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Metadata and the Human Dimensions of Librarianship

Memory, Invisible Labor, and Professional Formation

Metadata is often treated as the invisible scaffolding of library systems—standardized, technical, and impersonal on its face. Yet beneath its structured fields lie traces of human labor, professional history, and the personal relationships that sustain our work as librarians. These dimensions don't always surface in formal description, but for those of us who encounter metadata daily, even a single catalog record can carry unexpected weight.

It was an ordinary moment in my workday: reviewing newly arrived East Asian titles in the catalog, scanning subject headings, and checking romanization and publication details before sending them on to shelf prep. Then I paused. A seemingly unremarkable record, just one among many I review each month, suddenly sparked recognition and meaning when I saw a familiar name in the main entry: Jing Liu. I already knew Liu, Chinese studies librarian at the University of British Columbia (UBC), had published a new book in Chinese titled *Zhen Zhen Gong Zu*. Through our professional community of East Asian librarians, I had followed the news with admiration, shared congratulations, and felt proud from afar. But seeing her name here, embedded in the structure of our own catalog at the University of Virginia Library, was different. It was no longer just news; it was real, local, present. The subject heading: Chinese—Canada—History, stood in MARC 650. Simple. Factual. And in that quiet moment surrounded by metadata, I felt something shift unexpectedly.

Metadata as Personal and Communal Memory

Catalog records are often reduced to neutral infrastructure—tools to describe, organize, and make materials discoverable. To most readers, therefore, the catalog entry is simply functional—an author, a title, and a subject heading. Yet encountering this record reminded me of my own connection to Liu, who has been a formative presence in my professional path, though not in formal ways. She is a mentor and model in the informal, often underacknowledged spaces of librarianship. Whether as a graduate student working at the Asian Library at UBC a decade ago or later as a colleague in the wider East Asian library community, I benefited from her guidance and generosity, offered without any expectation of recognition.

What moved me most, though, was the presence of the Chinese name in the parallel field. For me, it carried more than phonetic transcription; it was a sign of recognition, a reminder that our cultural background was not invisible. Its appearance alongside the English-language fields made the record feel less like an impersonal artifact of policy and system and more

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like a bridge between worlds. It recalled the ways my professional life has been sustained not only by institutional structures but also by relationships—mentorship, collegiality, and community—often nurtured through shared language and heritage. In that moment, the record ceased to be a neutral entry and became instead a quiet marker of belonging, a place where personal identity and professional connection converged.

Metadata as Invisible Work

Behind the simplicity of the record lies a constellation of human effort: the scholar's research and writing, the library's acquisition, the cataloger's subject knowledge, and the institution's commitment to multilingual description. None of these roles, apart from the author's, are explicitly identified in the record. Examining each role more closely reveals how scholarly communication is sustained by many kinds of expertise, often unacknowledged but deeply essential.

Liu's book itself represents sustained intellectual labor—drawing on a donated collection to uncover the story of a Chinese immigrant family in Canada and connecting their experiences to broader histories of migration and settlement. The record also encodes the behind-the-scenes labor of librarianship. Acquisitions staff ensured the title was ordered and received. Catalogers provided the parallel fields in Chinese and English, carefully applying standards of romanization and subject access. Shelf-prep staff prepared the physical book for circulation. All this labor is condensed into a sparse set of fields that most users overlook—not out of neglect but out of a natural focus on their own research needs. Yet for those of us attuned to it, the work is visible, quietly present in every keystroke, every authority heading, every decision about how knowledge is framed.

Metadata as Professional History

Metadata also bears the imprint of professional history. The parallel English and Chinese fields in the record remind me of how far cataloging practice has evolved. Earlier generations of East Asian librarians worked under systems that permitted only romanization—often Wade-Giles for Chinese—leaving original scripts absent and sometimes distorting meaning. Later, the shift to pinyin brought its own complexities of retraining and standardization. The eventual inclusion of non-Latin scripts in catalogs marked another turning point, affirming the importance of representing works in their original language rather than only through transliteration.¹

Each of these shifts reflects more than technical adjustments. They mark institutional choices, cultural politics, and professional advocacy. They testify to the persistence of area studies librarians who argued for better representation of global languages within predominantly English-language systems. When I see both Chinese script and pinyin in a record today, I also see this longer arc of professional struggle and progress—an institutional memory embedded in our tools.

In the end, what seemed like a single catalog record held far more than bibliographic data. It revealed the human connections, layered labor, and professional histories that quietly shape how knowledge enters and endures within our libraries. *~*

Note

1. In fact, this history continues to develop: “Beginning October 1, 2025, the Library of Congress will launch a phased rollout to expand non-Latin script input beyond the MARC-8 repertoire.” This announcement can be accessed through Cataloging and Acquisitions (Library of Congress).