

# Asian Community Library

First in U.S.

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Oakland Public Library, Asian Community Library, Oakland, Calif. 94606

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■ The first Asian Community Library in the United States opened in Oakland in 1976 with the help of a \$300,000 federal LSCA grant. The library offers a popular collection of print and audiovisual materials in five Asian languages (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Pilipino, Vietnamese) and a special collection in English on Asian Americans and Asian history and

culture. There have been acquisition, cataloging, and political difficulties, but high circulation and positive response from the Asian community have earned the Asian Community Library a third year LSCA grant of \$50,000. Oakland Public Library is prepared to take over the Asian project's funding in FY 1978-79.

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IN March 1976 the first Asian Community Library in the United States opened its doors to the public. Funded by a two-year federal Library Services Construction Act grant, the library as a branch of Oakland Public Library offers library materials in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Pilipino, and Vietnamese. It also specializes in English language materials on Asia and Asian Americans. Prior to the library's existence, most of more than 50,000 Asian Americans residing in the Oakland Bay Area were unserved by the public library.

## Patrons

The target groups of the Asian Community Library include: 1) non-English-speaking Asian immigrants in need of recreational and informational reading

materials in their native languages, materials to assist them learn English and become acculturated to American life; 2) second to fifth generation Asian Americans in need of information on their cultural heritage and the Asian experience in America; and 3) non-Asians interested in Asian and Asian American subjects.

## The Library

The staff of the library consists of one librarian, two library assistants, and an audiovisual technician. These four are capable of covering the four major Asian languages—Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Pilipino—and have led the growth of the Asian Community Library. The collection now consists of 15,000 books, 32 newspapers, 100 magazines, 50 films, 20 filmstrips, 2 slide sets, 1000 records, 400 cassettes, and 40 videotapes. The library also has a bookmobile that carries paperbacks and magazines in the Asian and English languages to child care centers, public schools, adult educational centers,

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This paper is one of several papers in a series planned by the SLA Committee on Positive Action for Minority Groups.

community agencies, and shopping centers on a regular basis.

The library's audiovisual collection of records, cassettes, films, filmstrips, slides, and videotapes serve as an additional source of recreational and educational materials for the target groups. Except for the videotapes, all audiovisual materials circulate. Popular records and cassettes in the Asian languages are purchased locally and make up 27% of the branch circulation. The staff is still previewing films and has just begun circulating them. They have found that educational films on Asia, geared for classroom use, are most disappointing. The majority of these films are out of date, unimaginative, condescending, or inaccurate. Because there are few free sources for films in the Bay Area, especially films on Asian subjects, it is expected that the library's film collection will be extremely popular.

The staff is continuing to videotape television and in-house programs of interest to the library's target group. The purpose is to build up a resource collection on Asia and Asian Americans to be used in the library as part of library-sponsored programs to the public. What has been videotaped is often unavailable in other mediums such as film.

Each Saturday the library sponsors a children's program of storytelling, films, and crafts. Each month a program featuring a speaker, a film, or a cultural presentation is planned for the public. Past programs have included a Chinese shadow puppet show, a Korean classic film, an Asian American poetry reading, celebration of the Pilipino "Bonafacio Day," and a film on China.

One difficulty encountered in dealing with the Asian language collection is cataloging. The original proposal establishing the library called for the staff to do the necessary cataloging. However, it was felt that staff time was better spent on materials selection and direct services in the branch library and on the Asian bookmobile. On the other hand, the staff recognized the need for an organized and accessible collection. The solution was to hire a trilingual cataloger with project consultant funds.

## Materials Acquisition

Acquiring materials for non-English speaking Asian immigrants has proved most difficult. Only limited quantities of materials in the Asian languages are available in local bookstores. For the large quantities the library wishes to purchase, the staff found it economically advantageous to buy from overseas dealers, despite the delays. Among the difficulties encountered were communicating and setting up accounts, ordering from catalogs, and waiting six weeks for materials to arrive by ship.

The staff particularly had problems acquiring Pilipino and Vietnamese materials. There is little available in the United States at reasonable prices. Materials available from the Philippines are closely censored by the government and often questionable in terms of the quality of the paper and durability. As for Vietnamese materials, there has been no export of books from Vietnam since the end of the Indo-Chinese conflict.

In terms of walking a neutral political line, the staff must remember the nationalistic sensitivities of the Asian American communities. Materials and programs in the library must reflect all sides of political stands: Mainland China versus Taiwan; North Korea versus South Korea; martial law versus anti-martial law in the Philippines; North Vietnam versus South Vietnam.

To acquire materials on Asian history and culture in English poses no difficulties; much is available from American publishers. The problem is selection. Staff librarians rely on their own knowledge, the review media, and consult other librarians and teachers knowledgeable on the subject.

However, there is a dearth of acceptable materials on the Asian American experience. Most of the published materials available are written by white missionaries or scholars with a distorted view of Asian American history. New works written from an Asian American perspective are slowly being published, but usually by small presses with limited budgets which allow for little publicity or

distribution. Because many colleges, universities, and public schools in the Bay Area are offering Asian American Studies courses and because there is a large concentration of Asian Americans in the library's vicinity, the staff has sought to build up its Asian American collection by buying almost everything in print and by keeping informed of new publications through personal contacts, the Asian American media, and local stores specializing in Asian American materials. This collection is supplemented by a vertical file of news clippings, magazine articles, student papers, and pamphlets.

### **Community Involvement**

The library's present staff is unique in that each member takes an active, personal interest in the Asian American community. Through their involvement and contacts in the community, they are able to assess personally the library needs of the target group. They are also able to provide information and referral services to resources in the community, such as where to find employment assistance, language classes, and social services.

Another means of community contact is the Asian Community Library's Community Advisory Committee, composed of 20 individuals representing community agencies and the interests of the target group. The committee meets monthly with

staff members to assist on materials development and program planning.

The staff has found that, by far, the best method of assessing needs is direct contact with patrons on the bookmobile, in the library, and at library programs. Much can be learned by responding to the criticisms and suggestions of patrons. Traditionally, Asians are educationally oriented. With adequate publicity, the staff has found it easy to draw patrons to the library. Through interpersonal rapport, the staff has been successful in learning of gaps in the collection and of necessary additional services.

High circulation and positive response from the Asian community this past year has convinced the California State Library to award the project additional third-year funding of \$50,000.00, which will allow the library to hire additional staff of a half-time children's librarian, a half-time cataloger, and a half-time Vietnamese library assistant. Plans have been made to use this third year to increase the library's collection and establish a stable group of patrons for the library, so that Oakland Public Library will be able to easily take over the project financially in the fourth year.

*Received for review Jun 15, 1977.  
Manuscript accepted for publication Nov 1, 1977.*



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