THE LIBRARY OF THE HONG KONG BRANCH OF
THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY

J. L. Y. CHAN

In the early days of Empire, when western institutions permeated around the world as a result of colonisation in the nineteenth century, libraries were among the first community organisations established wherever foreign settlements developed. Some of the libraries began as informal shared collections of reading materials, but a few developed a specialty of publications providing sources of information about the host country and its culture. This paper traces the development of the Library of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, its progress and growth since inception, and addresses some of the concerns faced by the Library.

The Royal Asiatic Society

The establishment of the Asiatic Society dates back to 1784 when a group of interested traders, missionaries, diplomats and administrators founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta, the then capital of British India. This provided the impetus for the formation of the Royal Asiatic Society in London (now known as the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland) in March 1823 which again gave rise to the founding of other branches, in Bombay and Madras in 1838, in Ceylon in 1845, in Japan in 1875, in Malaya in 1878, and in Korea in 1900. In China, two branches were established, the Hong Kong Branch (formerly named the China Branch) started in 1847 followed by the North China Branch in Shanghai in 1857/58. The aim of the Royal Asiatic Society and its branches is ‘... investigation of the subjects connected with and for the encouragement of science, literature and the arts, in relation to Asia.’ As such, they serve as fora for discussion and greater understanding of Asian culture.

The Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society had actually grown out of a Medico-Chirurgical Society which was founded in 1845, initially constituted as the China Branch in January 1847 with the effort of Sir John F. Davis, the then Governor, himself a founder member of the Royal Asiatic Society in London. Due to dissent and feuds within the trading community in Hong Kong, the China Branch collapsed in
May 1859 after the departure of Sir John Bowring, but was revived with the approval of the parent Society in London and reconstituted as the Hong Kong Branch in December 1959 under the active patronage of the Governor, Sir Robert Black. It is currently very active and is in a sound financial position.

The Library

Similar to other branches, the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society set up a collection of books within its field of interest, relating to Asia and its culture. As a result of the merger with the Medico-Chirurgical Society, it had the benefit of inheriting all the books from this Society.

The Society in Hong Kong was not as fortunate as its Shanghai counterpart where the Government, in 1868, provided a site for its building at a nominal rent and later granted it in perpetuity to the Society. For many years, the Hong Kong Branch did not have any permanent site, and thus its collection moved from place to place.

In the early days, in 1849, as allowed by the then governor Sir S. G. Bonham, the collection was housed in a room at the Supreme Court building where the Society had its meetings. In 1859, when the Society ran into difficulties, the, by now, valuable collection of 400 books was placed in trust with the Morrison Education Society (formed in Canton in 1835) which, from 1855, had also kept its library in the Supreme Court house. In November 1869, when the Duke of Edinburgh visited the Colony to open the first City Hall, the Morrison Education Society presented its own library as well as that of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society to the first City Hall Public Library to serve as the reference collection. This laid the corner stone for the future relationship of the Society with the Hong Kong Public Libraries which eventually would become the permanent home for the Society’s collection. In fact, following the resuscitation on the Hong Kong Branch in 1959, the President’s first annual report stressed the need for “a meeting place of our own where we can build our Oriental library which should fill a special need ...” and expressed the hope that some accommodation could be made available in the City Hall. However, this was not realized until after several movements of both the Society and the collection.
In 1957, with the generous support of Mr. R.E. Lawry (Honorary Secretary), the British Council in Gloucester Building became the home of the Society where it held its meetings and lectures to members. The Library’s collection was accordingly kept in the British Council’s Library. But shortage of space soon became a problem which necessitated the splitting of the collection. Mr. H.A. Ryding, the then Hong Kong University Librarian as well as the Society’s Honorary Librarian, extended an offer to house some of the rarer volumes and the growing stock of exchange periodicals. This unsatisfactory division of the Library persisted after the closure of the British Council Library in 1975 when all the books were moved to the Public Records Office Library with the kind permission of the Government Archivist, while the periodicals (current and bound volumes) and pamphlets were sent to the Hong Kong University Library.

In 1977, when the Society joined the newly built Hong Kong Arts Centre as a constituent member, it was able to rent a small room for use of members and place its growing collection in the Kotewall Library within the Centre. The Hong Kong Arts Centre is a privately funded body dedicated to the promotion of culture and performing arts. Its focal position for the arts in Hong Kong together with the great efforts of the Honorary Librarian, Mr. Ryding, resulted in a spectacular increase in the use of the Library. The collection also grew rapidly through enthusiastic contributions from members. Unfortunately, in 1985, prompted by financial considerations, the Arts Centre reorganised and the Society had to move.

With the help of the Hong Kong Library Association, the Society’s Library found a new home in 1985, on permanent loan to the Urban Council’s Kowloon Central Library, the newest and largest addition to the Urban Council’s Public Library Service at that time. The event was marked with an exhibition, in November 1987, of the Society’s collection of books on China and Hong Kong with a supporting series of talks to publicise the valuable collection. A catalogue of the exhibited collection was also compiled and published for the occasion.

In 1994, recognising the need for a central location for members to use the books effectively, the Chief Librarian of the Urban Council, Mr. Michael Mak, agreed to members’ petition to relocate the books to the Reference Library at the Hong Kong City Hall, when the High
Block was expanded and renovated. The Society's collection was housed in a Special Collection room in the City Hall Library.

Collection expansion with a resulting shortage of accommodation is a common problem amongst all libraries. While members appreciated the convenient location and ease of access with the City Hall Library, some members lamented that the room was becoming very crowded, making it very difficult to browse the collection. Although the Chief Librarian, Mr. Mak, acknowledged their concern, not much could be done since the City Hall Library was experiencing similar space problems for its entire collection. The situation was ultimately relieved with the building of the new Hong Kong Central Library at Moreton Terrace in Causeway Bay. This was officially opened on 16 May 2001, and comes with well-equipped modern facilities, and a spacious and pleasant environment. The Society's collection, as part of the Reference collection, was relocated to the new Central Reference Section. The Main Collection of post-1900 materials is shelved in the Special Collections area while pre-1900 materials (with selected rare post-1900 materials) are housed in the new Rare Book Room. Compact shelving is provided to maximize storage capacity with adequate room for expansion. A comfortable reading area is also available for users to consult the materials.

The Collection

Since the acquisition, through inheritance, of the Medico-Chirurgical Society's collection, the Library continues to expand through donations, purchases and international exchanges. Periodic appeals are made by presidents of the Society for gifts of books. While many members generously send donations to the Library, Dr. James Hayes has to be acknowledged for his relentless contribution to the building up of the Society's substantial and valuable collection. Dr Hayes (HKBRAS President from 1983-1989) has been largely responsible for book purchases, especially during his presidency, augmenting the Library's size to around 3,000. Subsequent to retirement in Australia, he still actively searches for modestly-priced, hard-to-find books in second-hand bookstores, for the Society.

The Society now possesses an excellent quality Library. The collection consists of books, periodicals, pamphlets, photo albums,
microforms, audiovisual materials, and CD-ROMs, covering oriental subjects and cultures, in varied languages, and has become a fine reference source. Some of the books provide eye-witness accounts of China over the past years. Many of these are old and out of print, available to the public only in this Library.

The Society has also established exchange programmes with many learned societies all over the world. The Journal forms the basis of the Library and sufficient numbers are printed for exchange. The Journal has a book review section which helps to bring in a useful nucleus of publications. Of high academic standards and interest, there has been an increasing demand for it from members and scholars overseas. The Collection is growing steadily as a result of the many useful exchanges established with other institutions.

Collection access

Post-1900 materials are available for loan. For security and preservation of rare and valuable materials, pre-1900 materials (with selected rare post-1900 materials) which might be difficult to replace are only for in-house use. The collection is also open to the academic community, students and the general public as it is the intention of the Society to aid scholarly research on China and the Far East.

Bibliographic aids


In addition, the Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society is one of the journals enlisted in the University of Hong Kong Libraries’ digital project on Hong Kong Journals Online which contains scholarly journals published in Hong Kong. This database is open to access worldwide and allows browsing of table of contents.
and keyword searching of author, title and journal. The full text of the articles will be displayed if copyright clearance has been obtained. Together with the printed indexes, the database, which provides greater coverage, and fast and convenient searching capabilities, will greatly assist scholars in locating information in the Journal for their research on Hong Kong and the Far East.

Automation

With computerisation of the collection at the City Hall Library, the Society's collection has become far more accessible than it was in the past. The Dynix Library System makes available bilingual access to the Society's records of both western and East Asian materials. Books, journals and other materials can be more efficiently retrieved by searching the automated catalogue, by author, title, subject, and/or keywords. The old printed card catalogues are no longer used and have been discarded. In November 1997, the system was further enhanced to allow remote access to the collection via the Hong Kong Public Libraries online catalogue. Users who are connected to the network may access the catalogue in offices or at home, and no longer have to take special trips to the Library for required information.

In support of the Hong Kong Government's Digital 21 initiative, the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society created an Internet website in 2001. This was done by Ms. Moody Tang and the website provides information on the Society, its history, activities, and publications on the Internet. Also, with the establishment of a hyperlink to the Hong Kong Public Libraries' online catalogue, the website offers an alternative gateway to the Society's collection. It also serves as a powerful vehicle in promoting the Society and its collection to scholars, libraries, institutions, and the world at large.

Conclusion

Founded in 1847, the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, through the dedication and support of its members, will continue to strive to provide a forum for the sharing of knowledge and experience, and discussion of common interests. The Library, moved to the new Hong Kong Central Library in May 2001, has finally found a home with modern well-equipped facilities where its excellent and
unique collection will be able to serve a much broader scholarly audience in the pursuit of Asian studies and scholarship.

NOTES


4. Dr. James Hayes, the then President, selected a collection of books for an exhibition jointly presented by the Urban Council Public Libraries and the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society held in the Urban Council Kowloon Central Library between 18 November and 1 December 1987. *A Catalogue of Books on China and Hong Kong in the Royal Asiatic Society (Hong Kong Branch) Collection* was also compiled and printed, and was available free to the public at the exhibition.
Hong Kong Arts Centre