The Seto Collection in the UBC Asian Library: Its Usefulness to Scholars and Students

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The Seto Collection in the UBC Asian Library: Its Usefulness to Scholars and Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this research study is to paint a clearer picture of one of the pioneers of Canada, Seto More (also known as Seto Ying-Shek). As secondary literature on him is sparse, we look at the primary source materials and the resources that are available in drawing a portrait of this important figure. This paper builds on his life as a resource guide and offers researchers an important opportunity to build on the work laid out by librarians.

1. Background

Despite the occasional newspaper article by or about Seto More 司徒旄, also known as Seto Ying-Shek 司徒英石, the larger framework of his story remains little known to the world. For anyone who has examined Chinese Canadian history, this should come as no surprise. Traditional Canadian scholarship has excluded the country’s marginalized aboriginal and ethnic peoples outside the extent of its French-Anglo population. As a result, pioneers such as Seto More have remained relegated to the margins of national history.

Thanks to Mr. Brandt Louie 雷震瀛, Mr. Seto’s grandson, who asked about his grandfather’s collected books and their usage at the University of British Columbia (UBC) Asian Library, we are able to paint a much clearer portrait of this important figure. The donation, made in 1967, consists over 2,200 items of Chinese books, journals, pamphlets, photos and archival materials collected by Brandt’s maternal grandfather. Believing that the collection is fairly significant, Louie wanted to see for himself how the collection is being used in its current environment. He brought family members from both the Seto and Louie branches to UBC on May 21, 2015 in the hopes of understanding more about their grandfather. The visit request encouraged us to take a journey in excavating research materials, showcasing the donations and their usage. What we found was a moving and humbling understanding of a critically important person in not only Canadian, but also Chinese history. Mr. Louie invited us to his home and shared his personal memories of the struggles and successes of his pioneer family. He also encouraged us to investigate further how his grandfather was able to navigate freely in both western and eastern societies in early Canada, when discrimination against the Chinese became a hallmark of the White citizens of B.C. The Seto collection itself, though it lacks detailed analytical cataloguing, offers clues and information. Seto More’s life and work sheds light on the deeper causes and conditions of the trans-Pacific world in which we now live.
2. Seto More

Although Seto More was born in Victoria, B.C. on January 15, 1889, he was not recognized as Canadian and did not hold official citizenship. Seto More's father, Seto Fangin, emigrated from the historic town of Chikan, Kaiping of Guangdong Province 廣東開平赤坎鎮 in China to San Francisco in 1860 and found his way north to Victoria, British Columbia, in 1865 before Canada became a nation in its own right. This territory became the sixth province of Canada six years after he settled down in British Columbia. Fangin raised his family there, establishing a successful tailor business, Sam Kee 深記, making and selling sails and tents as well as top quality Western style clothing. Seto More grew up in this Chinese Canadian merchant family nurtured in traditional Chinese culture and values. He was especially close to his elder sister, Seto Chang'an 司徒長安 who married Lee Mong Kow 李夢九, the first Chinese hired by the Canadian government as the chief interpreter for the Department of Customs in 1889. Mr. Lee was a founder of the first Chinese Benevolent Association in Canada in 1884 and also established a Chinese School (Le Qun Yi Shu 樂群義塾) by donation in 1889. He helped Kang Youwei 康有爲, Liang Qichao 梁啓超 and Li Hongzhang 李鴻章, when they came to North America.

Despite being an intellectual and Canadian-born, Seto More did not have the right to vote and was unfairly restricted in life because of his Chinese heritage. Since the Chinese were excluded from civic voting, people like Seto could not enter into a professional career as a lawyer, accountant or pharmacist as such professions required one to be a voting citizen. In addition to the humiliation that China had been suffering at the hands of Japan and western powers, the events of his youth may have influenced and inspired him to take a part in building a new China. Among his scholarly friends from China, Huang Yuansheng 黃遠生, (1886-1915), the very first modern reporter of Republican China, left us with a vivid description of the young Ying-Shek. Huang recounts that Seto More’s words and his pride of his Chinese heritage had inspired his own work as a reporter. Huang's biography mentions that the young Ying-Shek was often mistaken for Japanese, and that this upset him whenever it happened, prompting Ying-Shek to wear a Chinese flag whenever he traveled.

Learning his classical Chinese at home and from the Chinese school that his brother-in-law was running, Seto More gained extensive knowledge of Chinese history and culture. He spoke many Chinese dialects and was good at literary writing, calligraphy and painting. He collected books by reformists, and by cultural and political leaders with various views. He met many of them in person who, while empowered by traditional Chinese wisdom, also pursued knowledge from Western advanced countries, leaving a legacy for him to follow.

Excluded from Canadian and B.C. politics, Seto More used his knowledge and skills in both English and Chinese in finding employment and building his wealth. He worked for the Canadian Pacific (CP) Steamship Co. for almost four decades. As a well-known and well-connected Asiatic passenger agent, Mr. Seto had intimate knowledge of the villages and family histories of the Chinese who immigrated to Canada as he had booked passages for them on the legendary Empress ships that linked Canada with the Far East. The Seto Collection shows how much he enjoyed the cultural activities in town: newspaper articles,
poetry competitions, Cantonese opera, modern plays, etc. He made many significant Chinese friends when they stopped by B.C., such as the Peking Opera performer, Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳, the head of the Bank of China, Zhang Jia’ao 张嘉璈, as well as a leader of the New Culture Movement and Ambassador to the U.S., Hu Shi 胡适. Mr. Seto not only arranged their trips in North America but also introduced these honored guests to local communities, interpreted for their speeches and promoted their visits in local newspapers. In return, he learned from the visitors the latest developments in his ancestors’ homeland.

Mr. Seto carried substantial influence and weight due to his contributions in politics, education, Chinese cultural and philanthropic activities. In 1907, he founded a political society to support the Republican revolution, which helped Dr. Sun Yat-sen 孫中山 gain support from overseas Chinese. The early 20th century witnessed Ying-Shek’s intensive involvement in fighting racial discrimination, head tax (1885-1923) and the Chinese Exclusion Act (1923-1947). Well-known to the Chinese community for his Chinese and Western learning, Mr. Seto More represented the intellectuals and elites among early Chinese Canadians. He was often invited to UBC and community events to talk about astronomy and Chinese art and culture. He was a well-respected community leader and power broker, representing the Chinese community opposing segregation and The Chinese Exclusion Act. He successfully led numerous fundraising activities for Dr. Sun, Chinese schools, and in time of war and disasters for The United Way and The Red Cross. Mr. Seto More passed away in 1967, the year Canada implemented a new immigration policy based on points rather than race. After his death, his daughter and son-in-law, Geraldine Seto and Tong Louie kindly donated his private library to UBC. Noteworthy as the largest private donation made to the Asian Library in the twentieth century, it was instrumental in the development of the Chinese collection and services to the public at UBC, particularly in light of the challenges of acquisitions from China during the time.

3. The Seto Collection

Mr. Seto collected an impressive library covering publications from China, Japan and Canada from the beginning of the twentieth century. Most books are on the humanities, such as philosophy, religion, history, literature, rubbings, and calligraphy. Among them, many collections of poetry, Chinese textbooks, local histories, journals and individual selections were published with his direct support or printed in British Columbia. He treasured the books on cross-cultural studies, such as the works by Liang Shuming 梁漱溟.

The collection includes various intellectuals’ works, such as original editions by Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, Lin Yutang 林語堂 and Zhang Taiyan 章太炎. Mr. Seto even made notes and comments in them as well as small corrections in Liang’s Xin da lu you ji 《新大陸遊記》. He was consulted by the grandson of Kang Youwei, Dr. Jung-pang Lo 羅榮邦, when Lo was writing Kang’s biography.9 Besides books by the reformists and nationalists, the collection also includes books on Marxism and works written by Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 and Mao Zedong 毛澤東, both Chinese Communist leaders. Mr. Seto made several notes on October 1, the new National Day of the People’s Republic of China. One is in a book by a Japanese author on
He wrote in 1949 that he pulled out this book to review on this special day. On the same day in 1953, Mr. Seto recorded that he read People's China, the first international journal published by the Communist Chinese government, multiple times on October 1. These notes reflect his consistent love towards China and his Chinese identity beyond any political party or regime.

Curious by nature, the usually calm and moderate Mr. Seto could get thrilled and behave like an overjoyed school boy by any human technological development or advancement. He once left a remarkable note of excitement in his texts when the first satellite was launched by the Soviet Union. He did collect scientific books but only those representing Chinese heritage or wisdom, such as traditional Chinese medicine, the invention and spread of gunpowder, and Chinese astronomy works by Kang Youwei.¹¹

The UBC Asian Library processed and rebound the books upon receipt to better protect them, adding a special collection stamp and gift plate to the title page. The items in Seto Collection have only very brief romanized cataloguing records without Chinese scripts, and not showing their belonging to this special collection. The books were dispersed before the Louie-Seto family came to visit. Although most of the items were traced back to the Asian Library based on the physical donor plate, due to lack of Chinese library staff, the collection has not been fully catalogued or promoted. Thanks to the Hidden Collections Project funded by the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), some of the collection’s unique items are being revealed online. Phoebe Chow, the Program Services Assistant, gave a presentation on the Seto Collection at the WCILCOS 6th International Conference in October 2015 in Xiamen.¹² This paper is another effort to tell the scholarly world of this hidden treasure at UBC. After all, The UBC Asian Library has been a major hub of Chinese scholarship for both local and foreign scholars with its special collections and primary resources like the Seto Collection. We need to do further research on Chinese Canadian pioneers, and we invite scholars to work with us along the trail that the pioneers like Mr. Seto blazed for future generations to follow.

4. Samples from the Seto Collection

A hand-written note was discovered inside a Chinese classical ritual book printed in and brought from Japan. The note and poem were written by Huang Zhuotang 黃灼棠 in 1927: “Mr. Ying-Shek, an old friend of Mr. Yat-sen … advocating revolution and awakening an immigrant community ...”
As intellectuals in favour of modernizing China in 1907, Mr. Seto banded together with other Chinese youths in Victoria, B.C., and established the Striking Oar Society (击楫社, jijishe in Pinyin, or Chi-chi She in Wade-Giles). Not only was the Society radical in nature, but also it threatened the established order in the Chinese community, which was comprised mainly of older male labourers and merchants who looked to imperial China as their motherland to worship and respect, not to criticize or rebel against. The Society supported the anti-Qing Republican Revolution led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen, who favoured British Columbia as an important location for fundraising and for advocating revolution. Seto More and his Striking Oar Society distributed Min Bao 民報 in Chinatowns throughout British Columbia. This handwritten note and poem by Huang Zhuotang revealed that the Society may have had other members already, and that they probably took a group photo before they went their different directions at the beginning of the Republic China, although that photo was not found in the collection. Some of the members such as Wu Shangying 吳尚鷹 and Xu Zile 徐子樂 became lifelong friends of Ying-Shek and important historical figures. Wu returned to China and became the secretary of Dr. Sun and later a minister in the Republic of China and a professor in the United States. Xu was the editor of Chinese Times《大漢公報》, a director of Chinese schools and a well-known Chinese poet in North America. The Seto Collection includes his friends’ books with their autographs and the revolutionary journals that their Society distributed. These items, related to Dr. Sun and to the Republic of China’s foundation, have been heavily requested and used by scholars locally and from China, especially around 2011, the centenary of the revolution.

School segregation appeared many times in B.C. history, known as “Yellow and White in Separate Schools.” Seto More’s brother-in-law, Lee Mong Kow, established the very first Chinese School in Canada in 1899. Seto was heavily involved in the work of the school, fundraising, teaching, and helping the teachers hired from China. Many items in the collection showed his enthusiasm and productivity. The textbook that Seto More and his wife compiled from their family correspondence states on the cover by the printer or
In his twenties and early into his career as a travel agent, Mr. Seto noticed the neglect of the northern Chinese language of Mandarin among his fellow immigrants in North America, and recognized its importance based on his own work experience. He advocated instructing school-age children how to pronounce Chinese characters in Mandarin. The Chinese School teachers and students worked on pronunciation tools and printed them as a text book: 《廣話國語一貫未定稿》. Mr. Li Danyu 李澹愚 noted in this book that he and the school were really “compelled” by Mr. Seto to adjust the curriculum and produce the book in a timely fashion.

The forward looking and open-minded Seto More won respect among people beyond B.C. communities. Besides leading the Anti-Segregation Association (ASA) and challenging the separate schools policy, he also led a study group to repeal the Federal Exclusion Act and lobbied on Capitol Hill. This is one of his legacies in the early twentieth century. Not only was he a role model for many Chinese in Canada, he was equally respected by prestigious scholars from China whom Mr. Seto made an extra effort to help. In return, he was mentioned by the most prestigious writers in their works, such as Huang Yuansheng 黃遠生, Hu Shi 胡适 and Wu Mi 吳宓. A photo dated in 1930 recorded his friendship with Mr. Zhang Jia’ao 张嘉璈, to the left in the photo below.
5. Scholarly Usage of the Collection

The Seto Collection fills an important gap in the Library's collections and serves the teaching, learning and research needs of students, faculty and researchers. With the enlarged Chinese collection and growing presence of the Asian Library, UBC hired Professors Zhang Foquan 張佛泉 and Ye Jiaying 葉嘉瑩 in the 1960s to teach Chinese culture and literature. Their presence in academia helped elevate the status of Chinese studies in Canada. This treasured collection has already supported UBC scholars in the past, and is now benefiting newly established programs, such as the minor program of Asian Canadian and Asian Migration Studies and the Cantonese Program. We can easily name a few examples of the collection's usage below:

Dr. Laifong Leung 梁麗芳 did extensive research at the Asian Library on Chinese Canadian literary interactions. In her work, she explored the incorporation of images in order to show the transformation of Chinese classical poetry in the Chinese diaspora. For several decades, classical poems appeared almost daily in the literary pages of the Chinese Times. They published an anthology of their poetry in 1957 that included 1,000 poems by Chinese literary elites in Vancouver and beyond. From its worn out cover, we can tell it has been a popular book at the Asian Library. The poems tell us about Chinese intellectuals' lives, experiences and their spiritual pursuits in Seto Ying-Shek's time. Seto was usually the one who would start a poem at the beginning of social events, with his friends completing the remainder of the poem. Most of his own poems were responded to or followed by others as well, expressing admiration towards Seto as one who exemplified values "between Chinese and Western erudition." Seto and his friends continued to write classical poetry, even though the form was quickly falling out of favour in China soon after the May Fourth Movement in 1919. Dr. Leung thinks that intellectuals like Seto clung to the classical form not only because it was something with which they were familiar but also because it was symbolic of their cultural identities. Seto's poems reflect his knowledge of Chinese history and literature, record his efforts and struggles, and display his proud feelings towards Canada's natural beauty and its surrounding Canadian Rockies environment.
Students and professors from different departments have examined the textbooks that the Seto family produced or Ying-Shek used when he taught and directed Chinese schools in Victoria and Vancouver. Professor Duanduan Li 李端端 presented a paper entitled *The Construction of Chinese Identities and Ideologies in Textbooks for Chinese Heritage-Language (CHL) Learners* on behalf of co-authors Dr. Patricia Duff, Hong Jiang, and Lorita Chiu at the 2014 World Congress of Applied Linguistics in Brisbane, Australia. Her research was largely based on the special collection of old Chinese textbooks at the UBC Asian Library. The presentation attracted more scholars from Australia and Japan to use the same books in 2015, a reflection on the high level of overseas Chinese education.

Professor Chen Zhongping 陳中平 from the University of Victoria and the independent scholar Mr. Chang Chi Jeng 張啓礽 have been working on the Kang-Liang association. Mr. Chang was excited to see Mr. Seto’s hand-written notes in Liang Qichao’s book, which pointed out Liang’s error and provided crucial details to Prof. Chang’s current research.

Community leaders and writers such as Ms. Winnie Cheung, Mr. Rudy Chiang and Mr. Hopland Seto also went through the Seto Collection and discussed with us their impressions and findings. They shared the same vision to promote this treasured collection and the remarkable man who built it and who contributed so much to the two countries.

Scholars from China did research on Chinese Canadians’ contributions to relief efforts during the Sino-Japanese war. *Yusheng yuekan* 《禺聲月刊》, one of the journals published by Chinese community leaders including Mr. Seto, was highly valued. His calligraphy of this journal’s title was on the cover of its inaugural issue and many others. The journal was just one of many methods that Mr. Seto used to gather support from Canada for China. He led the
impressive war relief fundraising activities and thus left the most important documentation about that time in the Seto Collection.

6. Between Chinese and Western Erudition

Mr. Seto More was well respected and was regarded as an expert on the history, art, language and culture of China. The great irony is that even though he had never set foot in the land of his ancestors, China came to him, as he often received a steady stream of illustrious visitors—university professors, politicians, and diplomats—who beat a path to his door to meet him. He also maintained a lively interest in art and natural history. He served on the Vancouver Art Gallery Association and as the Vice-President of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada. A sensitive artist, he painted in water colors and was a fine calligrapher. Recognized as a scholar, Mr. Seto was invited to UBC as well as to numerous community events to deliver workshops and lectures.

Seto More is remembered as a knowledgeable grandfather who loved China in spite of its political struggles. He led the war-relief fundraising efforts in the 1940s and was an active and moderate community leader. As such, Mr. Seto enjoyed a level of respect and acceptance by mainstream white society that was nearly unparalleled at the time. He loved Vancouver, B.C., and its natural surroundings, left with us his poetry on hiking in the Rockies and walking by English Bay. He gave himself a pen name as 狮门鱼侣 (A Companion of Lion’s Gate Fish). Seto More passed away on January 26, 1967. His final wishes, to advocate donations to the B.C. Heart Foundation and to have his ashes sprinkled on English Bay, were fulfilled by his descendants.

We believe that we are obliged to share Mr. Seto’s life journey and his proud dual identity as a Canadian-born Chinese navigating freely in both societies. We look forward to connecting his collection to more scholars around the world.

References


Situ, Fanzhen. *Kaiping wen shi,* No. 22, August 1989, p. 68.


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1 Jing Liu is the Chinese Language Librarian, Allan Cho is the Community Engagement Librarian and Phoebe Chow is the Program Services Assistant. All three authors work at the University of British Columbia Library and they wish to thank Mr. William B. McCloy for his great help in proofreading.


4 Seto Shengwu, Situ Fanzhen, in *Kaiping wenshi,* No. 22, August 1989, p. 68.

13 Mr. Seto’s children felt that they held a rightful place in Canadian society although they both faced racial discrimination. The controversy started with WWII, over whether Chinese-Canadians should volunteer to fight for a Canada that did not even give them the right to vote. Wilfred (Bing-tang) Seto served in the Canadian military during the war and became one of the first Chinese who received Canadian citizenship in B.C. in 1947. Mr. Seto’s daughter, Geraldine, and son in-law Tong Louie were among the first Chinese Canadians to move out of Vancouver’s Chinatown into the White westside neighbourhood. Despite a demonstration and the media’s outcry, they refused to back down and they held on to their vision of a multicultural Canada. They were both UBC alumni and attended UBC at a time when Chinese were not permitted to study or work in the professions. Their son, Brandt Louie, is one of Canada’s most respected entrepreneurs and philanthropists.