

A Short History of The Library of The Asiatic Society of Japan 1872 - 1942

Harold M. Otness*

The history of the Asiatic Society of Japan has been well told in Douglas Moore Kendrick's *A Century of Western Studies of Japan; the First Hundred Years of the Asiatic Society of Japan, 1872-1972*¹ This work, however, makes only scattered references to the Society's library. This paper focuses on the library itself, drawing on Kendrick, the annual reports of the Society as published in *Transactions* over the years, four published catalogs of the collection (1878, 1902, 1919, and 1935), and other sources. It is concerned with the early difficulties of building a library of publications which, for the most part, originated outside of Asia, and which attempted to serve the widely varied interests of the expatriate community in Japan, along with those of its Japanese membership.

The Asiatic Society of Japan was a truly international endeavor, bringing together people of several nationalities and professions, all united in their curiosity of Japan and their desire to understand it better. The library represented at least some of the fruits of their labors, and it may well have made some contribution to the understanding of Japan by Westerners. The library is viewed here as a bridge between cultures, in which understanding flowed in both directions, and its significance is enhanced by the fact that it was among the first libraries established by Westerners in Japan.

It is a matter of curiosity that the Asiatic Society of Japan is not, and never has been, a branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. Unlike its counterparts in Calcutta, Singapore, Shanghai, and Seoul, which it has clearly resembled over the years, it was first an "affiliate society", and, since 1936, an "associate society" of the Royal Asiatic Society of London.² According to Kendrick, it originally intended to be a branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, and apparently the Royal Asiatic Society thought so too, but the bond was never formally struck. Perhaps this was in deference to the large number of non-British members from its

*Southern Oregon State College Library, Ashland, Oregon 97520, USA.
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beginnings. The British did not dominate the expatriate communities of Japan to the extent that they did in India, Hong Kong, and many other trade centers in Asia. The term "Royal" may also have been avoided in deference to the Japanese members, and to the Japanese Royal Family.

Among the 114 Western members on the first published list, there were only thirty-eight merchants and nine missionaries. The majority were diplomats, foreign employees of the Japanese government, and members of the professions, so it cannot be said that this organization was dominated in its early days by missionaries and merchants as was the case with its counterpart societies elsewhere in Asia.³ Among such societies, this one had the most participation by members of the host country in its early days (although Japanese membership appears to have declined in this century).

The Asiatic Society of Japan was founded in 1872, six years before the Malayan Branch in Singapore, fourteen years after the North China Branch in Shanghai, and twenty-eight years before its counterpart in Korea. Its first appointed "librarian & curator" was H. Pryer, an Englishman whose hobby was the collecting of butterfly specimens. In the early days the library and museum functions were treated together, and the major efforts of the society seemed to be on the establishing of a natural history exhibit. The first book donations, seven unspecified volumes, were received in 1873.⁴

In the beginning, a "small room" in the Grand Hotel in Yokohama served as the library. It was in this hotel that the Society held its early meetings, but in 1874 a room was engaged at No. 28 in the International Settlement to hold the books. It was decided that the room should be open from 4 to 6 pm daily for the use of the books, but that the room would be open all day for writing. At least that was the recommendation of the Library Committee.⁵

According to the annual report of 1876, published in *Transactions*, a room was secured for both the library and the museum in the Imperial University (now Tokyo University) in the capital. That year twenty-five books on Japan were purchased and copies of *Transactions* were exchanged for the journals of twenty-one similar organizations worldwide, including branches of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bombay, Ceylon, Bengal, and Shanghai, plus the Royal Geographical Society, the American Oriental Society, the Boston Society of Natural History, the American Philological Society, four French societies, two German, and one Italian.⁶ The journals received formed the core of the early library collection and gave it the scholarly focus which it was to retain.

One of the earliest donations specified by title was a "Large Map of Japan, Four Sheet," given by the Secretary of the British Legation and its Japanese

language translator E.M. Satow. At the same time five other members made cash donations.⁷

The goal of developing a museum was dropped in 1878, and efforts from that time were concentrated on the library. An abbreviated catalog of the library was published in *Transactions* of 1878. In addition to the journals already mentioned, there were 120 monograph titles, but only about half of them concerned Japan: the remainder were on China, India, and even Argentina. It was clearly a miscellaneous collection of donated volumes which included such non-East Asian works as *Murray's Handbook to Greece*, *Spenser's Fairy Queen*, and "Shakespeare—Selections in Hindostani". The books about Japan were mostly on travel, language, geology and the other sciences, and religion. No mention was made of publications in the Japanese language.⁸

As the foreign settlement gravitated towards Tokyo from Yokohama, the Society moved with it. In Tokyo the Society used the reception room of the Kaisei Gakko for a couple of years, and then moved to the Tokyo Chamber of Commerce office in the Tsukiji Settlement where it remained through 1883. The library apparently also moved to the Kaisei Gakko, but there the security must have been lax because it was noted that "a considerable number of book missing from the shelves and someone had removed pages from a scrap-book of scientific extracts."⁹ But publications were received at a greater rate than they were being lost and a true library was indeed developing.

The annual reports of the librarians complained of the lack of funds for the purchase of materials, but donations and exchanges were steady. The Society continued to move from one location to another, and divided its meetings between Yokohama and Tokyo. During part of the 1880s the library was housed in the Peer's School of the American Episcopal Mission in Tokyo. Later it was mentioned as being in the College of Engineering and still later at the Methodist Publishing Building, but its exact location during these years seems to be confusing from the literature surviving today. The Society itself was without a permanent home during this period. Meetings were held in a variety of locations in both Yokohama and Tokyo, including Keiogijuku, the forerunner of Keio University, where the library eventually found a home in 1911.¹⁰

The by-laws of 1899 spelled out the duties of the librarian, of which there were ten in all, ranging from the distribution of the Society's *Transactions* to making regular reports to the governing council. The specific library responsibility was expressed as taking "charge of the Society's library ... keep its books and periodicals in order, catalogue all additions ... and superintend the binding and preservation of the books". Article XVI stated:

The Library shall be open to Members for consultation during the day, the keys of the bookcases being in the possession of the Librarian or other Members of the Council resident in the neighborhood: and books may be borrowed on applying to the Librarian.¹¹

In 1891/92 it was reported that the library received seventy-two serial publications, although many of these appeared to be single issues rather than long-term subscription copies. In that year an attempt was made to dispose of those publications not concerned with Asia in general or Japan in particular. Some of these publications, including books, were "loaned" to Keio University Library over the next few years.¹²

The library catalog published in 1902 in *Transactions* was the work of the librarian, Rev. Arthur Lloyd, who also held the presidency and sometimes the vice-presidency of the Society during the first years of this century. He was an English missionary with the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and lecturer at both Keio and Tokyo Imperial Universities. Lloyd was distressed over the lack of use of the library. One year, he reported, there were fewer than ten visitors to the library, and remarked later, "It was but natural to ask the question whether it would not be advisable to take some step either to make the library more useful, or to relieve the Society of a rather profitless burden."¹³

In 1906 the library was in the Methodist Publishing Building, "cheerfully, adequately, and suitably housed", Lloyd was able to report, and it was from this point that the library began to develop in a systematic and usable manner.¹⁴ Lloyd died in 1911 and Professor E.W. Clement served as librarian for the next four years.

A few years later the collection was moved to Keio University where it was eventually placed in a special closed-stack location in a "fireproof" building—a necessity due to the frequent earthquakes and resulting fires that regularly leveled portions of Japanese cities. A library assistant, "Mr. Kasahara", was employed, a card catalog was developed, and pamphlets and serials were bound. Presumably the majority of this work was done by Mr. Kasahara, who in later reports was referred to as the "Assistant Librarian". About 3,000 volumes were reported, including serials, and the collection was described as "a nucleus for a comprehensive reference library on Japan".¹⁵

Efforts were made to solicit gifts from the membership as apparently few funds were available for library purchases. Fifty-five exchanges were listed, ranging from the American Philological Association to the Ecole Française de l'Extreme Orient in Hanoi; from the University of Upsala in Sweden to the Royal

Society of Adelaide of South Australia. A list of "Thirty-Year Subscribers" included Dartmouth College and the Public Library of Portland, Oregon.¹⁶

In 1917 the Rev. Charles F. Sweet became librarian and he complained about the neglect of the library, which he attributed to concern by members for the war then raging in Europe. The library was open from 8 am to 5 pm daily except Sundays and holidays, and members had "unrestricted access to the shelves, and well as the privilege of withdrawing books".¹⁷

The third edition of the printed catalog was issued in 1919. It listed each title by broad subject heading along with its assigned shelf number. The following summarizes the distribution:

Subject	No. of Titles
I. Bibliography	14
II. Miscellaneous or General	103
III. Geography & Travel	55
IV. Ethnology & Anthropology	44
V. History & Biography	101
VI. Laws & Treaties	14
VII. Language & Literature	69
VIII Religion & Philosophy	68
IX. Art	21
X. Industries	9
XI. Currency & Nuismatics	8
XII. Education	4
XIII. Social Problems	8
XIV. Periodicals (inc. single issues)	69
Books in Japanese	58

While efforts had been made to focus the collection on Japan itself, both China and India continued to be well represented, making this a broad Asian collection. In addition to English language publications, other European languages, particularly French, German, and Dutch, were represented. Still essentially a scholarly collection, there was very little concerning economics and business, surprisingly little on religion and social problems, no popular fiction, and no general magazines or newspapers. The collection, it can be assumed, reflected the interests and activities of its members, and whatever came in by way of exchange and donation. Some of the books then listed have become quite scarce

and valuable in recent years, but at that time none of the publications would have been considered particularly rare. The earliest imprint date was Kaempfer's *History of Japan*, 1727, in two copies, and a miscellaneous collection of essays published in London in 1782, but these were exceptions. The report of the Perry Expedition was included, as were the other standard nineteenth-century works by Eastlake, Griffis, Satow, Chamberlain, Hearn, Rein, and others. Japanese authors in English were also well represented. In total the collection was probably one of the best of its kind in Japan at that time, and would be highly regarded as a historical-core collection in any academic library today.¹⁸

But development was always too slow in the eyes of the librarians. The Rev. Sweet's librarian's report of 1921 reported no new book additions. "So long as no greater use is made of the excellent works we already possess he (the librarian) does not feel that he should ask for money from our seriously depleted treasury to buy books," he reported. Even the publishing of the catalog two years earlier had failed to stimulate activity. Yet, he continued, "it is a comfort to know that some scholars do find it worth while to use the Library." He wrote that any person introduced by a member of the Society could consult the books and even borrow them "upon the same terms as members". This was a liberal policy for a membership organization of that day. Just how many people took advantage of it was not recorded in the reports. In the same report Sweet noted that a bibliography of Japanese-language works in the library had been compiled by Dr. S. H. Wainwright, an indication of the growing presence of publications in that language.¹⁹

The great earthquake and fire of 1923 failed to destroy the library collection, although it was very disruptive to the Society's other activities. Its stock of *Transactions*, stored elsewhere, was totally destroyed and at least two members lost their lives.²⁰

The next year, 1924, donations poured in. Kobe College donated a bound set of *The Japan Mail*, while a Dr. Seymour contributed some copies of the Society's earlier *Transactions*. The financial report showed only three library expenses: 120 Yen for the Japanese assistant, 20 Yen as a New Year's gift to Keio University, and 15 Yen for an insurance policy for the Library Room. No book were purchased.²¹

Sometime in the 1920s a new membership category of "libraries" was initiated. There were both annual and thirty-year memberships, with twenty-eight reported in the former category and sixteen in the latter. Presumably these were other libraries, both in Japan and abroad, with which the Society had exchanges.²²

Donations remained modest throughout the 1920s. Most came from authors, some of whom were members of the Society, and a few came from publishers. In some years there were few purchases. The financial report of that year reported an insurance premium of 13.50 Yen for the library.²³

In 1928 the collection was moved to the new annex of the Keio University Library, and a special case was constructed for the more valuable books in the collection.²⁴ Throughout this time the Society was making an annual "gift" of 20 Yen to Keio University to house their collection. The next year only eight books and some periodicals were received, and none were purchased.²⁵ Most of the gift books concerned Japan, but there were some curiosities too such as *Aluminum Compounds in Food*, which was accepted in 1930.²⁶

Over those years librarians were drawn from members of the foreign faculty of Keio University, and they included the Canadian economist E.C. Hyde, the American law professor C.A. MacDonald, and the Oxford educated English literature professor, John H. Burbank. While the relationship with Keio University seemed ideal, it was not to last. In 1932 the library was transferred from Keio University to the new two-story concrete building of the German East Asiatic Society, 18 Hirakawa-cho, 5-chome, Kojimachi-ku, in Tokyo, adjacent to the German Embassy. This was a more convenient location for members, but library hours were reduced to 4:30 to 6:30 pm, Wednesdays and Fridays only. However, adjoining the Society's library was the collection of the German Asiatic Society and reciprocal arrangements were worked out so that each group had access to the other's collections. The librarian reported that "it has long been the wish of the Council that the Library should be more utilised by Members and other Students."²⁷

The 1930s were difficult for the Society, and the arrangement with the German Asiatic Society seemed to be in the interests of both groups. While the libraries were not merged, reciprocal borrowing privileges were instituted, and use did increase.²⁸ In 1935 a new printed catalog of the collection was issued, at a printing cost of 510 Yen. This almost doubled the total library expenditure for the year to a total of 284.30 Yen. The catalog showed the following holdings:

	Subject	No. of Titles	Specific to Japan
I.	Bibliography	38	(4)
II.	Miscellaneous or General	123	(45)
III.	Geography & Travel	135	(32)

IV. Ethnology & Anthropology	66	(10)
V. History & Biography	124	(72)
VI. Law & Politics	28	(11)
VII. Language & Literature	99	(38)
VIII. Religion & Philosophy	103	(23)
IX. Art	28	(19)
X. Economy & Industries	28	(7)
XI. Currency & Numismatics	12	(3)
XII. Education	8	(4)
XIII. Social Problems	8	(4)
XIV. War	9	(1)
XV. Science	47	(0)
XVI. Periodicals	346	(38)

The last category was a miscellaneous collection of sometimes single issues of serials, government reports from various nations, annual reports, and even such items as the *Bulletin of the Oregon Agricultural College*, year unspecified, and "Miscellaneous pamphlets, Vol. I."

These counts are necessarily rough because the bibliographic information is sketchy, inconsistent, and abbreviated. A tentative observation would be that roughly one-quarter of the publications, or about 300 titles, concerned Japan specifically, with perhaps another 300 titles on Asia in general or other nations in Asia, some in which Japan had considerable involvement, especially Korea, Formosa (Taiwan), Manchuria and China. If half of these titles were books (the remainder being journals, government documents, and scholarly reports), the Japan and Asia collection numbered about 300 books and an equal number of other publications. By today's standards this library constituted a minor bibliographic resource, but in Japan in the 1930s it was a significant collection. The focus was scholarly, or at least serious in the amateur, with very little popular literature, either fiction nor non-fiction. The absence of scientific publications specifically on Japan is curious—perhaps it was skimmed off for university or research institute collections.

About this time Neil Skene Smith became librarian and he was followed by Frank Hawley, an English teacher of English who had a considerable library of Japonica in his own right. Exchanges of materials were arranged between the Society, the German Asiatic Society, and the Kokusai Bunka Shinokai (The

Society for International Cultural Relations), a Japanese government organization which was rapidly building up its own collection of Western language publications on Japan.²⁹

The growth of the collection seemed not to be orderly during the years between the two World Wars, nor particularly active, although substantial gifts were noted from a Miss Susan Ballard and Professor Trevor Jones. In 1936 Sir George B. Sansons loaned an impressive collection of Chinese classics numbering 2,000 volumes, but what use was made of it is not clear. Library hours were extended somewhat and over thirty books were received as gifts that year, plus some Asian research publications from the University of Upsala. Members outside of Tokyo could request publications by mail.³⁰

The 1937 issue of *Transactions* announced that the Society was invited to become an Associate Society of the Royal Asiatic Society of London, and that this new arrangement would include reciprocal library privileges.³¹ However considering the political situation of the day, it is unlikely that many, if indeed any, members of either organization would be able to take advantage of this arrangement.

In 1938 librarian R. Van Gulik was able to report thirty-nine donated books, and 195 issues of periodicals. Most of these items were specific to Japan. Mr. A. M. Tracey Woodward, the author of a book on the postage stamps of Japan, donated fifteen of those volumes, plus a number of copies of *Transactions*. But use of the library continued to be discouragingly low. Throughout the year only twenty-eight "visitors called for book", plus "several enquiries from places outside Tokyo". The latter were presumably filled through the mails. More ominously, it was reported "Books lent numbered 58, while 54 books were returned." An attempt was made to sell some of the books not specific to Japan, in order to acquire funds to purchase more books that were.³²

The annual report for 1939, the last of the pre-World War II reports, showed fifty-two "visitors" to the library, and a total library expenditure of 829.50 Yen, of which 320 Yen went for rent.³³

World War II interrupted the growth of the Society and effectively put an end to its library. Declared a "foreign organization" in 1942, the Society was supposed to be dissolved; however, the Japanese and German members continued to meet occasionally. The collection was transferred to Tokyo Imperial University where it perished in a bombing raid in March, 1945. The only books that survived were those that had been on loan at the time of the bombing, and it was reported that these could not possibly number more than twenty.³⁴

The revised Constitution of 1948 again specified the duties of a librarian and the intention to once again support a "Reading Room and Library"—this time housed in the Tokyo Correspondent's Club.³⁵

Conclusion

From the four pre-World War II printed catalogs of the Society's library, it would appear that, in its day, and especially very early in this century, it was, while modest by today's standards, one of the better libraries of Western language publications about Japan to be found in Japan, second only to the Oriental (Toyo Bunko) and perhaps to a very few university collections. How much use it received and the fruits of that use are unfortunately not easily documented today. The library does not appear to have been well-known outside of the Society itself. It probably never exceeded 1,500 titles at the very most, and perhaps double that number in total volumes. On this matter the annual reports are unclear and inconsistent. Certainly its growth was uneven and its losses, some no doubt resulting from its frequent moves, were considerable. By comparison, the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society in Shanghai had over 10,000 volumes in the 1930s.³⁶ The Korea Branch in Seoul probably never exceeded 500 volumes.³⁷

But it was not the central purpose of the Asiatic Society of Japan to create a library. The library was really a by-product and the result of its other activities. It was always a volunteer operation, except for one paid Japanese employee, and it relied almost exclusively upon exchanges for its publications and the donations of its members and friends. It was a Western institution in a nation not then well served by libraries, and it provided an opportunity and a place for Westerners to study the published literature on Japan. The library was a testimony to the intelligent and serious curiosity that Westerners had about Japan and the Japanese. It was a well-intentioned cross-cultural attempt to gather Western language publications about a nation that was increasingly coming to the attention of the West, and to make that information available to the growing number of Westerners residing there. It was accessible, under varying restrictions, to the Japanese as well.

In the end the library ironically was a victim of the very lack of understanding that it tried to alleviate. Its resurrection following World War II is beyond the scope of this paper.

Notes

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3. Kendrick, p. 51.
4. *Ibid*, p. 62.
5. *Ibid*,
6. *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* (hereafter TASJ,) Vol. IV, 1875-76, pp. iii-iv.
7. *Ibid*, Vol. VI, Part 1, 1878, pp. 533-8.
8. Kendrick, pp. 153-4.
9. Unsubmitted (ed.).
10. Kendrick, pp. 152-6.
11. *TASJ*, Vol. XXVII, 1899, p. 49.
12. Kendrick, p. 157.
13. *Ibid*. p. 157.
14. *Ibid*, p. 157.
15. *TASJ*, vol XLI, pt. V, 1913, p. 816.
16. *Ibid*, Vol. XLI, pt. 5, 1913, pp. 822, 839.
17. *Ibid*, Vol. LXVII, 1919, p. 3.
18. *Ibid*, Vol. XLVII, 1919, Separately paged, pp. 1-56.
19. *Ibid*, Vol. XLIX, Part 1, pp. 3-4.
20. *Ibid*, Second Series Vol. I, 1924, pp. 2-3.
21. *Ibid*, Second Series Vol II, 1935, pp. 117-8.
22. *Ibid*, Second Series Vol. III, 1926, p. 176.
23. *Ibid*, Second Series Vol. IV, 1927, p. 182.
24. *Ibid*, Second Series Vol. V, 1928, p. 120.
25. *Ibid*, Second Series Vol. VI, 1929, pp. 146-7.
26. *Ibid*, Second Series, Vol. VII, 1930, p. 4.
27. *Ibid*, Second Series, Vol. X, 1932, p. 166.
28. *Ibid*, Second Series, Vol. X, 1933, p. 156.
29. *Ibid*, Printed Separately, 1935, pp. 1-111.
30. *Ibid*, Second Series, Vol. XIV, 1937, pp. 280-83.
31. *Ibid*, p. 283.
32. *Ibid*, Second Series, Vol. XVI, 1938, pp. 2-3.
33. *Ibid*, Second Series, Vol. XVII, 1939, pp. ii-iii.
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35. *TASJ*, Third Series, Vol. I, 1948, unpagged.
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37. *Ibid*. "A History of the Library of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1900–1950". *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch*, Vol. 63, 1988, pp. 1-11.

