

BRITISH LIBRARY COLLOQUIUM ON CHINA, 23-26 August 1987
 School of Oriental and African Studies, London University

Colloquium participants

The colloquium was by invitation only and there were about 60 representatives from USA, Canada, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, Holland, Italy, France, Germany, China, Taiwan and Australia as well as representatives from the major British libraries with Chinese collections. Many kinds of libraries were represented, such as those with historical collections, those with modern collections, those with teaching collections, those small specialist collections and those with larger, general collections. NLA's collection falls into the latter category. We have a larger collection than SOAS, Cambridge and Oxford, and more current serial subscriptions than all of the libraries represented there.

British Library contributions

In conjunction with the Colloquium a special exhibition of Chinese curiosities had been mounted in the Kings Library of the British library. The British Library's collection has been built up over three hundred years and includes oracle bones, brightly coloured popular prints, wood block printed observations of a lunar eclipse of 1761, miniature sets of maps wrapped in yellow silk, early wood and bamboo ships, paper scrolls, concertina books with jade covers, theadbound books and theatrical posters. The convenor of the colloquium, Dr Francis Wood, presented a paper on the same theme.

Mr Barry Bloomfield, also of the British Library, spoke on collection development and the need for conspectus amongst European libraries in times of decreasing government support for libraries and education. He said that there are no more than 300 university teachers with an interest in China and not more than 1,000 students at all levels in Britian. The largest centres for Chinese studies outside China itself are in North America and Japan, he said.

A third paper from the British Library was on Chinese collections in the Science Reference and Information Service (the former BLLD). This dealt mainly with current serials and was delivered by Mr R. Kyang. Dr Helen Wallis spoke on Chinese maps and globes in the British Library and illustrated her paper with excellent slides. A fifth paper dealt with conservation of Chinese materials in the British Library, by Mr P. Lawson.

Mr Anthony Farrington, an archivist from the India Office Library and Records Department of the British Library, gave a sixth paper on Chinese materials to do with the East India Trade held in the India Office Library, including material on the establishment of the Chinese community in Britain. He spoke on the proposed exchange of Sino-British relations microfilm. As well as the

above, yet another BL staff member, Mr John Cayley of the Oriental Material Section, gave a paper on UK perspectives on automation and Chinese studies. He also demonstrated the RLIN CJK system currently undergoing a six month's trial period at BL.

British university contributions

Although Oxford, Cambridge and Durham University Libraries were represented, only SOAS provided written contributions. There were papers from them on their printed materials, their manuscript collection and an overview of Chinese studies in British universities.

The SOAS printed materials collection is around 100,000 volumes including 3,000 serials, many of which are in microform. Only 500 of these serials are current. The Oxford, Cambridge and Durham collections are considerably smaller and all of these are smaller than the NLA, which has a total of 225,000 volumes including 4,677 serial titles, 2,588 of which are current subscriptions. Neither Oxford nor Cambridge collect very much contemporary material; this is left mainly to SOAS and the British Library. There is no figure available for total volumes in the British Library, but their total serial titles are only 2,500 and 650 of these are current.

The manuscript holdings in libraries in Britain greatly exceed Australian collections. It would be fair to say that our manuscript collection have little significance, despite the fact that we do have a few rare and unique items such as the Verbiest maps and the Taiping Rebellion posters.

Notable manuscript collections at SOAS include those of the China Association, Chinese Maritime Customs, those of various missionary societies, John Swire and Sons Ltd., and many private papers, including those of Gladys Aylward, Sir Charles Addis, his son Sir John Addis, and Sir John Pratt. Notable manuscript collections in the British library include the Stein collection, the most important part of which is the Dunhuang paper scrolls, the Morrison collection, the Gordon papers, the Boxer collection and some albums from the East India Company and the China Factory Records held in the India Office Library.

The paper on Chinese studies in the UK painted a fairly gloomy picture for the present compared with its illustrious past which began in 1805. This commanding position was overtaken by the USA in the 1920s but there is a Contemporary China Centre at Oxford now, and at SOAS, and Chinese is taught at six universities in Britain; some forty to fifty academics are involved in teaching Chinese and another fifty have Chinese studies posts related to their disciplines.

Another SOAS academic, Dr Lo, presented a paper on Chinese card games described in ts'ung shu, or Chinese collectanea. A curator from the Victoria and Albert Museum presented a paper on Chinese artefacts and how they have changed over the years.

European contributions

While many countries of Europe were represented by delegates and took part in the discussion, only one paper from France was presented. This was on the Dunhuang and Central Asian Manuscripts. Another paper was tabled but not presented, describing the Far Eastern Library collection in Stockholm.

Australian contributions

Professor Lo Huimin, Head of the Department of Far Eastern History at ANU, presented a paper on the Morrison Manuscript Collection held at the Mitchell Library at the State Library of NSW. His paper was not available for distribution but, like all the others, will be published in the final report of the Colloquium. Pauline Haldane tabled the description of NLA's Chinese collection and selective list of Chinese ts'ung shu held in NLA, and presented copies of our serial and newspaper lists to the British Library.

Chinese contributions

China and Taiwan were represented and both presented papers, some in English and some in Chinese. From Taiwan there was an excellent illustrated paper on the collection in the Palace Museum in Taipei. This collection houses many ancient Chinese treasures with early books bearing the seals of successive emperors and rare early editions of Mencius and Buddhist sutras in tapestry. It is very strong in local history and genealogy. It is catalogued in chronological order with indexes to personal names. The catalogue is published. They are at present engaged in the process of microfilming their rare book collection.

The papers from China dealt with the Dunhuang manuscripts, paper making, census registers, rare books and the criteria for inclusion of rare books in a union list and, finally, Chinese bibliographic data processing.

American contributions

The American papers were both on the automation of Chinese characters. The first was by Andrew Wang of OCLC, who demonstrated their system. The database is much smaller than that of RLIN's CJK database but Mr Wang hopes to eventually include the catalogues of China and Taiwan. John Haeger, Vice President of RLG, gave a broad update of the RLIN CJK project which has made much progress in the last eight years. They hope very shortly to offer their system to users who will run it from an IBM PC in their second generation CJK enhancements to RLIN.

Visit to Oriental Collections Department

Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books has been renamed Oriental Collections. During my visit there I saw a demonstration of the current RLIN CJK system and had a print-out of the answer to a reference query on Namban (foreign art in Japan). I was presented with a copy of the Union List of Current Chinese Serials compiled by the China Library Group and published by the British Library. This list is in romanised form only using the Pinyin system.

Visit to SOAS Library

Here I saw a demonstration of the OCLC system for cataloguing Chinese books.

Visit to Victoria and Albert Museum Library

This library has a sizeable collection of books and periodicals on East Asian art and East Asian reference books. The catalogues are in loose-leaf folders arranged by date and by subject. For instance, they had 24 entries on Namban art in the subject folder.

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