The Development and Administration of the Chinese Rare Book Collection at the Chinese University of Hong Kong Library

Lai Fong Li, Meliza Ng
Head, Reserve Books and Special Collections/Head, Public Services, Chinese University of Hong Kong Library
E-mail: {lfli, meliza-ng}@cuhk.edu.hk

Keywords (關鍵詞)：Chinese Rare Books; Chinese Ancient Books; Rare Book Room; Shanben; Inter-library Cooperation; Preservation; Bibliography; Chinese Civilization

【Abstract】

The Chinese University of Hong Kong Library has developed a distinctive Chinese Rare Book Collection over the past four decades. After two years of intensive preparation, the Rare Book Room housing this special collection opened in April 2002. This paper outlines the development and administration of this collection with a special focus on the environmental controls of the newly established Rare Book Room and the inter-library cooperative activities with the Shanghai Library, including the joint exhibition of Chinese rare books and the collaborative project of editing the bibliography of rare books.

BACKGROUND

The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) has its origin in three colleges: New Asia College (founded in 1949), Chung Chi College (founded in 1951) and The United College of Hong Kong (founded in 1956). In 1963, the three colleges amalgamated to form the second-largest university in Hong Kong. The University Library System was established that same year to serve the newly founded university. The collection of Chinese ancient books is a natural result of the evolution and growth of the CUHK Library, one of the oldest and largest libraries in Hong Kong. Today, this collection comprises over 850 classical titles in more than 14,000 volumes of rare and unique editions. The collection’s scope ranges from the Yuan Dynasty (1260-1368) to the end of the Qianlong period (1795) of the Qing Dynasty.

HISTORY OF THE CHINESE RARE BOOK COLLECTION

Chinese ancient books can be divided into rare books and general stitch-bound books. In ancient times, the former referred to “books that have been closely scrutinized and collated so that there is no text errors or no part of the text is missing” [1]. Such books were called shanben, meaning fine text or fine editions. Nowadays, the term shanben is not limited to fine editions, but has expanded to include ancient materials that have scholarship value, historical and cultural relics, or works with a high artistic quality. Using this...
definition, the CUHK Library has 14,000 volumes of shanben, commonly called rare books. Among these rare items are volumes dating from the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, manuscripts, and Japanese and Korean editions of Chinese classical works. In terms of time span, these rare books were printed before the end of the Qianlong period, or 1795. In recent decades, many specialists in Chinese ancient books have recognized that there were many important historical materials and scholarly writing printed in the mid-Qing period. The craftsmanship of printers during this period also displays great skill and beauty. Many books, particularly those printed in the Jiaqing to Daoguang period (1796-1850) are hard to find [2]. The CUHK Library classifies traditional stitch-bound books from the Jiaqing to the end of the Xuantong period (1796-1911) of the Qing Dynasty as being semi-rare. At present, this semi-rare book collection contains more than 7,000 volumes.

CUHK Library’s Chinese Rare Book Collection originally comprised two parts. The first part belongs to the University Library and was first built up during the 1960s through the extraordinary efforts of Dr. Kaiming Chiu, the founding librarian and a well-known scholar. The core of the collection was purchased from the descendants of famous scholarly families in Guangdong province, including Qu Xiangbang. His ancestor Qu Dajun (1630-1696) was a patriot and scholar during the late Ming Dynasty. There were also gifts and donations from scholars, individuals, and friends of the library, including Ba Jin, Ye Lingfeng, Liu Sui, and the Fang Shu Fu Tang Foundation. The second part of the collection includes rare books that originally belonged to the university’s three founding colleges. Over the years, the rare books were scattered throughout the University Library and the branch libraries of the three colleges. These rare books need special care and handling, and the libraries were unnecessarily duplicating efforts to preserve and conserve their collections. To better maintain and preserve this valuable collection, the CUHK Library decided a few years ago to establish a permanent home to centrally house and preserve the collection. The rare books collected from the University Library and its branch libraries became an integral part of the Rare Book Collection in 2002. With special funding from the university, a well-designed Rare Book Room with environmental controls was set up to house Chinese and Western rare books, Chinese semi-rare books, manuscripts, and other collections of special interest on campus.

PRESERVATION STRATEGIES

The environment of Hong Kong is not favourable for book preservation because of its constant heat and humidity. Materials stored in poor environmental conditions easily become moldy, brittle, and worm-eaten. Preservation is therefore a high priority for the Rare Book Collection.

The newly established Rare Book Room, furnished with elegant rosewood shelves, antique tables and chairs, and some replica wood cabinets from the Ming Dynasty, provides a pleasant and impressive environment for scholarly and research activities. More importantly, the environmental controls of the room were carefully planned, particularly the temperature, relative humidity, air quality, and lighting controls.

Temperature and relative humidity controls are fundamental to book preservation because unacceptable levels accelerate the natural deterioration process of materials. There is ample documentation that the rate of most chemical reactions, including deterioration, doubles with every increase in temperature of 10°C (18°F) [3]. High relative humidity (above 60%) encourages mold growth and insect infestation, while low relative humidity (below 30%) causes materials to dry out and become brittle. In fact, humidity and pernicious insects are the main causes of book deterioration in Hong Kong. There is a need to preserve the rare materials in a 24-hour controlled environment with stable temperature...
and relative humidity. Taking all environmental factors into consideration, the conditions of the Rare Book Room are consequently maintained at a constant temperature of 20°C and a relative humidity of 50% - 55%. To ensure the climate control is operating in the desired condition, a wall-mounted thermo-hygrograph, which provides a simultaneous recording of temperature and relative humidity, was installed in the room. A staff member is also assigned the responsibility of monitoring the environmental conditions and recording the climate of the room.

Another important environmental factor is air quality. Dirt, dust, and air pollutants can damage rare materials. The installation of ventilation systems with high-efficiency filters is therefore necessary for removing airborne pollutants and purifying the air.

Chinese ancient books are susceptible to damage from ultraviolet light. Ultraviolet radiation, emitted by the sun and artificial light, can cause paper to bleach, yellow or become fragile. To eliminate the ultraviolet rays from sunlight and prevent subsequent damage, all windows in the Rare Book Room are covered with heavy blinds. Special lighting with ultraviolet-filtering shields was also installed to minimize the direct exposure to light.

In addition, the room is equipped with sophisticated waterless fire suppression systems, which can extinguish fires in 20 seconds or less. The fire detection and control network is critical to the functioning of the system. When the smoke detectors sense the presence of fire, the system releases agents to extinguish the fire by lowering the oxygen content below the level that supports combustion. Furthermore, complex security systems are connected to the security office of the university for 24-hour monitoring and response.

Human factors are also a major concern for preservation. Certain restrictions apply to the use of the rare books and other special collections. Gloves are given to users when handling rare materials to prevent the transfer of body oils to paper. Wooden book cradles designed to support the bindings of very old books are provided for serious readings. Staff members are also trained in the proper handling and housing of rare materials. Over the past few years, the CUHK Library has organized several lectures, inviting experts from China and overseas to talk of the preservation and conservation of Chinese ancient books and manuscripts. It is hoped that their experience can be used as references in treating the library’s most magnificent collection.

As part of its mission to promote culture and heritage, the CUHK Library also plans to reprint and digitalize some unique and rare editions, although this would be a long-term project given the many years it would possibly take to finish the digitalization.

**VALUABLE RARE MATERIALS ON DISPLAY**

To celebrate the official opening of the Rare Book Room, the CUHK Library organized a two-week “Joint Exhibition of Chinese Rare Books” in late April 2002. The exhibition was a concerted effort of the CUHK Library and the Shanghai Library. The Shanghai Library is one of the largest libraries in China, with more than 178,000 volumes of Chinese rare books. This exhibition was to be a touchstone in demonstrating the history of books and printing in ancient China, featuring a total of 40 invaluable items, half from the CUHK Library and half from the Shanghai Library. The 40 items were arranged in five groupings: woodblock printing; multiple-woodblock colour printing; movable-type printing; manuscripts, autograph drafts, and handwritten copies; and correspondence of celebrity. With this arrangement, it was hoped that visitors would come to appreciate the magnificence of China’s printing culture.

The exhibit included many unique and rare editions such as the world’s only copies of *Synthesis of Primary Learning* (小學書集成) of the Yuan Dynasty; the Collected Works of Mr. Qinghu (青湖先生文集) and *Sound of Chicks* (鷇音集) of the Ming Dynasty; the world’s first multiple-block tri-colour print,
Mencius (孟子) and the earliest surviving example of ceramic movable-type printing, Brief Introduction to Book of Changes (周易 略). The most ancient artefact was a profound Buddhist scripture, Sutra of the Lotus of the World of Wonderful Law (妙法蓮花經) in pleated-leaf binding. The text inscribed in gold on dyed blue paper was written in Five Dynasties (907-960). Although this handwritten copy is more than 1,000 years old, the paper is remarkably well preserved.

The exhibition, with its great variety of rare books and manuscripts rarely seen in Hong Kong, drew the attention of both the public and academic community. With their fine paper, outstanding typography, and elegant bindings, these materials reveal the impact and significance of Chinese civilization in world history. Due to the success of the exhibition, the CUHK Library and the Beijing University Library will co-organize an exhibition of Chinese rare books in 2004. It is hoped that the co-operation will lead to the continued development of relations between libraries in Hong Kong and Mainland China.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF RARE BOOKS

A bibliography of the rare books provides not only a complete picture of the library’s Rare Book Collection, but also enhances its scholarly use. Long before the opening of the Rare Book Room, the CUHK Library planned to create a detailed bibliography of its Rare Book Collection. The bibliography was made possible through the inter-library cooperation between the CUHK Library and the Shanghai Library. The Shanghai Library is one of the largest libraries in China, with a rich rare book collection. Its specialists have a profound knowledge of Chinese bibliography and connoisseurship skills in old and rare editions. With painstaking analysis, verification, and authentication, the rare book catalogue entitled An Annotated Bibliography of Chinese Rare Books in the CUHK Library was published in 1999, and the second edition was published in 2001. In this bibliography, more than 850 of the most valuable titles were selected and annotated. The bibliographic entries were arranged according to the traditional four-fold classification scheme — classic, history, philosophy and belles-lettres — with an additional section devoted to collectanea, for a total of five sections. Listed under each title are the author, edition, number of volumes, physical format and original publication details. In addition to the author and title index, there is also a publication index arranged in chronological order. This is the most comprehensively annotated bibliography of Chinese ancient books ever published in Hong Kong, and it has become an indispensable tool of critical scholarly activity in Chinese studies. To make all Chinese ancient books available for scholars for an in-depth study, the CUHK Library will continue to publish a bibliography of its semi-rare books, 7,000 volumes ranging from the Jiaqing period to the end of the Qing Dynasty (1796-1911).

CONCLUSION

As a major research library, the CUHK Library provides not only currently published materials, but also unique and rare editions for the university’s teaching and research programs. Chinese ancient books, particularly those printed in the Song and Yuan dynasties, however, have become more expensive and difficult to locate for acquisition purposes. The CUHK Library thus makes little attempt to purchase new titles, but instead continues to explore the possibilities of collecting through gifts and donations. Current technology on preservation and conservation, generous donations of rare items and manuscripts, academic collaboration, and special funding ensure that CUHK Library’s collection of rare books and artefacts — a testament of China’s celebrated printing history, culture, and heritage — will be enjoyed and treasured by the public and academic community for years to come.
NOTES


REFERENCES


