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HONG KONG LIBRARIES HAVE GIANT SHOPPING LIST

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One of the world's biggest library expansion programs is now under way in Hong Kong. Over the next 10 years, this small, densely populated British territory will go shopping for more than two million books.

The Hong Kong government is providing homes for a growing number of people in multi-million-dollar new towns being built in the New Territories -- that part of the mainland beyond Kowloon. Along with all the other facilities that people need to live a full life, libraries will be provided in each centre. A major central library to service the New Territories will be built in the town of Tsuen Wan; there will be major regional libraries in Shatin and Tuen Mun, seven district libraries with a full range of services in the smaller new towns, and small libraries for Sai Kung and Cheung Chau. People living in the distant villages of Tai O, Mui Wo, Peng Chau, and Lamma Island will also be provided for.

"Because of the inherent respect of the Chinese for learning there is a tremendous demand for library services," says Mr. Randolph O'Hara, chief librarian for the New Territories. "There is a big interest among young people particularly, and we expect this will continue as they become adults." It is estimated that the library expansion program will cost about HK\$50 million (US\$10 million) in books and equipment and HK\$100 million (US\$20 million) in buildings.

In the past, most of Hong Kong's population was concentrated in the urban centres of Kowloon and Hong Kong Island. Public library services really only started in 1962 when the first Urban Council Library opened at City Hall. Development was fast, and today the council operates 11 district libraries, two mobile libraries, three record-listening libraries, and a video library. Two more district libraries are planned. These libraries have a combined stock of over a million books 16,000 audio-visual items and they subscribe to 2,400 newspapers and periodicals. The registered library membership stands at about 824,000, and in 1979 3.8 million books were issued for home reading, while a further 3.9 million were consulted in the libraries -- including the reference libraries, which dealt with 51,000 inquiries.

Although the Urban Council's jurisdiction does not extend to the New Territories, it was logical that its library experience should be made use of in developments there. Therefore, the public library program under way is under the administrative direction of the Cultural Services Department, but it is distinct from the Urban Council libraries financially, administratively, and in staff.

There are already nine libraries in the New Territories but most are fairly small. "We are starting from the very beginning," said Mr. O'Hara, "We are going to have purpose-built libraries. The central library at Tsuen Wan will be the main facility and all the other libraries will be able to draw on

the book stock and facilities there." Even so, the libraries at Shatin and Tuen Mun will be sizeable facilities, and they, in turn, will act as resource centres for the smaller libraries of other towns.

"At present a great deal of the usage of our libraries is in relation to formal studies," said Mr. O'Hara. "Students with few resources at home obviously come to the library to study. But a new pattern is now emerging where young people come to the library for a variety of purposes."

By the time the New Territories library expansion has been completed, a total of about 2.1 million books will have been purchased. About 150,000 have already been bought. Reference books will make up about 300,000 of the total, with most of the rest intended for home reading. There will be about 600,000 books for children, and also a wide range of audio-visual media. Once the system is fully operational, there will be about three books in Chinese to every one in English.

An interesting facility of the New Territories library system will be the mobile library which will move around the smaller population centers, bringing books to people who are unable to make regular visits to the larger libraries. Mr. O'Hara sees the mobile library as being of particular value to the very young, to the elderly, and to the handicapped.

By 1991, when the New Territories development program is complete, Hong Kong will have 40 libraries, large and small, static and mobile, providing books and audio-visual material throughout the territory. Says Urban Services Department Director of Cultural Services, Mr. Darwin Chen: "Our library program, in both scope and pace, is second to none anywhere in the world."