NOTES ON HONG KONG LIBRARIES IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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Those of us who have watched the rapid development of libraries of all kinds in Hong Kong since the new University Library building was opened in 1961 may sometimes think that there is no library history worth considering for the first hundred years of the existence of the Colony. Certainly an appeal to members of the Hong Kong Library Association, made some two years ago, for any information on the early history of Hong Kong libraries met with no immediate response. Later, however, my colleague Mr. G. W. Bonsall in searching through local newspapers and other sources for information on other subjects came across a number of items about libraries, which he kindly brought to my notice. The present article is based upon this, slightly augmented from other materials, and in no way purports to be a comprehensive history of Hong Kong libraries up to 1900. It is evident that much more remains to be found by the diligent searcher before such a history can be written. For the moment, however, this brief sketch based on what has so far come to light may be of interest as an introduction to Hong Kong's library history.

Foremost of the early libraries in the Colony is undoubtedly the Victoria Library and Reading Rooms. 'Colonial', writing in 1933, stated: “A privately organised library was established in Hong Kong as far back as 1848. A small library with attached reading rooms was run by this organisation for some years, and really formed the basis on which the City Hall library was subsequently established.” Although 'Colonial' does not name the library, he goes on to say: “In 1871, probably in view of the coming into being of the public library, the original institution, retaining its more or less private character, was organised into a club, which was known as the Victoria Club.” As will be seen later, this makes it certain that the reference is to the Victoria Library.

The next reference found to the Victoria Library & Reading Rooms is a report of the Annual General Meeting held on June

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12th, 1852. This records a rearrangement of the books, and since “proper classification was out of the question” they were arranged according to size, so as to give a uniformity of appearance. A printed catalogue was produced under the direction of Mr. W. F. Bevan, assisted by Mr. A. Dixson — the latter was Secretary of the Library for the year reported, and was re-elected for 1852-53. There is no record of the total number of books, but during the year 75 titles in 133 volumes were added; the number of members rose from 63 to 66 — against 19 new members 10 had left the Colony, 1 died and 5 withdrawn. The annual accounts\(^3\) balanced at $1,755.02, and the cash in hand at the end of the year was $37.11. The largest item of expenditure was “Books, periodicals and newspapers from England $675.83.” This did not include carriage, since it is stated that the Peninsular & Oriental Steam Navigation Co. kindly conveyed the monthly parcels free of charge. Rent of premises accounted for $355.00.

There had apparently been some criticism of the inaccessibility of the premises. Their exact location has not been ascertained, but an advertisement of 1852 gives Queen’s Road as the address, whereas another in 1867 gives Wyndham Street. Whether the change was made in 1852 is not clear, but the proposed new premises would, according to the Committee’s report, cost an additional $120 p.a. for rent. A search for subsequent annual reports should throw further light on this question of location. It would also be interesting if a copy of the printed catalogue of 1852 could be found.

Also in 1852, Dixson’s Hongkong Recorder contains at least three advertisements relating to the Victoria Library. The first gives notice of a meeting of the committee to be held at 8 p.m. on 21st June, for the purpose of “the selection of Books to be ordered by the next mail.” The advertisement goes on to say that the monthly package by the last mail, which had been mislaid on board the P. & O. Co.’s receiving ship, had since been found, and as well as the usual magazines certain books had arrived, including Gutzlaff’s Life of Taou-kwang. It seems that there were at this time quite frequent purchases of books, since another notice in the Hongkong Recorder of 9th July announced the arrival of a further consignment, which included Davis’s China during the War and since the Peace and Fortune’s Tea Districts of China and India.
A note in the *Hongkong Recorder* of 2nd July, and repeated in that already mentioned of 9th July, advised “Captains of Vessels and Strangers visiting the Colony” that they might be “admitted *gratis* to the privileges of the *Reading Rooms*, on being introduced by a Member.” There is evidence that these privileges were in fact used by appreciative visitors, though in one instance with near-fatal results. In 1853 a party of officers from an American naval vessel visited the Victoria Library “to enjoy an hour’s quiet reading.” It is not stated by whom they had been introduced. The report continues:

“We were soon stretched out on easy chairs and couches conning our books. Having finished my examination of one pamphlet, I got up from my sofa on the verandah looking toward the harbor, to return it to a table spread with others some ten feet distant, and was returning to my seat with another when I saw the marble paved verandah falling in and my poor messmate, Winder, precipitated to the basement below, a distance of fourteen feet. He was completely covered and surrounded by the broken beams and masonry. My own feet were arrested on the very door sill from which the verandah separated, and I saw the sofa on which, but a moment before, I had been sitting, slide down into the abyss — but, fortunately, it struck against a side wall and thus providentially covered and protected the head of my messmate from being broken. Had I been sitting on it that end must have fallen on his head and destroyed his life, if not my own; as it happened, his arm was broken by the marble squares of the pavement, and he did not escape without other bruises and scratches. Lt. Jones, feeling his chair slipping, succeeded in springing from it into the room, and escaped. Imagine the breathless feeling with which I saw the floor give way to my very feet, and poor Winder falling.”

It appears that the cause of the accident was that the beams of the verandah had been eaten away by termites. Whether these creatures had also attacked the books is not stated, but no doubt at some period of its existence the books in the Victoria Library must have suffered from the ravages of insects, and probably also from mould, the twin pests of tropical libraries. Certainly some of the volumes in the Morrison Library, to which reference will be made
We now move on fifteen years, to 1867, when the Victoria Library had fallen on evil days. No doubt a further search would reveal more of its history in the years between, but this must wait for a future article. On 21st January an editorial in the Evening Mail opens “It seems probable that the decline and fall of the Victoria Library will afford material for the local historian during this year of grace 1867.” The reason was apparently that the membership had fallen to 60, whereas to provide the necessary income from subscriptions 80 to 100 members were required (yet in the satisfactory report for 1851-52 already noted the membership had risen to only 66). The Evening Mail goes on to say “There is no advantage to be derived from membership at all equivalent to the high rate of subscription.” This rate was $2.00 a month. Although the Evening Mail praises the quality of the magazines received, it notes that there are not enough of them, and only a few of the subscribers make much use of them. Similarly so many local residents themselves subscribe to overseas newspapers that there is little demand for those taken by the Library. Of the book stock the main criticism is that it consists almost entirely of standard authors — Scott, Dickens, Thackeray and Cooper are mentioned — and neglects current literature. Most people again have their own copies of the former, but would be glad to subscribe if they might be kept up to date with modern writers. The Evening Mail editorial ends with a suggested solution, to convert the library into a book club, the books purchased to be distributed amongst the subscribers instead of being retained as the property of the institution.

This solution was not adopted, and by the end of the year, after a further decline in membership, it appeared that the gloomy prognostications in the Evening Mail editorial might be fulfilled. Before coming to that situation, however, it will be interesting to examine a list of the 34 newspapers and periodicals which the Victoria Library received regularly at this time. The list appeared in the China Mail (the new name of the Evening Mail) for February 15th, 1867, and is rather inaccurately divided into “Newspapers” — amongst which are included Punch and the Saturday Review —
and "Monthly Periodicals"—including Quarterly Review and Once a Week. The complete list is reproduced here, rearranged alphabetically:

All the Year Round
Blackwood's Magazine
Calcutta Englishman
Chambers's Journal
China Express
China Mail
Colombo Observer
Cornhill Magazine
Daily Press
Dublin's Magazine
Frank Leslie's Illustrated
Fraser's Magazine
Friend of China
Friend of India
Galignani's Messenger
Hongkong Government Gazette
Harper's Weekly
Illustrated London News
Japan Herald
London Society
Macmillan's Magazine
Navy List
North China Herald
Once a Week
Pall Mall Gazette
Punch
Quarterly Review
Saturday Review
Singapore Straits Times
Sporting Magazine
Straits Times Extra
Sydney Morning Herald
The Times
Weekly Alta

Many of these titles have, of course, long since ceased to be published, but it is perhaps surprising how many have survived, whilst others are still used for research purposes, although no longer
current, such as the *Friend of China* and *North China Herald*. The connections of the Hong Kong trading community with Australia, India and Southeast Asia, as well as with Great Britain, are represented, though there is an absence of American publications.

On May 8th of this same year, 1867, the *China Mail* carried an editorial on "Our Libraries", which makes it clear that some of the other European communities in Hong Kong were equally well provided with library facilities. The German and Portuguese clubs are mentioned as having active libraries. The article goes on to remark upon the little use which is made of the Morrison Library, not because of restrictions imposed by those in charge of it, but on account of its out of the way situation — the same criticism which had been made of the Victoria Library in 1852, and was later made of the University of Hong Kong Library in 1961. On the Victoria Library, after praising the exertions of a few in prolonging its existence, the *China Mail* continues that it is "by no means so well supported as it deserves to be." The reason, it is suggested, is that the club-libraries had to a great extent filled the place it occupied fifteen or more years before, and as the funds available for book purchases decreased with the declining membership year by year the Victoria Library had become "but an inferior copy of its more thriving brother at the English club." The *China Mail* continues by suggesting that it would be profitable for both institutions if the Morrison and Victoria Libraries were brought under one roof, and whilst preserving their separate identities allowing subscribers of the latter to use the former (and presumably vice versa). As will be seen later, this suggestion by the *China Mail* met with a more favourable response than the earlier proposal, to convert the Victoria Library into a book club. The editorial concludes with the suggestion that the combined institutes might invite the deposit of free copies of "books, papers and pamphlets upon China, Japan, the Eastern archipelago or any portion of the world tenanted by the Chinese race", in return for which a catalogue *raisonné* of these publications would be issued every three or six months, and distributed free to subscribers as a kind of advertisement. "If the same principle were extended to general literature, it would be found that a very large number of European publishers and the consignees of books in China would gladly send 'review copies'. The question of expense would be solved by adopting this plan entirely in place of purchasing new works, the sum now paid..."
for them being devoted to publishing the quarterly catalogues."

We may doubt whether these proposals, which were not attempted,
would have worked in practice without some form of compulsion
such as operates in the case of copyright deposit libraries; but it
is interesting to find this suggestion of a centralised cataloguing
agency at this early date, even if with different motives and to
serve different purposes from those of the present day organiza-
tions of this kind.

By the end of 1867, as already noted, there had been a further
decline in the membership of the Victoria Library, so that it was
inevitable that some changes in its organization should be made.
To decide what form these should take, a special general meeting
of the subscribers was called for 4.00 p.m. on 18th December. The
China Mail noted that this had unfortunately been timed to start
one hour before a rowing match between English and Scottish
"fours" organized by the Victoria Regatta Club, and feared that
the attendance at the library meeting might suffer accordingly.
However, in the event over a dozen of the 43 members turned up.
The report of the meeting is contained in the China Mail of De-
cember 18th (the Mail was an evening paper even then). The Trea-
surer, Mr. Mitchell, stated that the income from subscriptions had
fallen to about $1,000, whereas expenses were over $1,300 a year.
He went on to inform subscribers of an offer from the Club Lusi-
tano to provide a room in the new Club at a rent of $15 a month,
no extras for light or coal, and free access to the Library for
members when the Club premises were open. This seemed a most
liberal offer, but was apparently made in the hope of encouraging
members of the Library to join the Club also. If this offer, the
best which had been made, were not accepted, Mr. Mitchell said
he would recommend that the Library should be handed over to
the proposed new City Hall. He concluded by proposing accep-
tance of the offer of the Club Lusitano for one year in the first
instance. After some discussion the proposal was accepted un-
animously.

The China Mail in a leading article on the following day
applauded this decision, and paid tribute to Messrs. Mitchell,
White, Smith and Crawford, who had formed the nucleus of work-
ing members whose efforts had kept the Victoria Library going.
The Mail took the opportunity to repeat the suggestion it had
made in the previous May, that the Morrison Library should be amalgamated with the other.

Two years later, Hong Kong’s first City Hall was nearing completion, and the subject of libraries was once again in the news. An unknown writer, quoted by ‘Colonial’ in 1933, wrote on May 5th, 1869: “The library room which will be entirely completed in a few days will before long contain a collection of books properly assorted and catalogued which, if not very extensive, will at least be the best collection in South China. It may be confidently hoped that its resources will be increased by private gift... The Morrison Library which forms the nucleus of the collection is... in a state which necessitates the outlay of nearly a thousand dollars... The former Asiatic Society’s Library has also [been promised to the] librarian without... prospect of receiving with it any funds towards its restoration.”

From a much later source we learn more about the City Hall, which it is worth noting was a private enterprise, not an official one, although Government provided the building site and a grant in aid at its foundation. “In 1871 the library consisted of 8,000 volumes, 3,000 of which were unconditionally presented by the trustees of the Victoria Library.” This confirms the statement made by ‘Colonial’ and quoted earlier in this article, and vindicates the China Mail in its campaign to bring together the Victoria and Morrison Libraries. The arrangement with the Club Lusitano for the housing of the Victoria Library therefore lasted at most only four years, from 1867 to 1871. This same source also quotes the terms of the gift under which the Morrison Education Society presented its books “as a free gift for the use of the public, on condition that in consideration of this gift and of the great services of Dr. Morrison to both European and Chinese, the books be kept distinct from all other collections in the City Hall, and designated ‘the Morrison Library’ in perpetuation of the great missionary’s memory.” Although there is little call in the present day for use of the Morrison Library by the public, the conditions imposed on the gift in 1869 to the City Hall are still observed, and the Morrison Library, housed since 1914 in the University of Hong Kong Library, is kept as a separate entity named in memory of its founder. Since the story of this collection has been covered in detail elsewhere, no more will be said here about the Morrison Library.
The City Hall Library continued in existence till a much later date, beyond the scope of the present article. According to Twentieth Century Impressions, by 1908 the total stock was 3,332 in the Morrison Library. However, at this same date, according to the same source, the Hong Kong Club had over 18,000 volumes in its library, so the situation had not radically altered since the days of the Victoria Library.

There is apparently only one other library in Hong Kong the history of which goes back to the early days of the Colony. This is the library of the Supreme Court, which may in fact claim to predate the founding of the Victoria Library, since it was started by Chief Justice J. W. Hulme, who in 1847 presented his own collection of law books. Yet even eleven years later Government had made no attempt to add to this collection. The inadequacy of the Supreme Court library became a standing cause of complaint with a later Chief Justice, Sir John Smale, of whom it is said that he "seldom delivered a judgment in which he did not make the time-honoured complaint as to the state of the library." Perhaps, however, he had an ulterior motive in so doing, since in 1881 Government bought part of Sir John Smale's collection to add to the Supreme Court library — and then had to keep it for a time packed away in boxes since the room used for a library was full.

Two years later it was felt that the Supreme Court had grown sufficiently in importance to require the appointment of a librarian. The position was advertised on 1st June, 1883, at a salary of $5 a week, the duties including to give general assistance as a copying clerk in the Registrar's office as well as to take charge of the library. The first appointee was Mr. E. B. Shepherd.

The use of the Supreme Court library was not restricted to the Judiciary and Crown Law Officers, though misuse by other entitled persons resulted in the application of 'Rules for the Supreme Court Library', which were approved by the Legislative Council on 20th March, 1891. Amongst other matters, these specified that "The books shall be in the custody of a Librarian to be appointed by the Governor", surely the most high-powered appointment of a librarian that the Colony has ever known. The supervision of the Library was, however, entrusted to the Registrar of the Supreme Court, who was expected to submit an annual report on the state of the Library, including a list of books added. Books could
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be removed for use within the Court, in Chambers, or the Registry, but were not to be taken further: whether this applied only to barristers and solicitors, who were privileged to use the Library subject to the rules, or also to the Judiciary and Law Officers who were entitled to use it, is not clear.

Mr. J. W. Norton-Kyshe, the Registrar of the Supreme Court, whose useful history of the laws of Hong Kong is the source of the information on its Library, managed to persuade the Government in 1896 that an annual grant should be made for the purchase of books. In 1897 this amounted to $500, and in the following year it was doubled.12

Certainly the history of Hong Kong libraries in the nineteenth century is by no means restricted to those which have been considered in this article, although they are probably the most important. There must, for example, have been libraries in the various schools, both Government sponsored and others, though the condition of school libraries in the Colony even today suggests that they would not have been particularly well organised fifty or more years ago. Government departments other than the Supreme Court must also have had collections of books. All these possibilities, quite apart from the existence of private libraries, both Chinese and English, need to be investigated. What has been discovered so far, however, contributes to refute the common notion of Hong Kong as a cultural desert, and to indicate that library history in Hong Kong goes back almost as far as the history of the Colony itself.

NOTES

1 V. H. G. Jarrett, under the pseudonym of 'Colonial' contributed a series of articles to the South China Morning Post between 17th June, 1933 and 13th April, 1935 on "Old Hong Kong". Typescripts of these articles were rearranged alphabetically by subject and bound in four volumes (unpaginated) in the S. C. M. P. Office. By kind permission of the Managing Director, a Xerox copy of this set is available in the University of Hong Kong Library. This extract is from the article headed "Public Library."

2 Hongkong Register, vol. 25, 1852, pp. 94-5.

3 At this date (1852) prices were normally quoted in Spanish or Mexican dollars, equivalent to about 4/2d sterling.

5 By 1867 Hong Kong was minting its own dollars. The English gold sovereign was quoted at this time at HK$4.60.

6 From the article on "The City Hall" in V. H. G. Jarrett, *op. cit.*


10 *ibid.*, vol. II, p. 369.

11 *ibid.*, vol. II, p. 429.

12 *ibid.*, vol. II, p. 430.