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The Library of Hong Kong Society for the Blind

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The Library of Hong Kong Society for the Blind

By

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Introduction

The Information Accessibility Centre (IAC) of the Hong Kong Society for the Blind (HKSB) is the only library that provides information and library services to the visually impaired people in Hong Kong. It plays a vital role in helping its HKSB members to obtain information and reading materials, thereby fulfilling their recreational reading needs, as well as to explore the world, while the supports provided by the local public libraries are very limited. In the following interview, Fung-kam Chung (Senior Library Assistant, HKSB) explains in detail, the unique collections, services, as well as other recreational activities that are tailor-made for the visually impaired people, as well as the hard work and patience that is involved for working as a library professional for the HKSB.

Could you introduce yourself, such as what did you study at university, and how long have you been serving as a librarian for the Hong Kong Society for the Blind Library?

My name is Fung-kam Chung. I am currently serving as the Senior Library Assistant at the Hong Kong Society for the Blind (HKSB, 香港盲人輔導會)¹. In fact, I have been working for the HKSB since 1992; that is over 24 years.

¹ Hong Kong Society for the Blind – Homepage. Available at: http://www.hksb.org.hk/en/
Could you give a brief introduction of the HKSB Library, including the history of the HKSB?

The library of HKSB was first established in 1965. It was named the Communication Department and was later renamed the Information Accessibility Centre in the year 2007. The current HKSB headquarters building in Shamshuipo was established in 1986, and the library was then relocated to the building together with many other service centres.

The library is dedicated to serving people who are visually impaired. The main sources of funding for the library come from the Social Welfare Department of the Government of the Special Administrative Region (SAR) of Hong Kong. The library is one of the many operating / service units under the HKSB. As of 2015, the total number of HKSB Library members is around 2,900, and the ratio between male and female users is about 55/45. All of our service users are certified by ophthalmologists as visually impaired.

What are the opening hours of the HKSB Library?
From 8:45 am to 5:35 pm from Mondays to Friday; and 8:45am to 1:00pm on Saturdays. We are closed on public holidays and Sundays.

When are the peak seasons of the HKSB Library?
Summer, July and August, is usually our peak season because it is a summer holiday for students -- they usually make good use of our library's services for leisure reading when they are on school holidays. Our library tends to receive more senior citizens on weekdays. We provide a room for our users, and they can make reservations free of charge. The room serves as a physical meeting place for social gatherings / networking for our members. Quite a number of them will use the room for singing karaoke.

In the past few years, did you witness an obvious increase or decrease in number of users of the HKSB Library?

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Based on our recent statistics, there are around 10 new members joining the HKSB Library per month. The in-born blindness members (people who cannot see anything since birth) made up the biggest group amongst our HKSB Library members, and there are many different leading causes of blindness. Visual impairment can be caused by different illnesses, such as diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma, cataract, or retinitis pigmentosa, and such illnesses could seriously affect a person’s vision.

I heard some of the reasons were caused by the fever in childhood but cannot afford the required medicine, such as the poor level of medical treatment in Mainland China. In Hong Kong, the level of medical treatment is high and the welfare to citizens is good. It should result in a decreasing number of blindness. Isn’t this the case?

If you are talking about the congenital group, that is true. Such number is decreasing. However, I don’t agree that the acquired group is smaller. It’s because there are many reasons to cause the visual impairment.

Do you know the reasons why the HKSB decided to set up its own in-house library? What purpose did the HKSB want to achieve and what benefits would the library bring to the HKSB members?

All the members we are serving at the HKSB are visually impaired, but they also have the desire to read. They also have their own unique information and reading needs and interests. It is easy to obtain the reading materials and other information for those who are able to see. Whereas for our HKBS members lacking the ability to see, where and how could they obtain information and reading materials? It is not like they could just go to pick up a book or magazine from a regular library, bookstore or convenience store. Thus, I think the HKSB wants not only to provide the rehabilitation services, but also to take care of their information needs, as well as providing materials to fulfil their recreational needs.

Given the convenience brought by the Internet connectivity, has the HKSB Library undertaken any major changes in terms of its setup and the daily operations during the past decade?
Given our limited staffing and modest facilities, the most significant changes lie in the fact that the HKSB Library is also going increasingly digital, that is, a large amount of audio tapes (audio CDs, cassette tapes) are gradually being replaced by different digital media – for the ease of circulation amongst users, daily operations and ongoing maintenance on the side of the library staff, and most importantly, saving a great deal of shelving space.

*With reference to the audiotapes that you mentioned earlier – where did these audiotapes come from? What are the contents and nature of these audio-recordings? Were they purchased from a regular bookstore or they were in-house produced by the HKSB staff?*

The HKSB has its own recording studio, for the purpose of tailor-making our own audio books to cater for the needs and interests of our HKSB members. *The Finer Taste of Life 100 《細味人生一百篇》* – is one of our most popular in-house-produced audiobook titles in the HKSB collection, and this single audiobook title consists of four physical cassette tapes in total. I believe we used this cassette-tape format for [in-house-produced] audiobooks since the HKSB Library was first established. But, we already stopped producing audiobooks in cassette-tape format since last year. One single cassette tape can only store 90 minutes of content in total.

*Since these audiobooks are in-house-produced by the HKSB, how and where does the HKSB recruit voice actors or narrators for recording your in-house-produced audiobooks? In addition, what are the criteria for selecting the volunteers to serve as voice actors for recording your audiobooks? As you know, some voices, regardless how attractive they sound in person, are not suitable for recording at all. So you are selecting voice actors for recording your audiobooks, what are your decisions based on?*

All of our readers are volunteers. They are required to read the texts precisely and clearly. Although they are not professional actors, they are expected to make the books alive in an authentic, vivid way. Some volunteer readers would utilize different voices and dramatization, in order to make the reading an engaging and pleasurable experience for the listeners. However, some of our service users preferred the readers not put too much emotion in their reading, so as to leave room for their own interpretation and imagination.
Besides, we want to readers to read aloud at a constant speed for purpose of easy listening. For the same reason, we tend to choose our volunteer readers carefully to ensure the overall sound quality. Some people tend to have lazy tones and are not acceptable for recording. We ceased to produce audio books in cassette format since April 2014. Now, we only produce audio books in CD format.

*Nowadays, given there is an overwhelming number of audiobooks, and other audio materials for pleasure listening so easily available on YouTube, have you witnessed a decrease in the need for in-house produced audiobooks at your Library?*

Even though there is a lot of high-quality materials might freely available on YouTube, however, it is hard to find audiobooks in Cantonese. Therefore, the HKSB Library still needs to produce our own audiobooks. Due to limited manpower, we could only produce 12 to 13 audiobooks every month by ourselves. Indeed, it costs a great deal of our staff time, resources and manpower to convert the books from textual to audio-recording format. Besides, there is still a high demand for our in-house produced audiobooks amongst our elderly members as they are not used to going online or using computers.

*Would you please introduce your collection in library, and what it includes?*

Our library collection consists of audiobooks and braille books. For the braille books, service users have to read by the sense of touch.

*Do braille books have different language versions?*

Sure. Using this blue book as an example, it is in English, written by a Nobel Prize author. First, we have to purchase the book in print and we convert the content into braille. This is the first one of five. This braille version has two sides on each page. And the Chinese version is in red. Our books are mainly translated into Cantonese phonetics. Cantonese has its own phonetics, and usually we can speak but most of us are not able to translate it into phonetics. This is because Cantonese has nine tones, with prefix and suffix tones, while Putonghua only has four. Based on these different characteristics, we make our own braille version.

*How long do they need to learn for understanding Braille?*
If they have inborn blindness, most of them can understand braille. May I introduce one of my members wearing yellow cloth, he suffers from inborn blindness. He must understand therefore braille because he needs to study, do homework, and take examinations at school.

_Do they need to study?

Of course, but some of them did not develop blindness until later in life. For example, some of our members become blind when they were forty or fifty. It is hard for them to learn braille. But some of them have successfully learned braille.

_Could you tell me about the size of the HKSB Library’s collection?

In our library collection we have about 11,900 titles of Braille books, 6,400 items of audio books, 6500 items of audio CD and another 8,200 items of DVDs, VCDs, etc.

_Could you tell me about the social backgrounds of your HKSB members?

We have members from all levels of Hong Kong society. I think the average age of our members at the HKSB is getting higher and higher over the years. Based on our understanding, over 50% of our members are over age of 50. In fact, because of their physical and health conditions, some of them are either retired or unemployed and dependent on social welfare provided by the local Hong Kong Government.

Because of their disabilities, some of them are working as blind masseurs. Some of them are performing clerical work in an office as secretaries. Some of them are working in sales.

_What are the major differences in terms of serving the visually impaired members here at the HKSB, in comparison to the users at a regular public library?

The sighted versus the visually impaired – I don’t think there are any major differences in terms of their information needs, and scope of reading interests between these two groups. For this reason, they like to ask for books about their hobbies and personal interests.
Since many of these hobby books use a great deal of photographs, drawing, as well as graphics to illustrate certain techniques, we as in-house audiobook producers [at the HKSB Library] need to spend a great deal of time, efforts and creativity to translate such graphics and photographs into verbal information which could be captured in the form of an audiobook. For this same reason, we try to avoid comic books or graphic novels, since it is almost impossible to translate a book that is predominantly filled with colourful graphic pictures into an audio-recording.

**What are the mental state and psychological needs of a majority of the HKSB members?**  As a Library Staff, what are the major differences in terms of serving the HKSB and users of a regular public library?

I think a lot of patience is required to work as a Library staff here. Because of their physical disabilities, many of our members might experience difficulties in searching our online public access library catalogue (OPAC). Since we have thousands of books here at the HKSB Library, in order to help them to find what they want, we first need to spend time talking to them -- understand the range of topics that they are interested in reading and their needs – we then help them search the OPAC – to find out whether their desired materials in their preferred formats are actually available in our library or not. Too often, blind people feel lonely or feel like no one understands them.

Furthermore, they are often bullied, not welcomed or even rejected in society. There is this Chinese saying, “Bad luck will come to you, if you are touched by a blind person’s cane...” Because of nature of our job at the HKSB, we have a better understanding of their needs and emotions. For this reason, many of our members would often come to just ‘chat’ or socialise with our staff members and each other, even when are not making use of our facilities and services. In addition to visiting the HKSB in person, many of them would call us by phone regularly. Some of them might even call us a few times per day – as they really want to have somebody to talk to or just listen to them.

**Do you have any interesting stories or rewarding experience, which you would like to share with the readers?**
I have previously worked for a local academic library as a part-time library assistant. By comparison, it is very rewarding to be working for the HKSB Library, because it allows me to understand the reading interests, information needs, as well as their physical and psychological needs amongst the visually-impaired people as library users. Because of the aging population, there is an increasing number of elderly people losing their sight as they age, and it has become increasingly difficult for them to learn new skills to acquire information, such as using the Internet. For such reasons, there is still a big demand for our special library materials, e.g., books that have large print and braille, as well as audiobooks, etc. However, because of convenience brought by Internet technology, an increasingly number of HKSB members have become frequent users of the multimedia materials [provided by our library], which they could easily locate over the Internet, instead of traveling all the way to the HKSB Library in person. Having said that, it is truly rewarding to be able to work as a Library Staff at the HKSB Library -- helping our members to find books and thereby fulfilling reading and information needs.

**Does HKSB Library also conduct the special activities, such as theme-oriented seminars or book talks, as a way to showcase or promote the circulation of your book collections?**

We also function in many ways like other regular public libraries, and we do organise book talks or other reading-related activities on a regular basis. Recently, we cooperated with an external organisation named, Read-cycling (書送快樂); via their connections, we invited some famous and popular authors to conduct seminars to promote reading and circulation of our collection amongst our HKSB members. We have invited Tai-chong Cheung (張帝莊), author of *World History* (juvenile literature) 《一本讀通世界歷史》, Steve Chung (鍾樂偉), author of *The Crazy Popular Korean Culture* 《韓瘋 : 讓世人瘋狂的韓國現象》 and Tin-chi Lau (劉天賜) to come to our HKSB and serve as speakers at our seminars. All our seminars and events were also open to the general public and received extremely high attendance rates.

In addition to book talks, author talks and seminars, we have music workshops and medical seminars too. Since 2009, we have been using audio-description services to enhance their level of enjoyment and understanding.
Since March 2009, we introduced audio description to film screenings to help our service users enjoy the wonder of watching films. Audio description is the art of making images accessible to those who are blind or with low vision.

**How about action movies?**

We also provide audio descriptions for action movies, e.g., *The Last Tycoon* 《大上海》 and *Ip Man* 《葉問》 etc. Fortunately, we found very capable audio describers who are able to describe the images precisely. Our service users spoke highly of these services.

Very often, the intervals between dialogues could be very short, but we still try our very best to describe all the actions and interactions between the actors onscreen.

Another centre of HKSB, the Rehabilitation Centre, organised martial arts classes, such as Wing Tsun (詠春), Tai Chi (太極), and social dance as well. Our members are joining these classes actively on a weekly basis. Thus, our HKSB Library also holds few titles related to Wing Tsun and Tai Chi.

**If a young LIS graduate is aspired to become a librarian for the HKSB, what kind of professional advices would you give to him or her?**

We are a special library, providing services catered for people who suffering from disabilities. People with disabilities tend to have special needs, and definitely require more love and care, as well as patience in comparison to other healthy people. My daily work as a Library Staff at the HKSB includes handling members’ enquiries via telephone, asking about our book-borrowing services. Very often, they may just call in for chatting (to socialise); we have to be patient in listening to them. Besides, they may not have many family members or friends to talk to, especially the people who really care for them and have good understanding of their physical as well as psychological needs. Others may not be able to understand their problem as much, but since we are in this service sector catered specially for the blind and the disabled, we are trained to have better understanding of their needs and difficulties.