



## Unlocking the Vault: Strategic Collaborations between Area Studies and Special Collections

Ruthann E. Mowry and Bing Wang

### Abstract:

The Rare Book & Manuscript Library (RBML) at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign houses one of the largest public university collections of rare books and manuscripts in the United States. Despite its vast and diverse holdings, certain areas of the collection, particularly Chinese-language materials, have been historically underutilized due to language barriers and the need for specialized knowledge. This article advocates for enhanced collaboration between special collections and area studies librarians to improve access and increase use of these resources. It examines the RBML's challenges with cataloging and utilization of Chinese materials and proposes initiatives, including enriched public programming, curated exhibitions, targeted instructional sessions, and increased promotional efforts. These initiatives are designed to align with the University of Illinois's strategic goals of inclusivity, global engagement, and academic excellence. Central to this endeavor is the collaboration with the Chinese Studies Librarian, whose knowledge and expertise is crucial in understanding and promoting these resources. The article underscores the significance of these initiatives in fully leveraging special collections and area studies, fostering the collection's utilization, study, and appreciation by both local and global audiences. This project also aims to present an example for collaborations between special collections and area studies specialists within a given university.

### To cite this article:

Mowry, R. E. & Wang, B. (2024). Unlocking the Vault: Strategic Collaborations between Area Studies and Special Collections. *International Journal of Librarianship*, 9(4), 27-35. <https://doi.org/10.23974/ijol.2024.vol9.4.398>

### To submit your article to this journal:

Go to <https://ojs.calajol.org/index.php/ijol/about/submissions>

---

## **Unlocking the Vault: Strategic Collaborations between Area Studies and Special Collections**

Ruthann E. Mowry and Bing Wang  
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, United States

### **ABSTRACT**

The Rare Book & Manuscript Library (RBML) at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign houses one of the largest public university collections of rare books and manuscripts in the United States. Despite its vast and diverse holdings, certain areas of the collection, particularly Chinese-language materials, have been historically underutilized due to language barriers and the need for specialized knowledge. This article advocates for enhanced collaboration between special collections and area studies librarians to improve access and increase use of these resources. It examines the RBML's challenges with cataloging and utilization of Chinese materials and proposes initiatives, including enriched public programming, curated exhibitions, targeted instructional sessions, and increased promotional efforts. These initiatives are designed to align with the University of Illinois's strategic goals of inclusivity, global engagement, and academic excellence. Central to this endeavor is the collaboration with the Chinese Studies Librarian, whose knowledge and expertise is crucial in understanding and promoting these resources. The article underscores the significance of these initiatives in fully leveraging special collections and area studies, fostering the collection's utilization, study, and appreciation by both local and global audiences. This project also aims to present an example for collaborations between special collections and area studies specialists within a given university.

**Keywords:** Special Collections, Distinctive Collections, Area Studies, Chinese-language materials, Library Collaboration

### **INTRODUCTION**

In an age where the digital revolution has made information more accessible than ever, the treasures of special collections libraries retain their irreplaceable significance. At the heart of these collections are rare and valuable materials that provide a tangible connection to the past, offering unparalleled opportunities for research, education, and cultural enrichment. Yet, these resources often remain underutilized, particularly when language barriers and specialized knowledge requirements obscure their accessibility. The Rare Book & Manuscript Library (RBML) at the

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign provides an example of this challenge and opportunity.<sup>1</sup> Despite its vast and diverse holdings, certain areas of the collection, such as the Chinese-language materials, have been historically marginalized. Special collections can significantly benefit from a closer collaboration with international and area studies librarians. By leveraging the specialized knowledge and language skills of these professionals, special collections can enhance the accessibility and use of materials that have been underused and rarely accessed. This collaboration not only enriches the collection but also aligns with broader strategic goals, including those related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and access.

The collaborative efforts of the Chinese-studies librarian and a special collections curator highlight the transformative potential of such partnerships. By addressing the language and knowledge barriers, RBML is fulfilling its mission of making its collection a part of the public trust and a repository for shared cultural heritage. Moreover, these collaborative efforts are in harmony with the strategic goals of the University of Illinois, which emphasize the importance of inclusivity, global engagement, and academic excellence. In the following sections, we explore the RBML's Chinese-language materials in detail, examine the challenges faced in making these materials accessible, and propose collaborative initiatives to overcome the obstacles. This case study demonstrates how strategic collaborations can unlock the full potential of special collections, ensuring that these invaluable resources are preserved, studied, and appreciated by a global audience.

## BACKGROUND

The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign is home to a large and diverse academic community, consisting of over 35,000 undergraduate students, 20,500 graduate students, and approximately 3,000 faculty members. In the 2023–2024 academic year alone, the institution welcomed 1,087 new international students from 59 countries. The RBML at the University stands as one of the premier special collections repositories in the United States. Housing just under 500,000 volumes and two miles of archival material, it boasts one of the largest public university collections of rare books and manuscripts in the United States. The RBML's collection spans an extraordinarily wide range of subjects and periods, although it is notably American- and Euro-centric. The RBML values its role as a steward for the shared cultural heritage material in its collections and is committed to ensuring that these materials remain accessible to scholars, students, and the general public alike.

One of the main reasons for addressing the disparities with the Chinese-language materials is to ensure that attention is brought to an underutilized collection. A collaboration between the Chinese subject area librarian and special collections promotes community engagement by reaching an audience interested in the subject matter as well as fostering connections and collaborations. Additionally, the collaboration supports multidisciplinary research by highlighting resources that can be utilized across various fields of study. It contributes to the educational enrichment of both students and community members by providing access to unique and insightful

---

<sup>1</sup> We extend our gratitude to Yung-hui Chou, a graduate student in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, for her invaluable assistance in surveying and identifying Chinese language materials housed at the Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

materials. Furthermore, the collaboration aims to fill existing research gaps by encouraging the use of these underutilized resources as well as promoting inclusivity by ensuring that students and other users can see themselves and their cultural heritage reflected in the collection.

As of this writing, the RBML holds about 75 cataloged Chinese-language items.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that this does not include all of RBML's Chinese-language material, but rather just the items that have been cataloged enough to have a language code applied and have the correct language code applied. The main issue we faced was the lack of complete catalog records and the inability to easily search for the Chinese-language items in the Library catalog. Many of the records do not conform to current cataloging standards for transliterating titles, as they employ the Wade–Giles romanization system.<sup>3</sup> This results in a considerable amount of confusion and inconvenience for all parties involved, sometimes rendering the items nearly impossible to find.

Access to the Chinese-language materials is often impeded by language and cultural barriers. Curators with limited expertise and specialization struggle to identify and utilize Chinese-language materials, resulting in lower circulation compared to more familiar items in the collection. Consequently, a significant portion of these materials receive minimal viewership. Accurately cataloging these items is also challenging due to unfamiliarity with the language, leading to incomplete, minimally informative, or even incorrect records. This limitation impacts the discoverability and utilization of these materials, as curators and researchers may struggle with partially understood contents. Furthermore, a majority of the items are under-utilized due to a lack of knowledge about the subject matter. This underutilization stems not only from language barriers but also from gaps in subject-specific expertise among both curators and potential users. Many of these materials encompass specialized fields such as classical Chinese literature, historical texts, and scientific treatises, which require a deep understanding of the context and content to fully appreciate their significance. Without sufficient expertise, these rich resources can be overlooked or misunderstood.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic libraries are often under pressure to improve services and accessibility to materials all while maintaining current levels of staffing and workloads. A solution posited by numerous scholars, discussed below, is a collaboration between special collections and area studies, which creates a symbiotic relationship that allows for both parties to optimize the accessibility, utilization, and preservation of unique primary source materials. By fostering interdisciplinary partnerships and embracing innovative methodologies, libraries can further position themselves as pivotal hubs for scholarly engagement and intellectual inquiry.

The predicament faced by the RBML's Chinese-language materials demonstrates the systemic nature of this issue across special collections institutions. Yaco, Brown, and Konrad

---

<sup>2</sup> We extend our gratitude to Chloe Ottenhoff, the Rare Book & Manuscript Library Cataloging Coordinator, for compiling the reports that were used for this project.

<sup>3</sup> Wade–Giles, a romanization system for Mandarin Chinese developed in the nineteenth century, has gradually been supplanted by the Pinyin romanization system since the 1980s. In 1986, the United Nations adopted Pinyin as the official romanization for Chinese, establishing it as the de-facto internationally-recognized system of romanization.

(2016) advocate for using digital tools to enhance the discoverability and utilization of specialized primary source holdings in higher education. Their argument emphasizes the imperative for special collections librarians to embrace innovative technologies, such as data mining tools, to promote collections and address underutilization challenges. They are not alone in suggesting that the path forward for special collections is through collaborations. Dreyer (2022) argues that special collections are becoming increasingly vital in distinguishing libraries. Special collections librarians need to adapt new technologies and partnerships with scholars to maintain relevance. This means offering both physical and digital access to materials and updating research skills to include digital literacy. Expanding on Dreyer's proposition, we advocate for extending partnerships to subject area librarians, enhancing the utilization of unique collections through interdisciplinary collaborations, which is discussed in further detail below.

Carter and Whittaker (2015) point out that "...area studies collections have developed as specialized accumulations of knowledge united by language, geographic region, cultural resonance, or all three." (pp. 354) This evolution underscores the importance of collaboration in research libraries. As liaison roles develop, librarians increasingly rely on partnerships and interdisciplinary collaboration to enhance access to unique materials and enrich scholarly endeavors. Carter and Whittaker (2015) support collaborations between special collections and area studies as well as their integration within academic libraries to maximize impact. They underscore the shared challenges faced by special and area-studies collections and advocate for methods to enhance accessibility and preservation, such as digitization. An article by Birrell and Strong (2014) takes the collaboration one step further and delves into the transformative potential of cross-departmental collaboration in special collections management, showcasing the successful outcomes of interdisciplinary partnerships in addressing operational challenges and promoting user-centered approaches. Birrell and Strong (2014) write: "...[the project] demonstrated the benefits of establishing real working relationships across departments; by creating opportunities to encourage staff members in each department to contribute their skills and expertise in new ways, we can create more meaningful end results."(pp.5) Cooper and Schonfield (2017) illuminate the symbiotic relationship between subject area librarians and special collections, advocating for collaborative endeavors focused on research and learning that blend subject-specific expertise with primary source holdings. Cooper and Schonfield contend that such alliances foster more robust public programming and research services, amplifying the educational and scholarly impact of these resources. Rosenkranz, Burrow, and Crane (2016) echo this type of collaboration by introducing a program at their institution, jointly designed by subject area specialists and special collections staff. The program, called Primary Source Lab series, emphasizes the pivotal role of collaborative efforts, aiming to assist graduate students with accessing primary sources in a more holistic setting. Their insights underscore the transformative potential inherent in interdisciplinary collaborations and provide a model for facilitating more nuanced access and utilization of primary source materials.

Collaborations between special collections and area studies are not just beneficial, but also essential for the future of academic libraries. The collective insights from the scholars mentioned above demonstrate that through innovative approaches and the breaking down of traditional silos, libraries can position themselves as central to academic and scholarly communities, ensuring that their unique resources are fully utilized and appreciated. This collaborative model not only

addresses current underutilization, but also sets a precedent for future initiatives, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive, dynamic, and resourceful academic environment.

## CURRENT HOLDINGS AND PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT DIRECTIONS

As mentioned previously, the RBML holds about 75 cataloged titles written in Chinese, all of which were published from the Ming (1368–1644) dynasty onwards. This collection encompasses original publications and reprints of earlier works. The genres and subjects represented include bibliographical guides such as the *Series of Han and Wei Books* (漢魏叢書); literary anthologies like *Collections of Poems by Oubei* (甌北詩鈔); classic novels including *The Golden Lotus* (金瓶梅詞話) and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三國志演義); theatrical texts like *Tale of the Pipa* (琵琶記); reference materials such as the *Kangxi Dictionary* (康熙字典); and imperial commissions exemplified by *Comprehensive Treatises to All Seasons* (欽定授時通攷). While the majority of the collection presents complete sets of these titles, the RBML holds only four volumes of the extensive one hundred and twenty-volume set of *The Celebration of the Emperor's Birthday* (萬壽盛典).

Despite its limited size, this subset serves as a foundational base for the expansion of RBML's Chinese literary collections. Given its current strength, priority will be given to acquiring titles related to themes in Chinese literature, agriculture, and imperial printmaking.

Chinese literature is a primary focus within both the University Library and the RBML collections. Notably, the inclusion of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, one of China's Four Great Classical Novels, underscores the value of obtaining the remaining titles, such as *Journey to the West* (西遊記), *Water Margin* (水滸傳), and *Dream of the Red Chamber* (紅樓夢), as well as other seminal works like *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (聊齋誌異) and *The Scholars* (儒林外史). Additionally, the presence of *Tale of the Pipa*, a renowned Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) opera, suggests the potential for enriching the collection with additional significant works of this genre from the era, including *Romance of the Western Chamber* (西廂記).

In the second instance, the RBML possesses *Comprehensive Treatises to All Seasons*, an extensive agricultural manual commissioned during the Qianlong period (r. 1735–1796) of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Completed in 1741, the treatise is adorned with intricate illustrations and was designed to regularize fundamental agricultural practices and techniques to boost productivity throughout the empire. The University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign is a land-grant institution and the University's College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES) is globally renowned for its excellence in agricultural studies. Collections housed across the University also demonstrate a strong commitment to this field. Enhancing the RBML's collection with significant historical Chinese agricultural materials would enrich the University Library's offerings and further solidify its dedication to serving as a bridge between historical knowledge and modern agricultural education and practices. Notable among potential acquisitions are *Chen Fu's Treatise on Agriculture* (陳勇農書) and *Complete Collection on Agriculture* (農政全書). Such additions would enhance both the RBML and the University Library's support for interdisciplinary and cross-geographical research in agricultural history and techniques.

Lastly, *The Celebration of the Emperor's Birthday* commemorates Emperor Kangxi's (r. 1661–1722) sixtieth birthday in 1713. Created between 1714 and 1715, this elaborate set consists of 120 volumes that meticulously document the celebratory events and extol the emperor's virtues of benevolence. The RBML possesses four volumes from this set featuring illustrations that capture the festive activities and decorations that adorned the capital, accompanied by textual descriptions that enhance the visual experience. This object exemplifies the artistic achievement in Chinese imperial printmaking during the Qing dynasty. Acquiring additional works such as *Imperial Drawings of Tilling and Weaving* (御製耕織圖) and *Illustrated Explications of the Cultivation of Rectitude* (養正圖解) would further highlight and expand the RBML's collection, enriching its resources and supporting a broader range of scholarly inquiries. The acquisition of such works will also foster scholarly interest and contribute to generating new knowledge regarding a wide range of research areas related to Chinese visual arts and culture.

## METADATA IMPROVEMENT

In addition to collection development, the authors will collaborate with the RBML Cataloging Coordinator to ensure the accuracy of catalog records for Chinese-language items and their alignment with current library cataloging standards. These improvements, assisted by the subject knowledge from the Chinese Studies Librarian, will involve detailed modifications across several cataloging fields to enhance both the accuracy and depth of the catalog metadata. The revised and improved records will include comprehensive details as below:

- Title Information: update the original title, any alternative or widely recognized titles, transliterations, and English translations.
- Dates: records, spanning various fields, will document both the initial publication date of the title or the date of the earliest known copy, and the publication date of the copy held by the RBML, offering a more comprehensive historical context.
- Contributor Information: enhanced records will detail the names and birth, death, or active dates of authors, editors, and other contributors such as engravers or illustrators.
- Subject and Genre Classification: entries will clearly define the subject matter and genre of the item, providing a clearer understanding of its thematic and stylistic categorization.
- Publishing Details: information about the publisher and the place of publication will be meticulously updated.
- Physical Description: details regarding the format and extent of the item will be recorded to assist in the physical handling and conservation efforts and enhance user understanding of the item's physical dimensions and scope.
- Content Summary: a concise summary of the content will be provided in both English and Chinese, offering bilingual insights to accommodate a diverse audience.

These enhancements aim to improve the accessibility and usability of the RBML's catalog for patrons and researchers, ensuring that the resources are comprehensively documented and readily available in a searchable format.

Several strategies are adopted with the aim to enhance the visibility and usage of the collection. One effective approach involves the inclusion of alternative titles to broaden accessibility. For example, the work known as *Comprehensive Treatises to All Seasons* is

originally titled 欽定授時通攷, with the last character 攷 being a variant of the more commonly used 考. By incorporating 考 as an alternative title in place of the less common character, it will increase the likelihood that the item will appear in search results.

Additionally, the assessment project will convert the Wade-Giles transliteration into the Pinyin romanization system, which is recognized and adopted by international organizations including the United Nations and the Library of Congress. For instance, the RBML holds a Qing dynasty reprint of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三國志演義). Instead of using the Pinyin system to transliterate the titles as San guo zhi yan yi, the current record transliterates the title as San kuochih (yenni), making it difficult to locate the book in the system by searching for its transliteration.

Furthermore, providing bilingual information not only enhances visibility of the collection, but also fosters the creation of new knowledge. Offering summaries in both English and the original language enables and encourages engagement from patrons who have basic or limited language skills. This is particularly beneficial for collections primarily containing graphical content, such as *The Celebration of the Emperor's Birthday*. These collections can be appreciated by patrons with varying levels of language proficiency, showcasing the intricate artistic skills depicted in the works. This approach not only cultivates potential research interest, but also facilitates the generation of new scholarly insights, bridging diverse academic interests and backgrounds.

Overall, these enhancements will significantly improve accessibility to the RBML collections and contribute to the academic community by broadening the scope of engagement and research possibilities. Bilingual information will also lower the barriers for cross-cultural understanding and appreciation, reaffirming both the RBML's and the University Library's commitment to inclusivity. It is also important to foreground the irreplaceable value in users being able to see themselves and their native language reflected in not just the catalog record, but the collection itself. This is essential to promote equity, inclusivity, and diversity in special collections.

## NEXT STEPS

The next step for the RBML's Chinese-language materials involves a multifaceted approach centered on enhanced public programming, digital exhibits, targeted instructional sessions, and robust promotional activities. We will be moving forward with a multi-pronged approach to instruction. The first stage will be designing targeted classes, such as Chinese culture, history, and literature, for instructors who would be interested in incorporating Chinese-language primary sources into their curriculum. These sessions will be developed in collaboration with instructors and tailored to the specific needs of courses and research projects. By providing hands-on opportunities to work with primary sources, these instructional sessions will enhance the academic experience and encourage the use of these materials in scholarly pursuits. Once we have established the teaching precedent, we will create a program intended to "teach the teacher" how to provide primary source instruction with materials in an unfamiliar language. The main objective is to create a resource that primary source instructors can access that will allow them to better access and use material in their own collections.



Additionally, we will focus on generating public programming specifically designed around the Chinese-language materials and in conjunction with the Chinese Studies Librarian. The programming will feature material from the collection in order to engage a diverse audience, including students, faculty, researchers, and the general public, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of the materials. We will develop a physical exhibit in the RBML as well as a digital exhibit that showcases the Chinese-language materials, will further enhance visibility, and will be designed to highlight the historical, cultural, and academic value of the items, offering interpretive content that makes the materials accessible to a broad audience. We will also organize public events to feature the Chinese-language materials. These events may include scholarly lectures, open houses, or interactive workshops. The aim is to integrate these materials into the RBML's programming, ensuring they are actively utilized and appreciated by a diverse audience. By showcasing the collection through various formats, we plan to engage students, faculty, researchers, and the general public, fostering a deeper connection with the material.

The approaches outlined here will not only elevate the visibility and use of the Chinese-language materials at the RBML, but also set a precedent for integrating underutilized collections, particularly where curatorial staff lack linguistic or subject expertise, into broader academic and community contexts. By fostering collaborative partnerships with subject area librarians and actively engaging the material for promotion and engagement, the RBML can transform the accessibility and appreciation of its unique holdings. These efforts will enrich the educational experience for students and community members alike, support multidisciplinary research, and promote inclusivity within the library's offerings. Moreover, these initiatives will bridge research gaps and highlight the global significance of the RBML's collections, ensuring that they contribute to a diverse academic discourse.

## CONCLUSION

The assessment project presented in this article underscores a collaborative approach towards enhancing the accessibility and use of the Chinese-language materials housed at the RBML. The importance of this type of collaboration lies in the ability to better access the campus community as well as the larger community. Furthermore, the innovation of this collaboration is the demonstration of what asking for help looks like. As demonstrated by several scholarly articles, area studies librarians are facing issues of relevancy and special collections librarians are facing staffing issues and barriers to accessibility, such as languages. Together, special collections and area studies can improve the accessibility and visibility of unique materials, enhancing their scholarly and educational impact. By leveraging the expertise of both areas, libraries can create more comprehensive and engaging programming, foster interdisciplinary research, and provide enriched learning experiences for students and the community. Moving forward, the continued expansion of the RBML's collections as well as the strengthening of partnerships with subject area specialists will play a pivotal role in advancing scholarly research and promoting cross-cultural understanding. This aligns with the broader goals of the University of Illinois to support academic excellence and global engagement. In essence, this project presents a model for other collections and units. The collaboration discussed is not just about enhancing collections, but is fundamentally about enriching the depth and breadth of academic and cultural discourse, ensuring that these invaluable resources are preserved, studied, and appreciated far into the future.

## References

- Birrell, L., & Strong, M. (2014). Partners in discovery: Collaboration in special collections. *Archival Practice*, 1(2).
- Carter, L. R., & Whittaker, B. M. (2015). Area studies and special collections: Shared challenges, shared strength. *Portal - Libraries and the Academy*, 15(2), 353–373. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2015.0017>
- Cooper, D., & Schonfeld, R. C. (2017). Rethinking liaison programs for the humanities. *ITHAKA S+R*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep49520>
- Dreyer, R. (2022). Refworld: Future frontiers for special collections libraries. *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 110(3), 257–274.
- Goldsmith, M. U. D., & Fonseca, A. J. (2014). Using special collections materials and creating learning centers to engage the community: Historic instruments, films, tools, and toys. <https://doi.org/10.1533/9781780634685.133>
- Jaguszewski, J. M., & Williams, K. (2013). *New roles for new times: Transforming liaison roles in research libraries* (p. 17). Association of Research Libraries. <https://www.arl.org/resources/new-roles-for-new-times-transforming-liaison-roles-in-research-libraries/>
- Rosenkranz, A., Burrow, G., & Crane, L. L. (2016). Developing a primary source lab series: A collaboration between special collections and subject collections librarians. In K. Totleben & L. Birrell (Eds.), *Collaborating for impact: Special collections and liaison librarian partnerships* (pp. 163–186). ACRL/ALA.
- Rossmann, J. J. (2022). Changing attitudes toward access to special collections. *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 110(3), 127–150.
- Liu, X. (2010). Discussion about subject librarian system and special collection library in the academic library. *Journal of Library and Information Sciences in Agriculture*.
- Yaco, S., Brown, C., & Konrad, L. (2016). Linking Special Collections to Classrooms: A Curriculum-to-Collection Crosswalk. *The American Archivist*, 79(2), 417–437.
- Luo, Y. (2013). Humanistic quality education of subject librarian under vision of joint development of subject service and special collections. *Journal of Guangdong Ocean University*, 33(2), 89–92.

---

## About the authors

Ruthann E. Mowry is a Curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts at the Rare Book & Manuscript Library, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Ruthann holds an MLIS with an emphasis on special collections, complemented by a Master's degree in Ancient History Language Acquisition. They seek to democratize access to special collections.

Bing Wang, Ph.D. in Art History, is the Chinese Studies Librarian and Assistant Professor at the International and Area Studies Library, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She oversees collections and materials related to China, Chinese, and Chinese diaspora.