

Some reminiscences of the HKU Library

In my youth a public library was not as common. The first public library maintained by the Hong Kong Government opened its door with the establishment of the Hong Kong City Hall in March of 1962. Before that I could only enjoy the pleasure of reading and borrowing books from either the library of my school, or the United States Information Service Library (on Ice House Street near to Duddell Street) or the British Council Library (in Gloucester House, where now in its place stands the Landmark). In the summer of 1963 upon finishing registration as an undergraduate of HKU I immediately went to visit its Library. I was thrilled to find a library with several storeys (with even a lift inside!), each floor having lines and lines of bookshelves filled with enticing volumes. In comparison to the four aforementioned libraries this was absolutely superb. Years later I have occasions to visit many more libraries, public or of an institution, which are far more spacious and hold far more volumes. However, that first impression made in a young undergraduate bred a close affinity that will forever make it the library I love most.

During the years spent as an undergraduate of HKU I spent many hours in the Library, particularly during the summer vacation when the place was quiet and with very few people studying there. The Union Canteen was in the Student Union Building next to the Library, where now the New Wing of the Library stands. In the afternoon during term time we sometimes stood on the corridor of the Student Union Building and looked towards the Library on the opposite side about fifteen to twenty meters away, across the fountain that was supposed to be part of the air-conditioning system for the library. Through the tall windows of the first-floor Reading Room we scoured for classmates who might be studying there. Our theory was this; if we fixed our stare long enough at somebody, that somebody would “feel” the stare and look back! Indeed, that was how we usually lured some classmates away from their study to have a cup of tea or a glass of “ning lok (Coca-Cola with a slice of lemon)” with us at the Union Canteen!

There is one incident that I should feel indebted to the Library for saving my life! In one hot summer day of 1966, instead of taking an afternoon nap as I used to do, I went to the Library to read some book. When I returned home I found that the beam on the ceiling fell down while I was away, making a huge dent on the iron rail of the upper deck of the double-deck bed I shared with my sibling. (Our residence was on the top floor of an old and somewhat run-down house that leaked whenever it rained. For years I was accustomed to sleeping with a couple of buckets on my side to catch the leaking droplets. But it was beyond expectation to know that the beam would fall down one day!)

When I became a faculty member of HKU I had the fortune to return my debt (so to speak?) to the Library by serving as a member of the Science Faculty Library Committee from the mid-1980s until I left the post to serve as the Head of Department of Mathematics in January of 2000. Those were difficult years, financially speaking, so that we were continually bothered by the problem of cutting subscriptions of journals and devising alternative plans to alleviate the

situation. I am glad to say that, with the cooperation of colleagues, we did manage to go through that difficult period.

In an article about the first class and the last class I taught at HKU as a regular faculty member (published in the New Year issue of *Convocation Newsletter* in 2006) I conclude with the remark: "I always say, no matter how the environment and mood of the tertiary sector change for better or for worse, there are three places which I love and feel comfortable with --- the classroom, the Library and the swimming pool." Today, seven years after retirement I still harbour the same sentiment. Now that I do not have the frequent chance of enjoying the classroom, the library may have become the first on the list.

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