

Asian Film Connection: Developing A Scholarly Multilingual Digital Library – A Case Study

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Background

In 1998, the staff of the Center for Scholarly Technology (CST) in the Information Services Division (ISD) at the University of Southern California (USC) was approached for assistance with a database/digital library project. Generally, the role of the Center is to assist with curricular technology projects. Although the project described below is somewhat outside the normal scope for the Center, the scholarly nature of the project was taken into account in granting assistance to it. The impetus for the project came from Jeanette Paulson Hereniko, Director of the Asia Pacific Media Center at the Annenberg Center for Communication and Founding Director of the Hawaii International Film Festival. Ms. Paulson organized a conference in Los Angeles in May of 1998 attended by members of NETPAC, the Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema, a pan-Asian cultural organization involving critics, filmmakers, festival organizers and curators, distributors and exhibitors, and film educators. At the conference, a plan for the creation of a scholarly, multilingual digital library about film in Asia was first presented.

Karen Howell, the Director of CST, working closely with Ms. Hereniko, developed a planning document for the conference. Other CST team members who contributed during the course of the project are Marianne Afifi, Robert Doiel, Dan Heller, April Lundsten, and Bonnie Ko, an intern from UCLA. For the construction of the promotional website, we also were fortunate to have the help of Dr. Shao-yi Sun who will be managing the project as more funds become available.

The purpose of the digital library is to promote the marketing of as well as awareness and education about film in Asia, not only to the rest of the world, but also among the Asian countries themselves. Asian films are rarely seen outside their respective countries and scholarly information about them is sparse and often not available in other countries. Thus the Internet can serve as a vehicle for communication and dissemination of information that has so far been difficult to collocate. The digital library's audience is expected to consist of filmmakers, critics and journalists, distributors and programmers, scholars and students, cinema fans, and anyone interested in Asian cultures. The participants in the conference were enthusiastic about the project and accepted the responsibility for conversion of their respective data to digital format and for contributing the data to the digital library.

Plan for a digital library

The plan was to include initially fifteen countries that would be contributing content to the database, China, Japan, India, Korea and Taiwan. It was anticipated that, once a prototype system was established, other countries, primarily in Asia would be approached to participate. Content was defined as digital objects such as text, video files such as film clips, still images, audio files such as sound tracks and other digital objects to be defined in the future. For all released films, 15 basic fields were initially defined, with many fields having two and up to 11 subfields. Each country was also to select 8-15 films from 1995 through 1997 to be highlighted. Additional fields would be added for the highlighted films. To be highlighted, a film needed to meet certain agreed upon criteria.

A central database was to be set up to facilitate the input of data and metadata in each country. Except for India, where English is the national language, it was expected that the input interface would be in the language and script of the country doing the data input and cataloging. It is important to note here that China and Taiwan use slightly different character sets, those in China having been simplified over the years. Thus we expected to be dealing with five character sets.

The central database was to be kept in the United States, initially at USC. Here, the data would be translated into the remaining languages, the translations entered and the integrity of the data that was input elsewhere verified. In addition, all input and output interfaces would be created centrally and a database manager would be hired to manage the flow of data. In addition, USC was to handle database administration on a central server. Due to lack of sufficient funds for the purchase of robust database software, it was anticipated that database software currently available at USC was going to be used in the project.

The project plan was developed using a matrix that listed tasks on one axis and the corresponding responsibility, costs, funding sources, timeline, and review on the other. This sequence of tasks began with the initial fundraising, followed by setting common conventions, data gathering, translation, database design and construction, website creation, website update, and promotion and publicity about the site. So far, some of these tasks have been accomplished in part.

Collaboration with the Center for Software Engineering

To move the project forward, the CST team collaborated with the Center for Software Engineering at USC. Through a collaborative venture of that Center and the ISD, every year the students in the Computer Science 577 course take on software development projects that are proposed by staff in the ISD. These projects are often too time consuming or too technologically challenging to be developed or implemented by the staff. Students in the class help to get the projects underway by playing the roles of software engineers and creating a system design or plan for the "clients".

We proposed the Asian film database project as one of the student projects; specifically we wanted the students to perform a systems analysis, define system and software requirements, design a system and software architecture, as well as study the feasibility of the project. A group of five students accepted to work on all these tasks for the project. The CST team met with the students on a weekly basis and worked with them to develop a design for the digital library. This project occurred in the fall semester of 1998 and many of the recommendations are still valid despite the rapid progress of information technology.

Promotional website and prototype phase

During the time at which fundraising took place, a promotional website was created to show the potential of what the digital library could look like and also to attract funding for the project. The site does not contain a database but consists of web pages simulating a database-driven information architecture. The website will be further developed to serve as a template for a prototype for the Asian Film Connection database that is expected to be created later in the year 2000 using content from Japan. The CST has also been considering the use of open source applications for this prototype in order to ease the burden of funding.

Funding

Funding for this project has been difficult despite the cooperation and good intentions of the contributing countries. The funds for the initial Annenberg Center grant were limited to three years. The intellectual work of CST and the infrastructure support from the Information Services Division, such as the provision of equipment, networking and disk space, has been an in-kind contribution and continues to be so until now. The work of the CS577 course created a useful vehicle for the students to do their work, but was also free of charge. Ms. Hereniko has spent much of her time on fundraising efforts, which she continues, so that the Asian Film Connections digital library may indeed become a reality.

Social Aspects

Although, on a management level, country representatives agreed that this digital library was a good idea, the reality of developing such a product was marked by communication problems on several levels. Only some of the designated contacts responded to calls for materials. It was difficult to ascertain what kind of technology infrastructure could be assumed at the different sites. Another initial difficulty was how to communicate the concept of a database or digital library to some of the participants and also to funders without a prototype. Once the promotional website was developed, it was easier to approach funders because the nature of the digital

library could be explained more easily. We also could show different character sets, images, and other objects.

Despite the cooperative nature of the initial conference, it was clear that we had to use care not to offend any country. Although we did not necessarily think that the English version should show up first, we decided to do so, because the management of the site would be in an English-speaking country. Because of the political situation between China and Taiwan, we had to be careful not to favor one over the other, for example in listing the countries. In planning the translations, we have to be careful to have all translations done before we upload them into the database. Because there were so many groups involved at USC, the internal communication and each contributor had different expectations of the project, which sometimes led to misunderstandings.

Conclusions

This project teaches us several lessons. One is that despite the proliferation of commercial sites and databases about film, scholarly sites that aim to be objective and not influenced by commercial interests are difficult to establish. In this case the representatives of the Asian film industries were very willing to contribute their time but they did not have additional resources to commit to the project perhaps due to an economic downturn in Asia at the time.

Another lesson to be learned is that multilingual digital libraries are exciting and promise to improve communication among countries without their having to give up their linguistic identities in favor of English which some say is the new Esperanto. Films from Asia and their directors are virtually unknown in the West and digital libraries about them may increase international recognition of their productions. Although much progress has been made with the representation of different scripts on the Internet, there are still costs associated with translation. During the course of the project we calculated that the cost for translation was a big part of the budget.

Furthermore, it appears that funding for scholarly endeavors from foundations and other traditional funders of educational projects is difficult to obtain in a "dotcom" world. Whereas startups and corporations pay sizeable sums for the design of often marginally effective websites, funders of educational websites were not willing to underwrite the costs of this project, although the costs were realistic relative to the project goals.

Useful URLs

AsianConnections: <http://www.asianfilms.org>

Center for Scholarly Technology: <http://www.usc.edu/cst>

Information Services Division: <http://www.usc.edu/isd>

University of Southern California: <http://www.usc.edu>

Center for Software Engineering at USC: <http://sunset.usc.edu/>