Interview with Mr. Billy Tak Hoi Leung, Functional Head of Public Access and Reference Unit University of Macau (China)

Introduction

The University of Macau was founded in 1981 as a private university called the University of East Asia. After thirty six years, the University has made outstanding contributions in teaching, research, and community services. Since its establishment, the University has trained tens of thousands of students to serve all society sectors.

The Wu Yee Sun Library of the University of Macau has become the largest library with the most extensive collection in Macau. The library is committed to integrating technology into traditional library services. To support development in teaching and research, the library also strives to create open learning space, bringing new learning experiences to teachers and students. This innovative exploration has brought about similar improvements to higher education systems in neighboring areas.
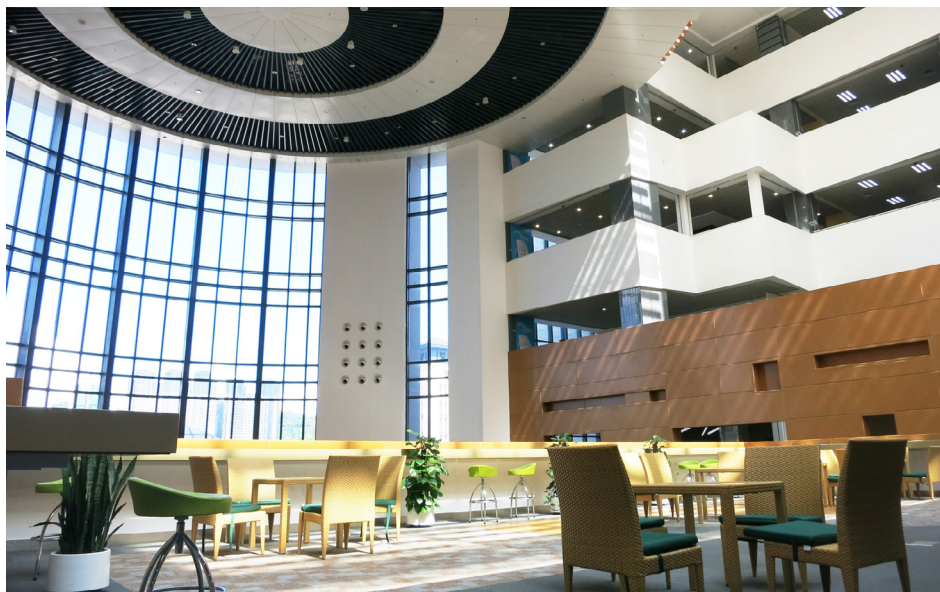

Mr. Billy Tak Hoi Leung – University of Macau

Mr. Billy Tak Hoi Leung is Functional Head of Public Access and Reference Unit at the University and Vice Director of the Macao Library and Information Management Association. (Currently, he is Assistant University Librarian). He was interviewed by Qianxiu Liu from the Graduate School of Library, Information and Media Studies, University of Tsukuba. The piece was co-authored with Jiawen Wang, Jian Zhou and Dickson Chiu from the Faculty of Education, The University of Hong Kong.

Liu Qianxiu – University of Tsukuba

University of Macau library - first floor

Here, Mr Billy Leung shares the valuable experience he has accumulated over the past thirty years, as well as his expectations for the future development of the library.

Liu Qianxiu (LQ): Can you introduce yourself first? Please tell us more about your career.

Billy Leung (BL): I first joined the library of the University of Macau in 1984. During this period I worked at the University Publications Center and in library administration, for instance, as the Secretary of the Library Committee and in personnel management… I joined the University of Macau Library again in 1988 and have been engaged in cataloging, acquisitions, and circulation since. In 2000, I founded the Reference and Library Instruction Unit (later renamed Public Access and Reference Unit) and then shifted the focus of my work to user services.

LQ: Why and how did you choose to become a reference librarian?

BL: Actually, it was very accidental. The library was short of staff. I applied for a job and was lucky enough to be employed. The library had only eight librarians then and the total number of students was about 300… The University of Macau's predecessor was an open college, which provided further education for

the public to obtain a degree. Therefore, I received a degree in Journalism and Communication during my employment. After graduation, I was engaged in the newspaper industry… six months later, I returned to the library in 1988. After that, I received a Bachelor's Degree in Chinese Studies from South China Normal University and a Master's Degree in Information and Library Science from Sun Yat-sen University.

LQ: What are the objectives of user education services in your library and what is your definition of library user education?

BL: We provide library guides for new students and… courses to train users to use the library. These include training on particular topics, such as retrieving materials on a specific subject and the use of databases. We also provide training on using various tools for writing papers such as citation, bibliographic management, and plagiarism prevention. Some teachers will also ask us to co-teach with them on how to use library resources… Our next goal is to plan for a credit-bearing elective course called Information Literacy.

This is particularly important because we need to find some excellent librarians… with fluent English to be teachers. English is the teaching language of our University. However, most of our Librarians in Macau are not as good as those in Hong Kong and other places in their English language, as their first language is Cantonese… most of them have graduated from library-related majors in mainland China or Taiwan without experience in studying abroad.

As for the definition and scope of user education activities, I think it is becoming wider and wider. I hope users can better use the library and develop research ability in the future through our education courses. Otherwise, they cannot improve their information literacy ability. So, we train students to use not only library resources but also tools for research activities.

LQ: As you mentioned, the ultimate goal is to improve users' research ability. Do you have different courses for graduate students and undergraduates?

BL: Generally, we do it separately. For example, lectures on how to publish papers are mainly for graduate students, as undergraduates have less demand for publishing. However, there are no restrictions on some activities, such as the use of databases. When both undergraduate and graduate students have similar needs, there are no restrictions.

We also focus on undergraduate education activities because secondary school students in Macau generally do not perform well in information search after

entering university… secondary school curricula tend to be exam-oriented so they don't need to do essays or projects. They often only know how to use Internet search engines, such as Google and Baidu, but cannot judge and use information properly. When they get into the University, they need to take the initiative to self-study. University teachers rarely teach students how to find materials and just let students search for information by themselves. However, students often do not know how to find them correctly, facing a vast volume of library materials. Therefore, they need our guidance and help.

LQ: Can you briefly introduce the educational background and job responsibilities of your colleagues?

BL: They mainly graduated in Library Science. They are all experienced librarians and have more than eight years of library work experience… which is particularly important. Now our team are all experienced, have language skills, and are professional librarians and teachers. Our library has forty two librarians and five reference librarians, including one with a Ph.D. and three with a Master's Degree. Due to the limited manpower in our library, they are not only engaged in the work of user education but also undertake reference services and promotion activities. For example, one teacher is in charge of the library system; another is responsible for acquisitions and cataloging.

LQ: Do you think user education librarians' scope and responsibilities will change in the future, or even now?

BL: I think the future change is that the library is no longer limited to a consulting center. Our library has three key objectives: teaching support, research support, and community services. Community services mean that we should go out of the campus and do some education or publicity to the public. For example, some organizations - mainly hospitals and private ones - need to train employees, encourage them to continue learning, and use our library resources. They will invite our library to provide them with lectures on using the library and a series of user education activities. For example, some hospitals require doctors to continue their advanced studies and use the library to find materials. Therefore we also provide lectures on medical databases.

The library is undergoing a process of transformation. The skills of librarians are comprehensive, while user demand is ever increasing. So we need skills in analyzing data and information, especially because we are engaged in higher education. We need to keep paying attention to these issues, collect the latest articles and comments, dig out the latest trends and situations… then analyze them and integrate them into a report. Besides, we can use some tools because there

are many databases now, and we need to analyze each subject's development. For example, we want to know the number of medical papers published by our medical faculty, their number of citations, their impact, and compare them with other universities' research to understand our strengths and weaknesses. We can use some tools to analyze these data and then report to the faculty and teachers for their reference.

This is how our university has changed in the past five to ten years. In the past, what we did was relatively simple, such as Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) as a regular service. Last year, our librarians browsed more than 200 articles on higher education every month, selected ten of them, and sent them to relevant university leaders for reference. This year, we also provided a comprehensive analysis of the content of the articles. These are the extensive abilities I just mentioned.

LQ: So, are the challenges faced by librarians increasing?

BL: Yes. In addition, because we usually read papers in Chinese and English, language ability is also needed. Although English papers are more regularly updated, abundant, and are publishing more important research, we also need to pay attention to Chinese papers in the local and Asian contexts.

The Information Commons at the University of Macau

LQ: What are the formats of library user education activities? Are they mainly face-to-face lectures or are there other participatory, interactive parts?

BL: The… activities of our library are diversified. Face-to-face lectures are common for explaining how to use library resources. We also organize some special events and invite famous guests to give talks. Aside from this, we hold some book exhibitions and other exhibitions, showing our collections by various themes. Users may not know about these books and their value if they are just stored on the shelf. Our exhibitions have two levels: small book fairs and relatively large ones. For example, if a writer wins a Nobel Prize, we will display their related works so that students can easily find them at the entrance. Because our library is relatively large, students need not go to every floor to look for those books. In addition, we have exhibitions of calligraphy works… In this way we encourage students to read more books and improve their general interest…

LQ: We all know that the rapid development of the internet and technology has also impacted libraries. Have you seen any significant changes in the past twenty years?

BL: Where there were few computers in the 1980s, I did relatively few activities in the library, and basic duties were centered on cataloging, acquisitions, and circulation services, as well as some interlibrary loan services.

Gradually, we have computers, and then we can go online. We subscribed to… a lot of electronic resources, and the transformation has taken place slowly. Students originally wanted to read the paper version, but now they need the electronic version. So, with the development of network information, is there still a need for reference service?... it is convenient for users to find library resources, but many problems can be solved by having librarians… they need the library's reference service to help them save a lot of time and find resources as soon as possible. This is a great change.

Our cataloging may be relatively simplified because some companies have provided cataloging services. We can transfer the cataloging data to the library system through their systems, and efficiently complete the required work.

Our work also focuses on promoting more activities and trying our best to attract users to use the library. Our work was relatively simple in the past, and users often used the library to find materials. We were not worried that they would not come to the library because the library space was limited. Now, as we have moved to the new building with much more space… they seldom have to come to the library as they can find information at home. We need to try our best to attract users to… our library again.

In this regard, we have made some efforts. First, we should provide a good learning environment. For example, we designed different spaces for them, some independent rooms to study. In addition, we have set up different furniture for the library… In the past, students' learning styles were more traditional; just a table and a chair, and these were not very comfortable. Now we will place some comfortable sofas and other furniture for them to read books. There are also some desks and chairs which are mobile and connectable. Two or three tables can be connected to help students do group discussions and other activities.

Second, we carry out wellbeing activities. For example, when the exam period is near, we distribute some small gifts or snacks to the students to relieve their pressure. The library also distributes some small items of stationery… when the library opens in a new semester. So, students can feel that the library is very concerned about their studies, and they will be more willing to come... The library has also become a social place for them to relax and rest.

Nowadays young people have many choices, so we need to provide diversified equipment to attract them and make them feel that the library can provide a good learning environment, including different space designs… The internet cannot replace physical space… Neither can this be replaced by cafes or restaurants, because some restaurants have a relatively poor environment.

University of Macau libraries lobby

LQ: Due to the convenience of online services, such as Google Scholar, does this make the work of librarians easier or more difficult?

BL: Generally, it makes our work easier. However, because users prefer to use the Internet to search for information rather than using the library, our librarians need to do more promotional activities to attract users. In the 1970s, even when there was no Internet, American Librarians predicted that libraries would die out in the 21st century. Then the virtual library appeared. In 1992, libraries in America began to use the Internet, and The University of Macau Library connected to the internet in April 1995. We can find out whether other libraries have some collections for interlibrary loan through this system. Before that, if we wanted to borrow books from other libraries, we needed a catalog from them or we mailed a letter to inquire whether there was such a book. Now we only need to confirm it through the internet, which is very convenient.

LQ: Has the library established a subject librarian system or a teacher-librarian system?

BL: Now, our library mainly focuses on two aspects. First, librarians actively contact teachers to understand their needs and discuss solutions and models with them. We understand their needs and provide services actively because some teachers do not realize that they need our services. On the other hand, some teachers take the initiative to seek cooperation with the library, and we can provide courses according to their needs. So, it is a two-way partnership.

Because we have a limited number of librarians, there are certain restrictions on establishing subject librarians. An important reason for developing subject librarians in American university libraries is that their librarians are not library majors in their undergraduate education but their Master's Degrees are library majors. As they have professional undergraduate backgrounds, it is relatively easy to provide subject services. However, as most of our librarians have both undergraduate and Master's degrees as library majors, they do not have other professional backgrounds. For example, some Law School teachers do not have much confidence in our librarians, because they think we do not know much about law and cannot become… subject librarians. There are also social and cultural… reasons. Some law graduates may find it difficult in the United States (US) to find a job and will consider working in the library. But in Macau, law graduates must… become lawyers and will not want to work in the library. So it is almost impossible for us to find suitable library staff with a professional law background. Some majors may be able to do so, but some majors also require a higher professional standard, such as law, engineering, and medicine… Therefore, we also have some difficulties in communication and cooperation with Medical School teachers. But our advantage is our comprehensive ability and information ability. For example, we can tell them

about the level of Medical School teachers' research results about cancer in the whole research field. Our library can analyze the information using digital tools, but it may be difficult for specific contexts.

Another problem is that librarians without subject backgrounds may not reach their professional level to select books and journals. Therefore, we turn to the teachers to make those decisions. We have a library committee for such communication, and each faculty will send a representative… We also promote our library user education activities through this committee. Because some teachers do not know that we provide these types of course services, we can better inform them through the committee. Therefore, the library committee plays a crucial role in linking the library and teachers.

LQ: How do you see the effectiveness of user education activities?

BL: We have a systematic evaluation scheme. If it is a relatively simple activity, there is a questionnaire after each activity to obtain feedback from participants. Some users and teachers may also take the initiative to discuss sessions with us or email feedback… after an activity, including after we go to the teachers' classroom to provide co-teaching services.

In fact, it is difficult to evaluate the reference service work because we are not like companies producing products with visible profits. We… play a supporting role in helping students and teachers solve their research and learning problems, but it is difficult to quantify the results. Our information literacy courses' effectiveness is difficult to evaluate, and we can only look at their feedback. However, a key to reference service work is the library management's attitude… they realize the importance and strongly support it. But there are legal provisions in the US and more recently Taiwan: every library must have a reference librarian and a reference department.

LQ: Students and staff from which disciplines are the most actively involved in your user education activities?

BL: Student needs in every subject are not necessarily the same. For example, students majoring in History or Literature need to read a lot... I found that the Social Sciences Faculty and Health Science Faculty of our university are very active in seeking cooperation with the library. First - as they need to find materials to write papers - how to retrieve the literature is very important for them. The Health Science Faculty also needs to search… databases for special topics. But there are many medical databases, and the information is not easy to find. The most passive are the students majoring in IT Engineering, followed by Business Administration,

probably because their information is relatively easy to find. However, our library has training lectures on data analysis tools and using economic data, which are useful for them and thus quite popular. So it is not just about information retrieval, but about how to analyze and integrate information.

IT Engineering students tend to use laboratories instead of the library because their assignments involve experiments. We have also thought about attracting IT Engineering students to participate in library activities, but they mainly use electronic journals that are easier to search. Moreover, we have resources integration for electronic journals to facilitate their retrieval. They need the latest information and papers, rather than the History department students who may need older materials.

Because our course is not compulsory, students come to class because they are interested and realize that they have this need, they will take the initiative to join. With this strong motivation, there is rarely the phenomenon of students playing with mobile phones.

LQ: Do you think professors play an important role in encouraging students to participate in user education activities?

BL: Teachers are essential because some students will only come if their teachers encourage them. My best experience is when the teacher has an assignment for undergraduate students, which can only be completed by referencing library materials. The teacher then brings the students to the library, and we can teach the students how to find the materials. We will have communicated with the teacher before the class starts to give students guidance on required materials and skills. As the students will normally be engaged and work hard under such an arrangement, the cooperation between teachers and the library has an excellent effect.

LQ: According to your observation and experience, what is the difference between undergraduate students and postgraduate students in their information search skills?

BL: Postgraduate students are relatively self-conscious and active, and they are more involved in library activities. Because they need many materials for writing papers, they are more dependent on the library. Undergraduate students may not find library education activities useful and participate until their final year or until they need to complete their graduation thesis. As first-year students have just entered the University and need to adapt to the university's life and study, including the new teaching methods and curricula, they have limited time to attend library activities.

For some time, we have asked students to attend library seminars through teachers. In the past, we had an English Language Center where we would spend a class every semester teaching students to learn how to retrieve materials in the library. After that Center was removed, there was no such compulsory activity, and it is up to us to attract students. In the future, more students will be willing to participate in these library education activities once we have assigned credits to courses.

LQ: Are there any online consultation and virtual reference services?

BL: Yes, we have a library system where users can submit forms to ask questions or ask a librarian by telephone.

LQ: Do you think reference librarians play a crucial role in presenting a positive image for the whole library?

BL: First of all, I think reference librarians provide a showcase. They must have a professional image because users come to the library for help. If reference librarians answer carefully and thoughtfully, users will have higher confidence in the library and will come to consult next time. Secondly, we must respect every user. Because every user comes to the library with a specific aim, they are often curious and eager to find… materials. If every librarian can embody these two aspects, users will feel that our library can really empathetically help them.

An ideal situation is to be able to… become good friends with users. Then they can come to the library whenever they are in need. But… it is also challenging due to some librarians' personalities. So, front-line reference librarians… prefer to communicate with others and be outgoing. However, most librarians are relatively introverted and it is difficult for them to give lectures and introduce the library to students. For example, in my previous experience, I introduced the library to more than 800 students in the gymnasium, including the question and answer session. We should be confident in introducing the library.... in either Chinese or English.

LQ: The… impression some get has always been that librarians are confined to internal activities, and the management model is relatively closed. Is this the situation?

BL: No - on the contrary - we outreach more often than expected. Our library has an open culture to promote communication. In fact, the library industry is the most valued in the US. I have visited more than 100 libraries. Americans love libraries very much. If you tell them that you are a reference librarian, they will give a thumbs up and show respect, because they think that librarianship is a very prestigious profession. However, if you say you are a reference librarian in

Chinese communities, their first reaction is to ask what a reference librarian is… This situation also shows that we need to continue to work hard to improve awareness of this profession. Changes have taken place in the mainland, especially in library equipment development, following… academic influences from the US. As they realize that the library plays an important role in the whole university, they have been vigorously developing the library. Previous library research in China mainly focused on cataloging and collecting books. It now focuses more on library systems and electronic libraries, including research on user information demands and behaviors.

The University of Macau favors the US management model from what I have seen of different management models. Because Macau was once a colony of Portugal, it was influenced by Portugal. The management change of public libraries was relatively slow before Macau returned its sovereignty to China. Even now, there is no large library, and the only major library is located at the University of Macau. We are open to the public, and people outside the university can also use the library.

I visited the library of the National Diet Library of Japan before. At that time, they did not allow taking pictures, even of the interior decoration. I also saw a lot of Japanese university libraries, which made me feel relatively conservative. Before the visit, we sent… a list of questions… in advance. During the visit, a colleague asked a question that was not on the list, and they had no way to answer it.

LQ: Does the University of Macau Library cooperate with other local or overseas libraries to provide user education?

BL: Yes, especially for interlibrary loans, such as with universities in Hong Kong. We also cooperate with some alliances or organizations, such as OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) and CALIS (China Academic Library & Information) in the mainland. We also jointly organize exhibitions with universities in Hong Kong and compile databases. For example, we merged the Hong Kong Journal Database of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Macau Journal Database… to form a Hong Kong and Macau Journal Database. This year, we jointly organized a series of activities such as Library Week with the Macau Public Library.

LQ: Does the University of Macau have a library major?

BL: Because of Macau's small population, not many people are interested in this major. Macau students have other choices and tend to study in other places, such as Hong Kong, mainland China, and foreign countries. They want to experience life outside, but they do not necessarily choose to stay in Macau. There is also a

lack of teachers in the library profession, which restricts us in trying to establish a new discipline.

LQ: What are your expectations or suggestions for future librarians?

BL: The key issue is to be interested in this study. Many people have told me about this problem before, and they think that this subject is relatively boring. If you are not interested in this profession, it will be more painful. For example, if you are not interested in cataloging at all… you will have a headache even when you see a catalog. But if you love it, you will be pleased to do it. Secondly, it is essential to master a foreign language because the University of Macau is teaching in English. Thirdly, it is best to have some working knowledge of Information Technology. I consider these three issues to have remained unchanged since the 1990s.

Because our profession is comprehensive, we need librarians to have self-learning ability. If a librarian has varied interests, their chance of success will be more likely. Otherwise, development prospects may be limited, especially because reference librarians may need to know every subject but not necessarily in-depth. Say, if you are interested in films, you can provide more useful information to users when they ask related questions or find related information. What needs to be

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deeply understood is the professional knowledge of the library. For example, the cataloging of special collections of ancient books requires professional knowledge.

The Impact of COVID-19

In order to cooperate with COVID-19 prevention and control, the University of Macau Library was closed from 3:00 pm on January 24, 2020.

During the period when the library was closed, the library's online reference service and online databases had been maintained. In addition, the return date of the borrowed books would be extended, and the books would be disinfected after they were returned. The service counters of the library has a transparent shield to physically separate staff from readers.

To facilitate study at home, the Library provided many online resources for study. The Library and Macau Academic Library Alliance (MALA) launched the Library's Online Course for the first time during the pandemic. These courses focus on teaching how to use online resources and databases.

Due to the relief of the pandemic in Macau, the Library reopened on April 20, 2020 (it was partially open at least). The University Library was just open to staff and eligible students. Those eligible students include PhD and Master's students at oral defence stage, PhD and Master's Students at research stage as well as Undergraduates in the final year.

According to the pandemic prevention guidelines, the reading space of the Library has been rearranged, and the number of seats has been reduced from 3,000 to 1,500, but the concurrent number of maximum users is 500. The distance between the seats should be at least one meter according to the guidelines of the authorities. In addition, all people must measure body temperature, wear masks and present health declarations before entering the Library, and regularly disinfect public facilities (such as seats, bookshelves, computer facilities, elevators, toilets, etc.) to ensure the health and safety of staff and students.

The University Library reopened on September 1, 2020, and most of the services returned to normal.