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The Ties That Bind: Communication, Collaboration, and Cross-Disciplinary Professional Development in the Service of Library Special Collections

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INTRODUCTION

Stanford University Libraries (SUL) comprises 20 branch libraries and centers, many with their own special collections or locked stacks materials. Over the past few years, Conservation Services at SUL has been actively reaching out to individual branch libraries to expand and standardize preservation efforts across the libraries. This article describes the recent work that SUL book conservators have done in partnership with Stanford's East Asia Library (EAL). To better conserve East Asian bound materials and deepen relationships between the departments, conservators collaborated with internal staff and external conservation peers to understand curatorial expectations, reconsider appropriate terminology and documentation practices, and develop new techniques to meet treatment priorities.

COMMUNICATION AND EXPANSION: BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH EAL

Collection growth across SUL highlighted the need for a more uniform, equitable, and concerted approach to conservation, and staff changeovers gave conservators opportunities to build and strengthen relationships that could support their department's expansion. Conservators increased outreach to colleagues across SUL by visiting branch libraries and inviting library staff to tour their off-campus Conservation Services facilities. Regular on-campus office hours with subject specialists and curators were implemented to consult on care and handling recommendations and potential treatment of items. During these face-to-face conversations, curators provide relevant information on the cultural significance of their materials, as well as how they are used and stored, and conservators provide treatment, housing, and handling advice (fig. 1). This enables conservators and other SUL staff to learn from one another in the service of the collections.



Fig. 1. Aude Gabory assessing items for treatment with Zhaohui Xue, curator for the Chinese Collection, and Katherine Matsuura, former curator for the Japanese Collection, from EAL. Courtesy of Aisha Wahab.

Papers presented during the Book and Paper Group Session, AIC's 53rd Annual Meeting, May 27–31, 2025, Minneapolis, Minnesota



Fig. 2. Traditional Chinese side-stitched bindings in cloth covered wrappers from EAL awaiting treatment at the conservation laboratory.

Collaboration with EAL has offered SUL conservators a particularly stimulating learning curve.

EAL's seed collection came from the Hoover Institution Library and Archive, which started collecting Chinese and Japanese language materials in 1945 and established the East Asian Collection in 1961. Conservation Services has been supporting EAL since 2001, when it was established as a branch library, but direct outreach efforts and a shared enthusiasm for collaboration between curators and conservators significantly increased the workflow beginning in 2021. In the fall of that year, Conservation Services received their first sizable batch of items for housing and treatment from the Chinese collection, which consisted mostly of traditional side-stitched bindings in cloth-covered wrappers (fig. 2).

As book conservators at SUL were trained primarily in the traditions of Western bookbinding and conservation, they needed to learn to look at and describe East Asian materials and expand their skills to best serve these collections. Book conservators began collaborating at the bench, scheduling regular sessions to work together on East Asian material. During these sessions, they discussed treatment options, celebrated successes, and troubleshot setbacks. They encouraged and learned from each other, determining that if they were to build a steady workflow from EAL, they needed to develop a treatment protocol and a documentation form that focused on side-stitched books and their wrappers.

TERMINOLOGY AND DOCUMENTATION FORMS

Prior to 2021, book conservators at SUL were using the same treatment form for all bound formats, adapting the form to suit distinct types of bindings as needed. This was challenging, as the form was centered around Western book and paper structures, materials, condition issues, and treatments. The conservators saw their work on the East Asian collections as a case study to address documentation practices more broadly with geographically and culturally diverse collections at SUL. They were also inspired by colleagues Aisha Wahab, Kristen St.John, and Richenda Brim's 2021 paper, "Recentering the Bench," about using more inclusive and accurate descriptive terminology, addressing Eurocentric biases, and the potential for linked data in conservation documentation. The conservators wanted to be more thoughtful in the language they chose and saw this project as a way to put these ideas into practice. Using accurate terminology when talking about damage and treatment options would also improve communication with EAL staff and better serve the collections.

SUL conservators began conducting research using a variety of sources to better understand East Asian binding structures. With differences between Chinese, Japanese, and Korean binding styles, difficulty in translating terms from multiple languages, and complicated dating systems, they realized that collaboration with the conservation community, curators, subject specialists, and catalogers was needed. The formation of an AIC Wiki project to develop the Book and Paper Group's "East Asian Book Formats" page in 2021 coincided with SUL conservators' work on East Asian collection materials (Book and Paper Group of the AIC 2024). The conservators participated in this group and worked on a section about the historic evolution of East Asian binding structures. This research and the Wiki group's collective knowledge contributed to a deeper understanding of East Asian book structures and terminology. The conservators also had discussions with rare book catalogers at SUL. Many of these catalogers are subject specialists with codicological expertise from different regions of the world, with knowledge of resources that can enhance conservation documentation practices.

For example, SUL conservators learned in their research on side-stitched bindings that using the Western term *volume* to describe each separately sewn structure is not accurate in the East Asian context, where division by volume does not always translate to the separation of text into sewn structures. Based on this, they chose to use the term *fascicle*, as recommended in the literature about East Asian books (Kornicki 1998; Munn 2009, 106). This work on terminology is ongoing, with considerations of using terminology from the language of origin in mind.

While working on this project, Conservation Services was also developing a FileMaker database for their treatment documentation. SUL conservators wanted a flexible system that would be capable of recording complex information about Stanford's collections. The new database has fewer checkboxes, more room for narrative description, and the ability to create templates that can be tailored to distinct collection material types. The templates can be used to record descriptive terminology and treatment steps, then this can be adapted to the individual treatments.

SUL conservators developed a template for East Asian side-stitched books based on their research. Detailed descriptive terminology and potential treatment steps serve as a checklist to prompt observation and assessment of the



Fig. 3. Li Yu 李漁, *Zi zhi xin shu* 資治新書. Shanghai: Du shu ji cheng yin shu ju, 1894 (East Asia Library, Stanford University Libraries, Call Number: 4673 4433). Wrapper with typical damages found on many of the items sent for treatment by EAL.

various components. The examination section in the East Asian side-stitched bindings template includes features such as enclosure wrapper style, covering material, and details about side-stitched books, including the number of inner and outer stitches and endsheet construction. The condition and treatment sections follow the same format as the examination section, allowing for more efficient and accurate documentation than was possible with the earlier form.

In addition to aiding documentation, using accurate descriptive terminology informs conservation treatment by deepening the practice of observation and study. For example, some features of East Asian bindings, such as the "inner stitch," are not readily visible. Inner stitches, made of twisted paper, typically bind the text block together before outer stitches are added. Learning the meaning of this term and its structural significance in East Asian bindings is helpful in conservation assessments. If an inner stitch is intact, then a weak or broken original outer stitch may not need to be replaced since the book is adequately supported by the inner stitch.

CROSS-DISCIPLINARY TREATMENT: APPLYING TECHNIQUES FROM TEXTILE CONSERVATION TO LIBRARY AND ARCHIVE MATERIALS

Part of the SUL conservators' treatment discussions with EAL curators highlighted the importance of retaining and stabilizing wrapper enclosures along with the fascicles for continued use. The majority of these were four-sided wrappers made of paper-based board covered in cloth, with bone clasp closures. Many of them had split joints and wear on the textile clasp straps and holders that made them nonfunctional when they arrived at the Conservation Lab (fig. 3). Conservators also did treatment work on the fascicles; however, this article will only focus on the treatment of the wrappers.

For split joints and hinges on the wrappers, repair using Japanese paper and paste was a straightforward treatment procedure. Yet, the conservators were uncertain how they should stabilize worn textile clasp straps and holders, areas that need to be flexible and strong to function properly. Even though repair of these components using Japanese paper did not seem adequately stable or aesthetically compatible, the conservators did not want to completely replace damaged straps and holders with new material.

In 2021, when EAL items were treated, the conservators decided not to treat the textile components of clasp closures on items, as there did not appear to be an effective treatment option. Despite having spent a significant amount of time treating wrappers for damaged joints and hinges, the wrappers were not fully functional with untreated clasp closures and needed to be further enclosed in corrugated clamshell boxes (fig. 4). This decision was frustrating for both conservators and curator alike.

Around the same time, SUL conservators were also working on a large incoming collection of Islamicate manuscripts, many bound with textiles or with historic repairs using textiles. Their work on both collections identified a lack of treatment techniques for failing textile book components. In 2023, to fill this gap in expertise, Conservation Services invited Howard Sutcliffe, principal conservator and director of River Region Costume and Textile Conservation, to teach a workshop. The



Fig. 4. Gai Qi 改琦, Hong lou meng tu yong 紅樓夢圖詠. S.l. : s.n., 19--? (East Asia Library, Stanford University Libraries, Call Number: 5762 1412 V.1-4). Treated binding with wrapper and side-stitched fascicles in a corrugated clamshell box. Courtesy of Zhaohui Xue.



Fig. 5. Conservation Services team practicing sewn tear repairs on textile samples under the guidance of Howard Sutcliffe. Courtesy of Jill Sison.

workshop focused on textile treatment techniques applicable to book and paper conservation. Over the course of 2 days, Sutcliffe went through the basic steps of cleaning, humidifying, and flattening textiles, as well as several stitched and adhesive-based tear repair and infill techniques (fig. 5).

Sutcliffe and SUL conservators also discussed treatment approaches for several items with textile components during the workshop. This included examining a second batch of items that EAL sent over in 2023 in anticipation of the workshop, with the understanding that they would be used for trial treatment with experimental techniques. Treatment discussions were particularly interesting, as they revealed different approaches between book and textile conservators. Sutcliffe mainly works with textiles for museum display, whereas SUL conservators were considering treatment for actively used books. Their understanding of acceptable levels of intervention also differed based on treatment norms for their specialty fields. For instance, Sutcliffe's initial treatment suggestions did not take into account the amount of access to internal binding components that book conservators are comfortable gaining during treatment. However, certain book treatment approaches had become habitual for SUL conservators, and conversations with Sutcliffe yielded much needed fresh perspectives.

Like the first batch of items sent by EAL in 2021, the second batch of treatment materials sent in 2023 were side-stitched bindings in cloth-covered wrappers. Figure 6 shows

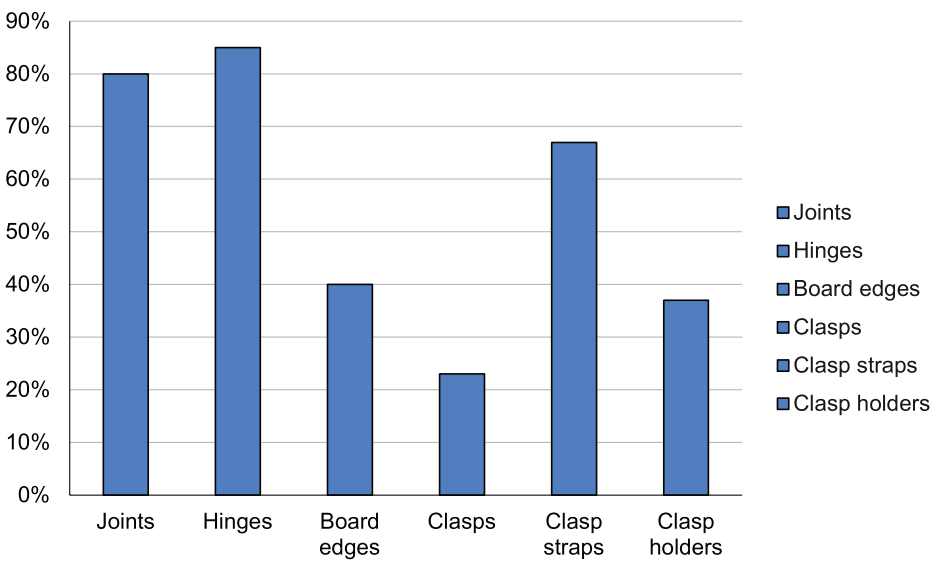


Fig. 6. Wrapper components in need of treatment for trial treatment items.

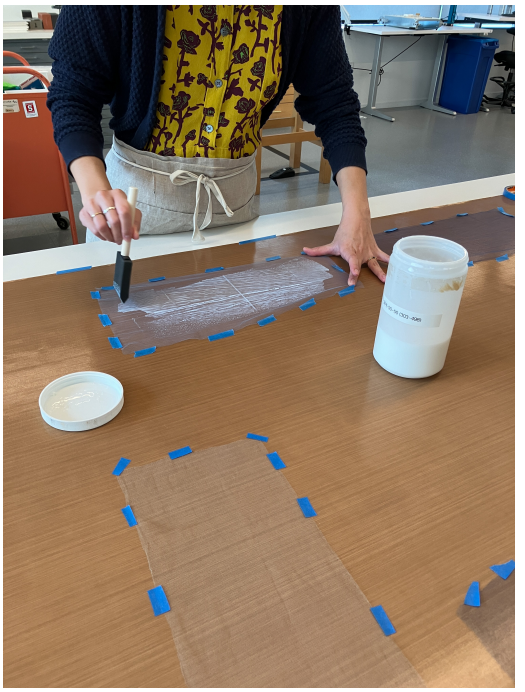


Fig. 7. Coating dyed pieces of nylon bobbinet with a Lascaux adhesive mix.

the percentage of different wrapper components needing treatment in the second batch of books. Most items had failing joints and hinges, with nonfunctional clasps due to damage of clasp straps, holders, and the clasps themselves. SUL conservators were particularly interested in testing repairs on these areas using adhesive-coated nylon bobbinet, a technique learned during the textile treatment workshop. The recommended bobbinet, sourced from Dukeries Textiles & Fancy Goods in Nottingham, UK, is a particularly fine and sheer tulle fabric with great strength and flexibility. Book conservators at SUL saw exciting potential in its use for consolidating and supporting frayed areas and loose textile parts in bindings. To prepare the bobbinet for use on the wrappers, pieces were first dyed in a range of colors similar to the wrappers using Lanaset dyes. They were then coated with a 50:50 mixture of Lascaux 303 HV and 498 HV diluted to a range of 15% to 30% in water (fig. 7). After drying, a piece of adhesive-coated bobbinet can be cut to the shape of the repair area and reactivated in place using heat. Fills or additional support material can also be added under the bobbinet to add strength to the repairs.

In trial treatments, conservators experimented with repairs on joints and clasp straps and holders using adhesive-coated bobbinet, traditional repairs using Japanese paper and paste, and a combination of the two. Figure 8 shows how frequently a type of treatment material was used for the repair of each component of the wrappers. Conservators were initially excited about the use of the bobbinet for joint repairs with heavy fraying but found that it did not adhere very well in these areas, preferring repairs using Japanese paper and paste for joints and hinges. However, they found that the adhesive-coated bobbinet was well suited for repairs on clasp straps and holders.

One example of a successful strap repair using adhesive-coated bobbinet is the treatment of 徐文弼 [Xu Wen Bi]'s 吏治懸鏡: 8卷 [*Li zhi xuan jing -: 8 juan*] China: Qing Dynasty, 1644–1912 (East Asia Library, Stanford University Libraries, Call Number: 4673 2901) (fig. 9). The lower clasp strap was torn at the folded edge, with a previous repair tacking the clasp onto the strap with thread. Because of the movement and tension required for these components to function, this previous repair was causing further tearing on the strap. The

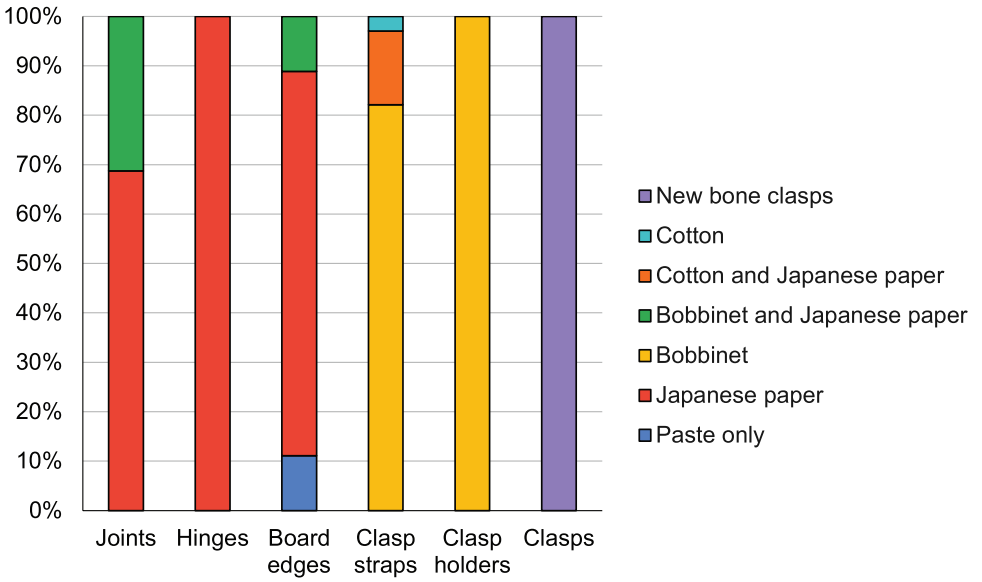


Fig. 8. Treatment materials used for each wrapper component in trial treatment items.



Fig. 9. Xu, Wen Bi 徐文弼, *Li zhi xuan jing: 8 juan* 吏治懸鏡: 8卷. China: Qing Dynasty, 1644–1912 (East Asia Library, Stanford University Libraries, Call Number: 4673 2901). Before (left) and after (right) treatment.

successful treatment of this book was carried out following these steps:

Step 1: To begin treatment, the previous repair and clasp were first removed from the strap (fig. 10). The strap pieces were then humidified and flattened, straightening out and realigning frayed threads where possible.

Step 2: A piece of adhesive-coated bobbinet was laid on top of the upper half of the strap (fig. 11). The bobbinet was cut long enough to cover both the upper and lower halves of the strap, with extensions on either side of the strap as well as where the strap is attached to the wrapper. The warmth of the conservator's fingers was used to temporarily tack the bobbinet down in place on the upper half of the strap.



Fig. 10. Detail of the clasp and the clasp strap before repair.

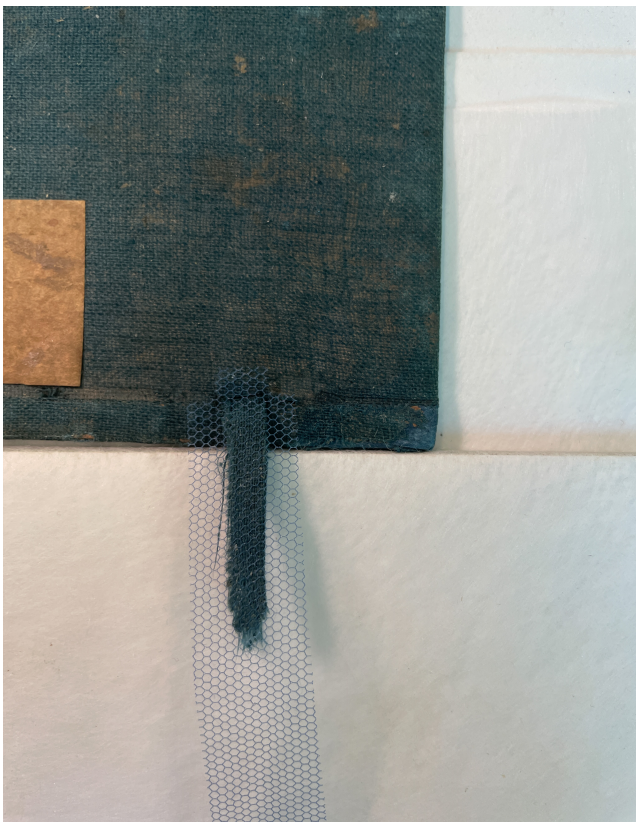


Fig. 11. A piece of adhesive-coated bobbinet on top of the upper half of the strap.

Step 3: To reinforce the strap attachment to the wrapper, an extension piece of the bobbinet was tucked into the wrapper under the covering material and set in place with heat using a small tacking iron (fig. 12).



Fig. 12. Bobbinet being tucked into the wrapper under the covering material.

Step 4: The clasp was threaded onto the upper half of the strap, with the extensions of the bobbinet folded onto the underside of the strap as needed (fig. 13). The lower half of the bobbinet was then placed over the lower half of the strap, bridging the tear between the two parts.

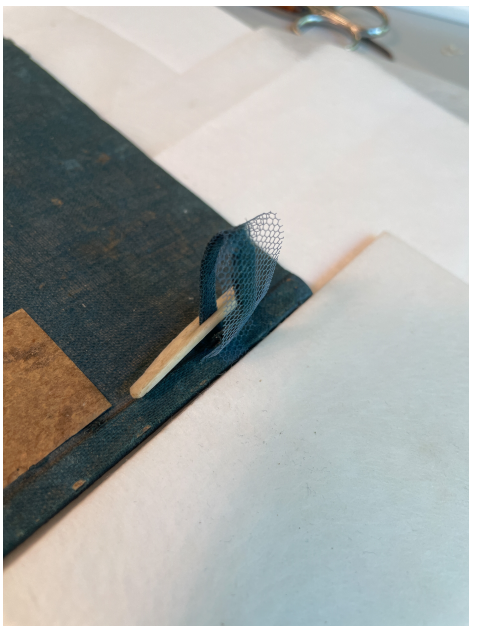


Fig. 13. The clasp threaded onto the upper half of the strap.

Step 5: The rest of the bobbinet extensions were folded around the underside of the strap (fig. 14).



Fig. 14. Bobbinet extensions folded around the strap.

Step 6: Heat was applied to set the bobbinet in place, moving the clasp out of the way as needed (fig. 15).



Fig. 15. Detail of the clasp and the clasp strap after repair.

The completed repair is visually unobtrusive, and the strap is now strong and flexible enough to be used as originally intended.

Using this method to repair damaged clasp straps and holders allows the wrappers to become functional again, and SUL conservators no longer needed to further enclose them in corrugated clamshell boxes. The successful application of textile conservation techniques on trial treatments has resulted in more regular treatment workflows from EAL. Further items from the Chinese Collection have already been identified for treatment, and conservators have also met with other EAL curators to discuss the selection of future treatment items.

Reviewing completed treatments with curators can yield helpful and sometimes surprising information on how a treatment directly impacts access. For one item that needed rebinding, conservators had a conversation with the curator for the Chinese Collection about the position of a new label. Together, they decided to place the label on the spine of the new binding. This decision seemed like a small detail to the conservators; however, the curator revealed that it had a significant impact on her work. She pointed out that traditional East Asian bindings and wrappers were intended to be stored flat, with title labels typically placed on the front board. As items at EAL need to be stored upright, front board labels make it hard to identify items on the shelves, and the action of retrieving and replacing items abrades the labels. These discussions about how treatments impact use and access will continue to inform conservation work on these collections. Considering the positive outcomes of these kinds of conversations, one of the conservators' next goals is to collaborate with EAL curators to design sympathetic enclosures for fascicles with missing wrappers or inadequate preservation enclosures. Together, conservators and curators will consider how to best integrate traditional formats with preservation best practices to design an optimal enclosure for current use and storage conditions.

CONCLUSIONS: FURTHER COLLABORATIONS WITH EAL AND BEYOND

Beyond treatment work, Conservation Services' growing relationship with EAL has also spurred more discussions with curatorial, technical, and public services staff about preservation best practices for security tags, storage, and handling. In the past year, conservators worked with EAL staff on care and handling training specific to their collection material, as well as providing guidance on exhibit display. Taken together, expanding outreach efforts, the development of documentation forms for specific types of collection materials, and the acquisition of new treatment techniques have strengthened Conservation Services' partnership with a relatively new "client" library and expanded treatment possibilities. SUL conservators view this collaboration as a model for engaging with other branch libraries, collections, and departments, addressing their unique cultural and material needs through thoughtful conservation practices.

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SOURCE OF MATERIALS

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