THE MORRISON LIBRARIES:
A TALE OF TWO PRIVATE
CHINESE COLLECTIONS

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I have been perplexed by references to "the Morrison Library" which are found in many of the older books and scholarly journal articles concerning China, and it has only been recently while spending a sabbatical year in Taiwan that I have come to realize that there were two distinct and separate Morrison Libraries, formed almost a century apart, one in Canton and the other in Peking, by unrelated individuals sharing the family name Morrison. Both were private collections originally assembled to serve the needs of their founders. One library was of Chinese language material while the other was of Western language publications, mostly in English. Each constituted a major collection of Chinese material and each was among the first of its type assembled by foreigners in China. Neither collection stayed in China, however, but both are still intact today in institutions in other countries, one in England and the other in Japan. How these libraries came about and what happened to them are interesting stories in the history of library development in China.

Dr. Robert Morrison has the distinction of being the first protestant missionary to China and his name is still used today by foreigners to designate the highest mountain on the island of Taiwan. He, however, never set foot on Taiwan nor did he have

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any direct connection with missionary activity here. Born in 1782 in Northumberland, he went out to Macao and Canton in 1807 where he labored for the next few years compiling his monumental *Dictionary of the Chinese Language* and translating religious works into Chinese. In doing so, he acquired, with great difficulty because at that time the Chinese were forbidden to sell or give their books to foreigners, a personal collection of what was reported to be 10,000 volumes including many rare and valuable editions of the Chinese classics. Almost all of these books at that time were unknown outside of China.

When Morrison returned home on furlough in 1824 he brought these books with him with the expressed intention of donating them to Oxford University. In return he hoped that a chair of Chinese language would be endowed in his name. It was no secret that he wished to be appointed to that chair. At this point the tale becomes rather murky.

Morrison had apparently requested duty exemption for his books before leaving Canton, on the grounds that he intended to donate them to a public institution in England, but at that time customs exemptions were granted only be benevolent societies and not to individuals. With his request denied, he apparently attempted to smuggle the books in. Instead of disembarking directly from his ship on the Thames, he transferred to a smaller ship at Star Point on the Devon coast, and that vessel took him to Salcomb. From there Morrison proceeded to London, but his books were discovered by the authorities, who seized them and held them for duty. The collection was valued at £2,000 when was then a considerable sum, especially for a missionary. Morrison did not have the money to pay the duty.

Squabbling and lengthy negotiations ensued over these books, and eventually members of Parliament and even cabinet ministers became involved. In time the London Missionary Society took legal possession of the collection, thus freeing the books from the payment of custom duty. Oxford University showed no interest in establishing a chair of Chinese language as
Morrison proposed, so eventually the books found their way to University College, London. Today the collection is in the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. It is still called the Morrison Library and Morrison's manuscript catalog of the books remains a part of it.

As a footnote, Robert Morrison had two more disappointments in his attempts to collect books. He had left a collection of personal books in Macao when he went to England. Upon his return, he found that they had been entirely consumed by white ants. Later, in 1827, after having laid the foundation for another collection of books, his house in Canton caught fire and they too were destroyed.

Robert Morrison died in 1834. Soon after his death the Morrison Education Society was founded and one of its first acts was to form a library as a memorial to him. Donations were solicited from among his missionary friends, and his son contributed some family books. When the Society failed a few years later, these books became the nucleus of the Hong Kong City Library which opened its doors in 1869. Later these Morrison books were transferred to Hong Kong University where they remain today, about 3,000 in number. They are known as the Morrison Collection and they are mostly in English and concerned with missionary activity in China. They should not be confused with the Chinese language materials of the Morrison Library, all of which were published prior to 1824 and concerned with Chinese culture, and housed in London now for over a century and a half.

But there was another Morrison who also formed a library in China. George Ernest Morrison was born in 1862 in Australia of Scottish ancestry. A remarkable man of many achievements, he was an adventurer who once walked from Shanghai to Rangoon, he held a medical degree from Edinburgh University (although he never practiced medicine), he served as the China correspondent for the London Times, and he was a political advisor to the first president of the Republic of China. His friend-
ships with officials and diplomats in China made him so well informed and so influential that he was referred to as "Chinese Morrison" or "Morrison of Peking."

When George Ernest Morrison arrived in Peking in 1897 he began systematically collecting all Western language publications he could find concerning China. Unlike his predecessor Robert Morrison, he did not read Chinese at all nor could he even speak it fluently. "Need forced me to form such a library... No serious library existed," he wrote later in a description of his collection. Books were then very cheap in China and within three years he was said to have assembled the best such collection in all of China. During the siege of Peking in 1900 almost all Western language books, and many of the Chinese books as well, were destroyed, but Morrison’s collection miraculously survived undamaged. He continued to add to his collection over the next few years, carefully compiling a manuscript catalog as he went along. A low fireproof building was constructed alongside his Chinese style home in Peking to house it. He was generous in making his library available to serious users and many foreigners who wrote books about China early in this century found his collection invaluable. They, in turn, often presented copies of their finished books to the library, in appreciation.

An American visitor to the Morrison Library in 1916 reported a collection of about 20,000 volumes including long runs of serials, and wrote "I believe (Morrison) has spent the larger part of his income on them." Another visitor the next year wrote that it was the best research library in China, and even superior to that of the Royal Asiatic Society Library in Shanghai for Western language materials. But as a private library it had limitations for public use:

Being a private collection the building which contains it is not furnished for public use, and it has the special disadvantage of not being heated in the winter, so that for several months it is impossible to study there. The owner is, however, most generous in allowing the freest access to the whole collection to any genuine student.
While the cold dry climate of Peking may not have been good for scholars, it was deadly to the insect pests which plagued library collections in the south of China. His books remained in good condition, unlike many books held in southern libraries.

Throughout his career in Peking George Earnest Morrison stated that upon his death his library would be given to a public institution to remain in China, but in 1918 he either had a change of heart or a need for money and he sold his collection intact to Baron H. Iwasaki, who was described as a “Japanese aristocrat”. The purchase price was £35,000 and it probably represented a considerable profit to Morrison.

The library was removed to Tokyo where in 1924 it was presented to the newly formed Oriental Institute, and it remains there to this day. The nature and extent of the collection can be measured by the catalog of it which was published by the Institute in 1924. Issued in two volumes, it was compiled primarily from Morrison’s own handwritten catalog. It was a model catalog of its type in terms of thoroughness and accuracy of entry, but it was somewhat eccentric in its arrangement, which was first by language. The first volume contained all the works in English, which comprised about sixty-five percent of the entire collection. In the second volume French predominated, followed by German, Latin, Italian, Dutch, Russian (transliterated into English), Spanish, Portuguese and there were even a few works in Swedish, Norwegian, and Celtic, among other languages.

While most of the books represented recent scholarship, George Ernest Morrison was a bibliophile with a passion for history. Among his treasures were nine different editions of the travels of John Mandeville and about forty edition of those of Marco Polo, the earliest of each being 1485. He also had the rare first edition of the second volume of Defoe’s Robinson Carsoe whose imagery travels included a portion of China. Most of these volumes were acquired from the London antiquarian trade.

There were 120 serial titles represented including a complete run of the Chinese Repository and many governmental publications
such as those of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service. Morrison's catalog included entries for articles in periodicals and these were interfiled with the book entries. In all there were about 20,000 entries of which perhaps two-thirds were monographs. There were also some prints and some maps, the latter of which were not cataloged. While the focus of the collection was China, there were some publications devoted to areas adjacent to China itself.

So these were the two Morriscos and the libraries they created. They were remarkable men and they formed remarkable library collections acting entirely on their own and within the limits of their own financial resources. It is doubtful whether either collection could be duplicated today, at any price, While it is regrettable that both collections were taken from China, it is fortunate that each remains safely intact, well taken care of, and available for the use of scholars, if in widely divergent places some distance from China itself.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Both Morriscos were major figures and much has been written about them. For Robert Morrison I used Robert Morrison; the Pioneer of Christian Missions by William John Townsend (N.Y., 1901) and Robert Morrison; the Scholar and the Man by Lindsay Ride (Hong Kong, 1957). For George Ernest Morrison I used the delightful sketch of him which appears in Hermet of Peking: the Hidden Life of Sir Edmund Backhouse by Hugh Trevor-Roper (N.Y., 1977) plus the standard biographical sources. Specific references cited in the text are as follows: