

Memories of the Workshop in Japanese Antiquarian Materials at Tenri University Library, June 2013

by Michelle Hall and Ayako Hatta

Michelle Hall, The University of Melbourne Library:

I was thrilled to have been selected to join with colleagues from around the world to take part in the workshop in Tenri and learn more about cataloguing and taking care of old and rare Japanese materials. We have some items in the Melbourne Japanese collection which have either been very badly catalogued or not catalogued at all, and I now feel I have the skills to make a good effort at describing these materials so they can be found and recognised in the catalogue by potential readers.

The things I remember most about the course were perhaps the weather - it was unbelievably hot! - the lovely colleagues I got to know from libraries around the world, and the unstintingly helpful teachers and their assistants we learned from every single day.

The course was intense: two weeks straight through with no weekend break, and even the teachers were with us all the way through. I admired their tenacity and energy, as well as their depth of knowledge and willingness to share all they knew. In fact, it wasn't until the end of the course, the final evening, when we really discovered the hidden depths of some of the teachers - specialists in reading certain types of characters or handwritten scripts, but all very humble and devoted to their work.

I enjoyed the mental puzzles of working out what might be the author or title or publisher, learning how to decipher dates from the use of Chinese calendar/zodiac animals, and making the bindings of a notebook out of paper. I learnt about many useful websites for helping work out seals (red ownership stamps) as well as older, more complex kanji which are no longer in use.

While I could not call myself an expert by any means, I feel that with my local fellow workshop attendees Ayako from Monash and Chie from Auckland we have a great cluster of specialist knowledge that will be very useful in the Oceania area. And of course, we have our colleagues overseas as well with whom we can exchange ideas and keep the knowledge updated. It is a great example of worldwide library collaboration at its best, and I honestly don't know how I can thank the organising committee or the Tenri library staff enough.

Ayako Hatta, Monash University Library:

Tenri City is the only city in Japan that is named after a religion (i.e. Tenrikyō). The final stop on the train line which I took made me feel that there was no way back and I would have to attend this workshop. The city was very well maintained with beautiful flowers blooming in hot summer. This atmosphere calmed my soul down and made me feel welcome.

This intensive workshop provided us with in-depth knowledge of how to handle Japanese antiquarian materials. The workshop was held in June which is Japan's hot and wet season. My first impression was of the very large number of antiquarian materials held in Tenri University Library. At the same time I was impressed by the library staff's knowledge and professionalism and their enormous patience in looking after all levels of this year's workshop participants.

I enjoyed the whole course, particularly hands-on sessions followed by lectures. The exercises for understanding the cataloguing procedures were excellent and straightforward. They also provided understanding of the mysterious materials themselves. The class method of working in pairs enabled me to learn from other participants. It was very useful being shown how to understand technical terms for both manuscripts and wood block printed objects. This involved decoding old characters and script, using tools for converting the traditional Japanese calendar to solar calendar dates and glean information from name stamps and determining ownership in both print materials and online versions. It felt like scales falling from my eyes!

It was interesting to learn about Japan's unique culture of producing and preserving manuscripts and wood block printed objects. The manuscripts go back to the 7th century and the wood block printed objects go back to the 8th century. One item which was examined in the class was a 19th century work. This was produced by a merchant called, Tatsuyuki Okukura who had an obsession for fish and who had a fabulous idea to produce a pictorial book of under-sea world. He produced the first volume of a projected series, entitled 「水族写真鯛部」 "Snapper". The snapper is the king of fish and Japanese believe that it will bring happiness. Because he went all out to spend on the best, fabulous colours, the series could not be continued and only volume one was completed.

The experience of this ten day workshop in Tenri was like the distillation of a thousand years of knowledge for me.



Photo: (from the left) Chie Emslie, Michelle Hall & Ayako Hatta

Please look forward to the article from Chie Emslie from Auckland University Library, the third participant from the Oceania region, who will submit her report for the next EALRGLA Newsletter.