

Can small resources make big impact? (a case study)

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Introduction

Considering the topic of this year's conference („Rethinking resources for Japanese studies“), one might ask whether it is possible to make any sort of impact in a local community (be it research/academic or wider community) with very limited resources. The case study I am about to present here advocates for a „yes“.

But firstly, let me give a short overview, so that you can get the idea of the institution I am presenting here today. The University of Niš, Serbia, was founded in 1965, making it a rather young university. However, in a little over than half a century of its existence, it has managed to grow into the second largest university in the country, after the biggest one located in the capital Belgrade. Today, the University of Niš comprises 14 different faculties, as well as several research centers, providing education to almost 30.000 students at all levels of studies: Bachelor's, Master's and PhD.

The University library was established only two years later, in 1967, with the aim of facilitating research and teaching activities of the University, with students and researchers as their primary target users. Indeed, the library grew together with the University and is today one of the leading widely-ranging scientific libraries in the region, open also to the general public. The library is located inside the University building, occupying approximately 1500 square meters. The building itself is a cultural monument of great significance, protected by the state, and is also one of the most beautiful public buildings and one of the landmarks of the city of Niš. As of 2019, the library holds about 100.000 monographs, 1400 journal titles (with over 80 000 volumes) and access to tens of thousands of e-resources, mostly academic journals.

Since all material has always been acquired with the goal of serving the library's main target group, which are students and researchers, there has traditionally been very little available on Japan in general, since Japanology is not a subject of study at the academic level at our University. That is why the library has acquired just a couple of hundreds of books on Japan, mostly Japanese literature classics translated into Serbian or English. As of today, resources on Japan consist less than 1% of the total of library holdings. And still, in our local community, those resources, scarce as they are, are well circulated and the public is very well aware of their existence. But it did not happen overnight, and it certainly did not happen by accident.

How it started

It began in 2012, which was, financially speaking, a very difficult year for the University library. The funds for books and journal acquisition had been severely cut, and the library was struggling to stay relevant and maintain the existing number of users. So, when we learnt about the Nippon Foundation project “100 books on Japan” (donation of 100 contemporary titles to interested libraries worldwide), it took us some deliberation among the library staff and we decided to apply. I must stress here that, had it been a financially stable year, we might not have applied, since those books were not in our primary focus, but we still decided to do so, hoping to enrich the holdings and perchance draw some new users. The donated books arrived in the library in early 2013. It was pure coincidence that very same year, a group of young people from Niš, who were enthusiastic about traditional and contemporary Japan culture, gathered together and formed an NGO. They called themselves “Taka” and wanted to organize the very first Japan-themed days in the city of Niš. As they were looking for a venue where their event could be hosted, and the library had just catalogued the newly-acquired books on Japan, cooperation was born. The library was hoping to promote the newly-acquired books, and the young people just needed a venue for their activities. So, more out of utility and perceived benefit than real need, the first Niš-based festival of Japanese culture, called “Japaniš” was born. However, the festival was such a huge success in the autumn of 2013, that the library continued to host it in the years to come, so that similar events took place in 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018, respectively.

Throughout these years, the University library has been a venue for numerous Japan-related activities, including (but not limited to) workshops, competitions, tournaments, exhibitions, presentations, lectures and many more. In the early years, the focus was mostly on popularization of all things Japanese, so the majority of activities were designed to acquaint the public with the best-known elements of popular Japanese culture, such as food, manga comics, origami making, anime and video games, etc. However, in time, the focus slowly shifted to more traditional elements of Japanese culture, and accordingly the presentations and lectures (instead of workshops and exhibitions) gained prevalence. In fact, the last „Japanniš“ festival of 2018 included lectures from two university professors, as well as a presentation given by His Excellency, the Ambassador of Japan to the Republic of Serbia, Mr Junichi Maruyama.

It is here important to note that the cooperation with „Taka“ is not limited to festival activities, as there have been other examples of jointly organized activities, such as Japanese language lessons for beginners and Japanese literature book club that takes place once a month throughout the year and is a huge success in the local community.

It is thanks to the festival and similar activities, that hundreds of people of all ages came to the library, learnt something about Japan, and as a result decided to pursue that interest further, either by lending library books, using online resources or even moving on to study it at an academic level at the bigger universities in the country and abroad.

Lessons learnt

After six years of organizing these events, lessons learnt that could potentially be of help to other institutions considering similar endeavors, can be summed up in the following three points:

1. Resources can be marketed in unexpected ways
2. Cooperation can be a rocky road
3. Impact is not always immediate

The first point means that it may be useful to look beyond traditional ways of marketing library resources through newsletters, book displays and exhibitions, as it has been our experience that events such as workshops, lectures and even tournaments can spark interest in certain library material.

The second point is of huge importance, because, even if I had made it all seem easy in my presentation here today, the fact is that it was not always so. The core management team in both "Taka" and the library has changed throughout the years, and it was necessary in more than one occasion to adjust expectations on both sides. Nevertheless, where there is good will and clear communication, all obstacles can be overcome.

Another important point that needs to be made here is that one cannot expect impact to be immediate. New initiatives take time to grow on people, and it took several years of constant efforts for the community surrounding the University library to get used to the idea that the resources on all things Japan-related should be sought right there.

Values gained

It is fairly easy to understand what „Taka“ gained through cooperation with the University library: first and foremost, the (physical) space for realizing their goals, and an amazing one at that, as the venue is, as you remember from the beginning of the presentation, inside one of the landmarks of the city. Moreover, they gained credibility and exposure that would have been very difficult to obtain, being a young and unknown organization. What the library gained is, in my mind, much less tangible, but nonetheless of great importance for us as librarians and as resource providers: we gained more media exposure, more relevance for general public (slightly diverting the public image of a closed, rigid, academic institution). Library employees gained new experiences, enabling them to feel more comfortable about making similar partnerships with other organizations and institutions. Last, but definitely not least, the library gained new patrons, especially young people.

Conclusion

To sum up, there are three points that I would like to emphasise for anyone considering a similar endeavour, and they are as follows:

1. Get out of your comfort zone.

This is easier said than done, as “we have never done anything similar” mentality can prove to be a significant hindrance, especially in the academic environment. However, my advice here would be that you do not need to go big. You do not need to host a week-long festival to promote all things Japanese your institution has. I can see how overwhelming that may seem. Instead, host a single event- a calligraphy workshop, or a small thematic exhibition, or a lecture by someone who does not necessarily even have to be from the academic environment, as long as they have something valuable or even just interesting to say.

2. Trust young people.

Again, this can sometimes seem counter-intuitive. After all, aren't we, the experienced resource providers, the ones who know how things should be done? Do we not have this vast experience, insight, wisdom even? We surely do. But what the young lack in experience, they make up for with enthusiasm, vigor and passion even. They also have their own precious means of communication, that we, the middle-agers, are not privy to, no matter how technically savvy we believe ourselves to be. Trust those young people, because they bring the much needed new energy to your institution and to the public experience.

3. Size does not matter!

Last, but definitely not least – the size of your collection truly does not matter that much. Of course it is important and valuable if you come from an institution that prides itself in a large and/or historical collection. But even if (like me) you do not, and even if your collection happens to be small and rather un-original, do not be afraid to market it aggressively to the public. What counts is not the size, and to a certain extent, nor is even the content. But the context in which you present it is hugely important: who your resources are for and what purpose they serve.

Thank you for your attention!