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IN SEARCH OF BOOKS IN HONG KONG AND TAIPEI

Wen-ling Liu, Indiana University

As a newly-appointed Librarian for East Asian Studies, I was eager to learn more about the book trade and publishing trends in East Asia, so the Hong Kong Book Fair in July 2002 offered me a good chance of broadening my knowledge. Led by Frank Xu from the Brooklyn Public Library, sixteen librarians from the United States participated in the event, an opportunity we partially owed to the Hong Kong Book Fair/U.S. Librarian Invitation Program jointly sponsored by the American Library Association and the Hong Kong Book Fair. I was very glad that three other CEAL members were traveling with me: Karen Wei (University of Illinois, Urbana Champagne), Ping Situ (University of Arizona Library) and Annie Lin (University of California, Davis). Annie and I planned to make the best use of the trip the moment we heard that both of us were on the team. Inspired by tips from our colleagues, we contacted the Libraries of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong University, both gifts and exchanges partners, as well as vendors to many libraries in North America. We intended to meet their subject librarians to discuss with them their collection development plans, compare them with ours, and visit their rare-book collections.

About Hong Kong

Because of the vicissitudes of over one hundred years of British colonial rule, Hong Kong has been transformed from a small fishing village into an international city. However, in his book 《香港不是真正的中國》, Professor Leo Lee points out that Hong Kong is not the real China; it is China only in the minds of many Westerners (香港不是真正的中國, 而是西方人心目中的中國1). The exotic quality of the city is magnified by the fact that the fashionable West and the tradition-oriented East co-exist conspicuously in an area only slightly larger than a thousand square kilometers. Situated between the South China Sea and the Mainland, Hong Kong is comprised of Hong Kong Island, Kowloon peninsula just opposite, and the New Territories, including 235 outlying islands. Under the principle of “one country, two systems,” the area became the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China on 1 July 1997. This policy allows Hong Kong to continue to enjoy a bustling free-market economy with few tariff restrictions. The population is a little over 7 million people, with nearly 95% being ethnic Chinese. The other major groups are Filipino, Indonesian, and British. The current government policy allows 55,000 Mainland Chinese citizens, primarily wives and children of Hong Kong permanent residents, to immigrate to Hong Kong each year.

When I arrived in Hong Kong on a very hot day, I was struck not so much by the humidity but by the overcrowding and the amazing contrast between landscape and cityscape: the blue-green South China Sea on the one hand, and the skyscrapers and bustling streets on the other. The Empire Hotel (皇悦大酒店), where our delegation resided, is conveniently located on Hennessy Road—a few blocks away from the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre (HKCEC) and close to an infamous red-light district. During the next few evenings, whenever we strolled back from dinner-and-shopping excursions, we willy-nilly became witnesses to the world of Suzie Wong.

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1 李歐梵. 《香港不是真正的中國》. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2001. p. 56.
Annie and I were very lucky to have a perfect guide in Mr. S. M. Au (歐錦文), who had been recommended to us by a joint friend. Mr. Au, a cataloger in the Chinese University of Hong Kong Library and a man with broad knowledge of Chinese culture and history, helped us experience the different social facets of life in Hong Kong. He took us to taste the famous seafood in an upscale business and shopping area (中環), went with us on a ferry to view the magnificent evening skyline of the city, and led us through a maze of alleys filled with street vendors and shops. Since Hong Kong is a city where “an inch of place is an inch of gold” (寸土寸金), it is not surprising that most buildings are quite small and that shops often share their floor spaces with each other. I could not but think of the famous quote of the novelist Ailing Zhang, “Hong Kong is a sumptuous but sad city” (香港是一個華美的但是悲哀的城市)2.

An important international city, Hong Kong also offers some examples of world-renowned architecture, and the Convention and Exhibition Centre at Wanchai, where the Book Fair took place, is certainly one of them. Overlooking the Victoria Harbour, the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre is a primary tourist site. It first opened in 1988, and an addition, built on an artificial strip of land extending into the ocean, was completed in 1997 and more than doubled the structure’s size. Its impressive aluminum roof suggests the rhythmic movement of a seabird's wing facing China. Many tourists take pictures in front of the sculpture of the Golden Bauhinia, which symbolizes the British handover of Hong Kong.

The Book Fair’s welcoming lunch, which featured uncommon dishes such as double-broiled shark’s fin with cabbage and assorted seafood, was held at the Golden Bauhinia Restaurant inside the Convention Centre. Mr. Benjamin Chau, Director of the Exhibitions Department, pointed out that in any given year about 1,500 events and almost one hundred major exhibitions take place in the Centre. One of its goals is to rejuvenate Hong Kong as a business as well as cultural hub in East Asia, and to strengthen the city’s competitiveness, especially vis-à-vis Shanghai.

Located on the lower level of the Convention Centre, the Trade Development Council (TDC) provides quality business information services to Hong Kong companies. It houses the largest collection of market and trade information in the city, and includes up-to-date electronic databases and a new state-of-the-art Multimedia Centre. It contains more than 40,000 books, 2,000 periodicals, 500 statistical tables, 160,000 newspaper clippings, 70 CD-ROM titles, and numerous videos. The most convenient facility for us was the free Internet service provided there. We sent e-mail messages to our colleagues in the U.S. and elsewhere, and searched the databases in our home libraries.

The 13th Hong Kong Book Fair (http://hkbookfair.tdc.org.hk/)

One of the largest and most prestigious events of its kind in China, the Hong Kong Book Fair, sponsored by TDC and held in the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, was spread over three large halls. 373 exhibitors from China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan participated in the Fair. The main hall was reserved for well-known book publishers; hall two was occupied by periodical vendors and shops featuring stationary and toys; hall three offered video and media

2 Ailing Zhang (張愛玲) in her short story “Mo li xiang pian” (茉莉香片) wrote that “Hong Kong is a sumptuous but sad city” (香港是一個華美的但是悲哀的城市.)
services as well as children’s publications (each visiting child spent an estimated HK$10,000 at the Fair). Officially, the Hong Kong Book Fair provided “first-hand access to the latest publications for public and academic libraries; the latest in music, software, and electronic publishing”; and the “opportunity to purchase materials at large discounts.” Over 430,000 people attended the Fair, whose safety was ensured by the presence of numerous security guards.

The latest popular books from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan were the main attraction for most visitors, including our librarians from the Brooklyn Public Library and the Queens Borough Public Library, which serve large Chinese communities in New York City. Since these librarians had attended the Fair in the past, they came well-prepared and well-supplied with substantial budgets. Newcomers, however, could easily get lost in the crowds and the colorful displays of books. We were fortunate that Joint Publishing, the host to our group, provided some of us with personal assistants who would help with the quick jotting-down of orders. The rest of us, with complimentary pens and book pads in hand, strolled down the hallways and visited the booths at a leisurely pace. We browsed the popular titles in order to get a feeling for the current cultural beat, and we explored hard-to-find material as well as important academic publications.

Each of us wore a red tag, which identified us as special guests of the Centre and afforded us instant access to publishers. Some of their representatives made special efforts to discuss news and trends with us. Large publishers—such as Shangwu (商务), Zhonghua (中华), Joint (三联), and some university presses—set up spacious booths and displayed many old research books together with new publications. Two long rows of booths were reserved for publishers from China Mainland. Among them, Shanghai Publishing had the largest display; I was surprised to find most of their books gone toward the end of the Fair.

I was especially excited when I discovered some valuable and presumably out-of-print titles that would be useful additions to the collection at Indiana University. With free Internet service, I searched I.U.’s library database to make sure that there were no duplicates and then placed quite a few orders, including materials about Hong Kong and Macau as well as books written by local writers. Of course, one of the benefits of attending a book fair is to be able to review books first hand and to evaluate and compare the quality of publications. Assured of their high quality, I did not hesitate to purchase from the publisher Han mo xuan (翰墨軒) the complete sets of Ming jia han mo yue kan (名家翰墨月刊), Zhongguo jin dai ming jia shu hua quan ji (中國近代名家書畫全集), and Zhongguo ming jia fa shu quan ji (中國名家法書全集).

Library Visits in Hong Kong and Taipei

Judy Lu, from the Library of Congress, told us in an e-mail message before our trip that “Hong Kong is a very high-tech place with a lot of very smart and efficient professionals in the field of Asian Studies.” Her statement sums up our experience perfectly. We were warmly welcomed and given guided tours to various collections. Our colleagues not only introduced us to their libraries, but also gave us many useful pieces of advice regarding our stay in Hong Kong.

In the Chinese University of Hong Kong Libraries, Mr. Yee-ip Ho, Head of the East Asian Languages Section of the Cataloging Department, and his colleague Mr. S. M. Au briefed us on the cataloging workflow of the Library. Ms. Meliza Ng, Head of the Public Services Division, guided
us through the collections, including the Universities Service Centre for China Studies and the Rare Book Room. The Service Centre was established in 1963 and includes complete runs of Chinese provincial and national newspapers from the early 1950s, 1,800 periodicals, more than 300 newspapers, and over 800 regional and statistical yearbooks. According to Ms. Ng, many scholars from Mainland China visit the Centre’s unique collection to find primary sources about China before the Cultural Revolution.

In the Hong Kong University Libraries, Dr. Y.C. Wan (尹耀全), Director of the Fung Ping Shan Library and a CEAL member, showed us the Fung Ping Shan Library (馮平山圖書館), the famed Hong Kong Collection, and the Rare Book Collection. Thanks to him, we had the chance to lunch at the library’s top floor overlooking the South China Sea, which, to my surprise, leaves the viewer with an impression quite different from that of the Pacific Ocean in the United States. Because of a government-supported project of hiring handicapped part-time employees for book shelving, the stacks are virtually dust free and extremely well arranged. Also noteworthy is the Hong Kong Collection in the Hung On-To Memorial Library. The University Libraries are designated as depository for books and periodicals published or printed in the city, so the Hong Kong Collection tries to collect books, serials, government publications, newspaper clippings, and non-print materials covering every aspect of Hong Kong history and life. This special library plans to become a comprehensive collection of materials related to Hong Kong.

A flight from Hong Kong to Taiwan is only one hour long, so I took the chance to visit dealers and a few academic libraries in Taipei. Courtesy of Hsiu-ying Chiang (姜紹英), a friend and an I.U. alumna, I was able to see the Rare Book Collection and the Gift & Exchange Department of the National Central Library. Accompanied by two more I.U. graduates, Pi-hsia Shih (施碧霞) and Kuo-ch’ung Chen (陳國琮), I also stopped by the Tamkang University Library, which was opened to the public in 1996 and which is located at the Tamsui River. Director Hong-chu Huang (黃鴻珠) took us through all nine floors of her library, and explained to us the electronic full-text project under way at her institution. As a relatively new facility, Tamkang University Library has spacious reading areas and shelving spaces.

Definitely the high points of my trip were the visits to the three Rare Book Collections. All are fire-resistant facilities equipped with temperature and humidity controls. The Chinese Rare Book Collection at the Chinese University of Hong Kong has over 850 titles with more than 14,000 volumes dating from the Yuan (1260-1368) to the end of the Qianlong period (1795) in the Qing Dynasty. The Fung Ping Shan Library has 550 titles in 8,500 volumes, including six Song Dynasty (960-1279) editions. The most impressive Chinese Rare Book Collection is the one in the National Central Library, which boasts of more than 12,000 titles in 125,000 volumes. Mr. Kam-tong Lou (盧錦堂), Head of the Collection, told me that most books are editions from the Song, Yuan, and Ming (1368-1644) Dynasties.

**Book Trade and Publication Culture in Hong Kong and Taiwan**

In spite of the economic boom of the past fifteen years, the Chinese government still emphasizes Communist ideology and controls the political life of the nation. The brief period of reportage literature is over, and the spirit of the student movement has faded. Nowadays, cultural and commercial influences from Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong inform the publishing market. This is
reflected in the fact that translated Japanese comic books and reprinted popular fiction and prose from Taiwan and Hong Kong sell very well. In the sector of research materials, great efforts are made to compile and reproduce on a large scale classical works grouped by subject, historical period, or geographical origin. Also currently fashionable are publications on archeological discoveries, rediscoveries, and analyses. As a result of the economic boom, travel literature flourishes. People want to know more about China and the rest of the world, and now many citizens can afford to travel.

Similar phenomena can be observed in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. After the return to China, Hong Kong and Macau residents have started to re-examine the two places’ positions in Chinese history. There are hundreds of new publications on Hong Kong and Macau, ranging from language books and studies of economic development to memoirs. In Taiwan, as a Taipei book vendor told me, there has been a gradual surge of Taiwan studies over last decade, and approximately 1,500 titles related to Taiwan studies were published in the last two years alone.

Conclusion

My attendance of the Book Fair made clear to me the value of direct and personal contact with book dealers with whom I usually communicate only through e-mail. I noticed that the dealers appreciated the chance to discuss common interests with their customers from overseas and to clarify mutual expectations. This definitely enhanced our cooperation. The trip made possible the opportunity to visit other valuable collections and to have discussion with colleagues in an informal environment. It also offered an opportunity for re-examining our cultural, economic, and social understanding of the regions for which we, as area and subject librarians, are responsible.