was taught in this case: Chinese American librarians cannot be silent when there is unfair treatment, and a collective voice is much more supportive and stronger.

Now CALA has been listed with many other groups regularly receive the position vacancy announcements from many institutions. This not only gives Chinese American librarians more information on job hunting but also helps many Chinese students in the library school to find a job after graduation.

### *2. Support Chinese American Librarians at the National Level*

Before 1980s, there were few Chinese American librarians on ALA committees despite their hard work and outstanding achievements in their own institutions or local communities. The first

two Chinese American librarians elected to ALA Council were Dr. Ching-chih Chen and Dr. Hwa-wei Lee in 1970s. Nowadays, more Chinese American librarians have been elected to ALA Council or Council committees. Although the support not only came from CALA, the full support from CALA for their winning the election cannot be underestimated.

The achievements of Chinese American librarians in the profession may be recognized locally. However, bring their achievements to a wider range is not easy by only personal effort. With the support of organizations, their work can have more chances to be recognized at the national level. For example, Linda Tse, a Chinese American librarian, was the first Cultural Minorities Services librarian at Montgomery County Public Libraries (MCPL) in Maryland in 1986. She worked hard to serve the four largest target populations living in the county: Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Spanish-speaking populations. In 1987, her work received the recognition by ALA. She received the 1987 ALA Presidential Exemplary Program Award. As she said, this recognition was on the CALA recommendation list for the ALA Presidential Exemplary Program Awards.

### *3. Promote Chinese Topics and Literature*

Chinese literature authored by Chinese in North America is recognized here and there. Chinese American librarians are the most qualified group to compile a list of best books on Chinese topics or by authors of Chinese descent and issue awards to such authors. Individuals lack of enough strength to do this alone and sustain the work. Organized together, Chinese American librarians can do this well and add the sound credit to the list. In 1990, CALA Greater Mid-Atlantic Chapter published *China and Chinese Culture: a Selected Booklist to Promote a Better Understanding, Grades K-8*. It was welcomed by children's librarians in the area and distributed widely. Started around the new millennium, CALA established the Best Book Award Committee. The Award is to honor English or Chinese language books originally published in North America. Every year, the Committee makes a list of best books authored by Chinese Americans and awards the authors. This effort has made Chinese topics and literature and Chinese American authors more familiar to the library field in a collective way.

### *4. Bridge Cultures*

Building and maintaining the exchange for libraries and librarians between the United States and China, and between Mainland China and Taiwan, are a dream and year-long efforts for many Chinese American librarians. Individual Chinese American librarians' activities with libraries in Mainland China, Taiwan and other areas can be traced back to at least half century ago. However, together as a force, this kind of activities has showed a unique strength. Through collective efforts, this dream can be realized and expanded more widely.

Started in 1980s, CALA formally established professional connections with librarian groups in Mainland China, Taiwan, and other areas in the world. CALA sends delegations to various conferences and seminars in both Mainland China and Taiwan. In 1987, together with members from International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), CALA sent a delegation to Mainland China to attend the conference celebration of the new National Library of China in

Beijing. A year later, another CALA delegation was invited to present at the Conference of the National Central Library in Taiwan.

Linna C. Yu, CALA President (1998-1999), recalled that one of CALA events in her tenure was the “CALA Reaches across the Pacific” Conference. At that conference, it was the first time CALA had brought representatives from the National Library of China and Taiwan’s National Library Association together to a library academic meeting, although they were antagonistic toward each other, objecting to the each other’s claims as the rightful association for China (Yu, 2004)). Such work can only be afforded via the organizational effort.

As a co-organizer with China Society for Library Science, U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, the Library of Congress (LC), and ALA, CALA members attended the first China-U.S. Conference on Global Information Access in 1996. In 1997, CALA and the China Organizing Committee of IFLA co-sponsored the forum “Chinese American Librarians’ Activities in the Changing World”. Thirteen CALA members presented their papers at the forum. Both events were held in Beijing.

Now the international exchange has become an on-going item on CALA’s agenda. CALA has arranged for and participated in more international activities in recent years, such as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Librarian Seminar series, and joined the Institution of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) program “Think Globally, Act Globally.” These events have brought hundreds of Chinese American librarians and ALA colleagues to China and other areas and Chinese librarians to the United States for exchange and learning from each other. Recently, CALA has become a member of IFLA. Through such exchange, it opens the channel for communication and increases the understanding from each side. In these activities, Chinese American librarians have played important roles in improving understanding and exchanging professional knowledge with scholars and colleagues around the world. As a CALA senior member said, “We promote world understanding and peace through professional interaction and information/knowledge exchange.” (Yeh, 2004)

### *5. Share Responsibilities*

Chinese American librarians have actively participated in various kinds of assistant work for the disaster relief in the United States and the world over. When a disaster occurred, organizational efforts will be more helpful. In recent years, for disaster relief, CALA has called among its members and Chinese American librarians for donation. Through CALA, Chinese American librarians have donated almost \$4,000 to the IFLA Disaster Relief Fund for the Tsunami of Indonesia in 2004 (Tseng, Wu, Wen, Li & Ho, 2005, p. 8); raised approximately \$40,000 for the Hurricane Katrina affected areas in New Orleans, 2005 (Lee & Tseng, 2011, p. 4); sent over \$20,000 to the “5.12” Wenchuan Earthquake area in China, 2008; over \$6,000 to the “8.8” Typhoon Morakot affected area in Taiwan, 2009 (NCL, 2010, p. 3); and over \$500 to Joplin (MO) Tornado stricken area in 2011. This integrated action has enhanced the positive image of Chinese American librarians as a whole.

### III. Organization as a Place

Chinese American librarians need a place like “home” to be nurtured and fledged because they share many things in common. They have similar career aspirations, experiences, and barriers. Together, they are able to discuss work experiences and exchange professional knowledge. Through organizational activities, Chinese American librarians’ skills and talents are recognized and extended more broadly.

Through CALA, Chinese American librarians have a better chance to speak in ALA national conference programs or relevant international conferences. From 1995 to 2011, CALA annual program has brought a total of 45 Chinese/Asian librarians to speak in ALA conferences. If taking local chapters’ programs in to account, the total number of speakers will go beyond hundreds. These opportunities have beneficial to Chinese American librarians’ professional development. The local programs have given more chances to young Chinese American librarians and increased their confidence in practicing librarianship.

To ensure that Chinese American librarians retain the tradition and inherit the pioneers’ spirit working in American libraries, more Chinese American librarians and the younger generation need to be drawn to CALA. Many Chinese American library school students do not have enough finance support to attend ALA programs. CALA has developed some scholarships and grants to help these library school students. Each year, the CALA Scholarship Committee awards four scholarships, over \$2,000, to support 2-4 full-time library school students of Chinese nationality or decent who are enrolled in ALA-accredited LIS programs in North America. There are also funds and awards to support library school students’ research projects or travel to ALA programs. In addition, CALA has allocated funds to send younger Chinese American librarians to the ALA Emerging Leaders Program. Since 2009, CALA has supported more than 10 young librarians to attend the ALA Emerging Leaders Program, which has enriched their professional experiences.

With the experience and confidence gained from working for CALA, many Chinese American librarians are able to contribute more confidently in other organizations. For example, with her experience of working for CALA and with the network built through CALA with many library leaders around the country, Bessie K. Hahn has played many leadership roles later in the ALA’s Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and Library Administration and Management Association (LAMA) divisions. Representing CALA and APALA, Amy Seetoo has served on two of ALA’s Selection Committees and reviewed applications and interviewed candidates for the administrative positions of the ALA Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS) and Diversity Office. The experience of playing leadership role in CALA has increased the competence for many Chinese American librarians to assume higher management positions.

Many achievements would be much harder or not possible by individuals’ effort without organizational backup and support. Every great Chinese American librarian shines and is encouraged more or less in some organizational manner. Nowadays, with the foundation work laid by many Chinese American librarian pioneers, later generations have been enjoying the benefits. In the history of Chinese American librarians, organizations play an important role. Reviewing the achievements of Chinese American librarians is for better learning where Chinese American librarians have been, understanding unique identity and characteristics, and inheriting

the values of Chinese American librarians generation after generation. For the further development, Chinese American librarians need to join their own representative organization, to be one voice in the library profession, and to be a force as a whole in society. The organization should and can create a sense of belonging for Chinese American librarians and build a positive image of Chinese American librarians in the profession and communities. The identity and value of Chinese American librarians can only be enhanced and respected through concerted efforts.

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**Note:**

Based on a paper presented at the 5th International Conference of Institutes and Libraries for Chinese Overseas Studies, Vancouver, Canada, May 16-19, 2012.

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Submitted to CLIEJ on 9 August 2012.

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Zhao, Lisa. (2012). Organizational action increases the visibility of Chinese American librarians. *Chinese Librarianship: an International Electronic Journal*, 34. URL: <http://www.iclc.us/cliej/cl34zhao.pdf>

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