

# The tradition in which we stand : history of Asian Christian libraries

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Part of the pre-Christian tradition of libraries from which Asian Christians, along with others, would seek their own library beginnings is interestingly told by Michael Trainor in his ANZTLA conference address "The theological librarian as mediator of religious meaning : insights from the ancient world" published in *ANZTLA newsletter* no.38, August 1999. The Asian library itself however much less known and a history of Christian libraries in Asia has yet to be written. Little has been written also of library history within particular Asian countries. Here are a few glimpses of the story we have discovered for Christian libraries in the region.<sup>1</sup>

## To begin in West Asia

We could note that Jewish synagogues after the fifth century B.C. always had collections of scrolls for the chief writings of Hebrew scriptures. And these were established again after the destruction of the temple (70 A.D.), first in the Vineyard at Jamnia, 28 miles from Jerusalem near the coast, where Rabbis began teaching again.

We should recall that Jesus himself read from scrolls held in the temple, and may have possessed one or two favourite ones himself. Certainly he had access to synagogue libraries. To summarise the following Christian libraries: many early Christian centres had repositories for books – in Antioch, Alexandria, in the centres of Syrian and Persian Christianity like Edessa, Nisibis and Baghdad, in a network of monasteries in West Asia, and later in India, Turkistan, China and Southeast Asia. Women as well as men who could read, cared for these. Congregational libraries – liturgical and archival – were gathered by local Christian communities, and these would have included many of the letters and the story of the Church's beginnings, which we include in the New Testament and others not found in our Canon.

Extensive evidence is now available for such libraries as these. We know that Diocletian destroyed many of these in persecutions of the Christians (303/304), although in the late second century Justin, Clement, Irenaeus, Tertullian and others knew and used a great many texts, scriptural and nonscriptural, Christian and non-Christian, including Jewish scriptures, and documents, membership rolls, lists of clerical and bishops' orders and much more.

As one example, a major library at Caesarea, cared for by Pamphilus, was used extensively by Eusebius, himself a prolific writer. The focus of the *Caesarean collection* was on Christian literature, and especially the works of Origen and other ecclesiastical writers. Christian scripture and apocryphal texts were also held.

But the work in this library was not limited to arranging, cataloguing and binding its holdings, but also to collating and revising texts, especially scriptural texts, and colophons (tail

pieces) were added which tell us of these corrections. Copying of texts was also undertaken, and orders for multiple copies were met. Also in the fourth century this library started to copy all its papyrus documents onto the more durable parchment, to preserve the writings from deterioration.

As a research library under episcopal control, it was possibly housed away from the church buildings and so escaped the persecution of Diocletian. Its final destruction is unknown but probably as the result of an Arab invasion in the seventh century.

At least from the third century there were libraries of Christian materials in Jerusalem and Caesarea, and it is assumed that Alexandria also had a major Christian library. A majority of the so-called fathers or mothers of the church would have had their own libraries, and these included clergy and leaders of the eastern churches, as far as from Persia to India and China.

### Asian Christian libraries

As with much history of Asian Christianity, especially in the pre-colonial period, it is necessary to recognise the extent of Christian presence in the period second to fifteenth centuries: from Persia in the west to Japan in the northeast and Indonesia in the southeast.<sup>2</sup>

#### 1. Monasteries

Monks of the early eastern and Asian churches found faithful companions in books – in their spiritual and ascetic exercises, and in their loneliness and in times of trouble. There was a keen interest in copying books and funds were often found to engage others in the copying.

Monasteries in Syria, Persia, Turkistan and China not only produced manuscripts and translations, but also gathered and kept them. Books were regarded as the most valuable of items and were sometimes kept in the treasury. Other monasteries had special library rooms. The number of books grew from gifts to the monasteries as well as the monk's labour. Some libraries were quite large, holding books of every kind, but mostly exegetical works, treatises, homilies, liturgies, and hagiographical works (ie lives of the saints). Such libraries were particularly for the use of monks and anchorites, but many others also used them, both lay people and clergy. Books were lent out – with rules for protecting both the copies and the library. If books were returned late, mutilated, damaged or stolen, anathema were pronounced in some places on the culprit such as "leprosy of the soul and body" or the "fate of Judas the traitor", or the person was counted as a violator of the sanctuary and guilty of sacrilege.

The monks were also energetic colporteurs who spread this literature not only through Syria and Mesopotamia, but also beyond these boundaries to other nations, as did Christian merchants and travellers, giving a great stimulus to the flowering of the literary culture.

#### 1. Libraries and writing in Asia<sup>3</sup>

The early libraries of the church of the east – which eventually spread by the eighth century from Persia to Japan and Indonesia – included, from the third century on:

##### *in Syria and Persia*

libraries at such places as Edessa, Nisibis (SE Turkey), Seleucia (near Baghdad), Tur Abdin (Mesopotamia), Beth Abhe (near Mosul), Rabban Hormizd, Bait Lapat,

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Amongst the remains of Christian activity which have been discovered at Dunhuang since 1907, and dating from the seventh to the eleventh centuries, are many of the most significant writings from the Church of the East, in East Asia. Amongst the library documents, found in a sealed room of the Chien-fo-tung temple, in heaps measuring almost 500 cubic feet, was the 'Chinese Gloria' or 'Hymn to the Trinity', along with longer Christian manuscripts giving biblical, historical and liturgical teaching in the thought-forms of Turkish Buddhist culture of this period.<sup>6</sup>

Early Christian writings here in Chinese, Persian and Turkic, are yet to receive full scholarly – and theological – attention. Even those which have been thus far discovered and identified comprise together a most valuable body of contextualizing Christian reflection. They form the largest single collection of Christian writing from central and east Asia prior to the eleventh century.

#### *China – Chang-an*

The scholarly Confucian Emperor T'ai Tsung (early seventh century) had established a 'university' here, with six professors employed in teaching high officials. Next to the palace was the imperial library, one of the greatest in the early 'medieval' world and reputed to contain two hundred thousand volumes and scrolls, including many Christian writings: the 'A-lo-pen' documents, and the Ching-Ching, Cyriacus and Turfan collections. Scholars were attracted here from northern China, Korea, Tibet and further afield. It was in this library that Christian scriptures were first translated into Chinese.<sup>7</sup>

The *Nestorian Monument* is a small library in itself! It is now verified to date from 781. The inscription in Chinese and Syriac takes the form of a eulogy on "the Propagation of the Luminous Religion in the Middle Kingdom ... composed by Ching-Ching, a priest of the Tachin (Syrian or Christian) monastery".<sup>8</sup> A brief doctrinal section and one on "the ministers of the Cross", introduces a detailed history of "the Way" in China.

Along with the Nestorian Monument must be put the Christian steles, manuscripts and paintings, found in many parts of the region, dating from the seventh to tenth centuries.

#### **More recent library collections**

##### *Pei-t'ang Library-(Beitang) - Beijing<sup>9</sup>*

The Jesuits in China under the guidance of Father Matteo Ricci (early seventh century) decided upon a programme of preaching their faith while spreading also their scientific knowledge. This required the latest books from Europe for their work in mathematics, engineering, astronomy, hydraulics and the reform of the Chinese calendar. Many books were gifts, and in 1613 a Belgian Jesuit priest, Father Nicholas Trigault, went to Europe to collect suitable books. When he returned in 1620 he had collected 629 volumes, many of them gifted and very valuable. Not all these books were scientific, but embraced other branches of learning. They were also in a variety of languages. The library thus formed was a valuable resource for succeeding centuries.

By the eighteenth century there were four Catholic churches in Peking (Beijing) – named from the points of the compass. The North Church had the richest library containing many of the treasures mentioned above. The combination of all the collections of books from these Christian centres formed the Pei-t'ang library. This library has been successfully preserved

over the many periods of warfare that have ravaged the area in the centuries since, and is now found in the Rare Books section of the Peking Municipal Library.

#### *Zi-Ka-Wei (Xujihui) – Shanghai*

This became the principal Jesuit library in China from 1847, although much of its holdings date from over two centuries earlier. The site was associated with one of the most scholarly of Ricci's Chinese colleagues Xu Guangxi (1562-1633). It was to become one of the most valuable collections of Chinese and Western manuscripts in the world.<sup>10</sup>

In the China section there are 5 categories – classics, history, teaching of the Sages, collections and series. There are 2000 books and tracts published by Catholic presses in China prior to 1800 alone! In the Western section there were 31 categories in 10 different languages. In both, there are unique and rare manuscripts from many centuries, and since 1992 these have again become available to scholars.

#### **The Philippines**

From mid sixteenth century, records exist of books, parchment and writing materials being sent with the Spaniards to the Philippines.<sup>11</sup>

The first collection of books established and known of as a library was that of Bishop Salazar (fl. 1581) brought on the galleon with him nine years after the conquest. He also summoned the first synod of Manila which decided to teach in Tagalog, and the *Doctrina Christiana* was to be translated for that purpose. In 1590 a bindery was established and a local Chinese carried on this trade very successfully. In 1593 there is reference to Juan de Vera (a Chinese) as being the first printer of the Philippines. Before his death he requested his brother to continue printing 'devout books' for the natives, both in Tagalog and Chinese.

The only book collection that has endured through the four centuries, however, is the collection of Archbishop Miguel de Benavides, which is still in the holdings of the University of Santo Tomas library, Manila. This library was established in 1605 with the gift by Fr Miguel de Benavides of his library and 1000 pesos for the establishment of the College of Santo Tomas. In 1613, when he was near to death, Fr Diego de Soria gave his library and 3800 pesos to the College. Other also donated libraries and money. In 1620 the University of Santo Tomas opened its halls to Filipino youth without distinction of race.

The only library building which has survived intact is the Augustinian library in the convent of San Pablo, commonly known as the San Agustin Church and Convent in Intramuros (walled city). The monastery, with its library on the second floor, was finished in 1607. In 1614 a second printing press was established here, the press coming from Japan. The first librarian whose name is given is Fr Agustin Maria de Castro, was a scholar, researcher, biographer, and librarian of the Augustinian convent of San Pablo in Intramuros. He arrived to study in 1759, and later was appointed librarian of the convent and of the theological school.

The library profession of the Philippines in the eighteenth century was one of prestige, and Fr Agustin provided the earliest known and existing detailed description of a library in the country, that of his convent of San Pablo. He describes the library as big, well lit, and beautiful. In 1768 Fr Agustin reports that Cebu also had many very rare copies, holding more than two thousand good books.

The first book written by a Filipino, Tomas Pinpin, was recorded in 1610, and educational

ability was high among local people. In 1590 an unknown author reports that it is women who usually know how to write – on “slats of canes” without ink, but cutting the face with picks to draw the letters. By 1609 we read that ‘many men and women have books of sermons transcribed by tem, as well as lives of saints, prayer books, and pious poems that they composed”.

Christian schools were common by 1840, and in 1846 a report reads “the knowledge of reading and writing was more widespread in the Philippines than among the common people of Europe”. During the nineteenth century the practice of employing assistant librarians, as a means of helping those people to pay for their tuition and lodging, is often mentioned.

On the political importance of books we read that in 1854 the reasons for the growing discontent in Filipinas – at social inequalities, and in particular the oppression of Spanish rule – are, among others “the spread of books and papers through the capital and provinces”, so that regulating the book trade was attempted.

There are many more fascinating details of Philippine Christian libraries in Hernandez’s book, one of the only histories of Christian libraries in Asia which we have so far.

### Conclusion

If we had time, the story should be continued with such libraries as that at

- *Serampore*, India, originally founded by William Carey and his colleagues in 1818 – one that is now a major resource for Serampore University and the national Senate for Theological Education in India.
- *Malacca* (Anglo-Chinese College) founded by Robert Morrison, William Milne and colleagues in 1819, later forming the nucleus of college libraries in Singapore, Malaya and Hong Kong.

And to mention only a few of the countless personal libraries known to exist:

- In India, the libraries of scholarly church leaders and missionaries, like Jean Calmette and Bartolomew Ziegenbalg (17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries), of Keshub Chunder Sen, and Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya (19<sup>th</sup> century), and A.J. Appasamy and Pandipeddy Chenchiah (20<sup>th</sup> century).
- In China, the libraries of Yang Ting-Yun and Zhang Xingyao (17<sup>th</sup> century), Herbert Giles, Timothy Richard and W.P. Martin (19<sup>th</sup> century) and Ma Xiang Bo and Karl Ludwig Reichelt (early 20<sup>th</sup> century).
- In Korea, the libraries of Chong Yak-Yong (1762-1836) and Yi Ik (18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century), Soh Chae-Pil, James Scarth Gale, Kim Jae-Jun, Helen Kim (19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century).

Amongst very many fine institutional libraries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, today we would have to mention in particular the extensive or specialised collections of :

- India: the United Theological College and CISRS, Bangalore; Leonard Archives, Jabal-pore; the Library of the Archdiocese of Madras.
- China and Hong Kong: Zikawei, Nanjing Union Theological College, and the Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religions and Culture.
- And in Korea: such libraries as those at Hanshin University, Seoul; the Soongshil Christian Museum, Seoul; and the Sogang (Jesuit) University.

And this is to mention only a few of the libraries in just three countries, where each of these

Christian libraries, along with many others, have specially established collections of immense value to their country and region.

Yet there is no survey or listing of these collections available, and only a few national studies so far made. A first *Directory of Asian Theological Libraries 1992-1993* was prepared in 1993 by the Forum of Asian Theological Librarians, and is now being revised. The start also has been made in many bibliographies of Christian writings in our Asian and Australasian countries, but much has yet to be done. (See *PTCA Bulletin* and recent issues of *Asian Journal of Theology*.) The wealth of Asian Christian libraries, their history and present resources is yet to be recognised and made widely known.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The original text from which this is taken was delivered at the Training Course for Asian Theological Librarians held at the Hong Kong Lutheran Theological Seminary, August 1999.

<sup>2</sup> England 1996; Gillman & Klimkeit 1999.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on these, see England 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Gillman & Klimkeit 1999, 57ff.; Wright 1894, 28ff., 68ff., and passim; Atiya 1968, 252ff.

<sup>5</sup> van der Ploeg 1983, gives detailed descriptions of these.

<sup>6</sup> For summaries see England 1996; Gillman & Klimkeit 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Gillman & Klimkeit 1999, 273.

<sup>8</sup> Saeki 1951, 53.

<sup>9</sup> Cummins 1986.

<sup>10</sup> Standaert 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Hernandez 1996.

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