

## **Internationalization and Collaboration: The Case of the Hong Kong Library Association**

LEO F.H. MA, leo-ma@cuhk.edu.hk  
New Asia College Ch'ien Mu Library, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

VENIA Y.M. MAK, ymmak@ied.edu.hk  
Library, The Hong Kong Institute of Education

### **ABSTRACT**

The Hong Kong Library Association was established in 1958 by a few enthusiastic librarians in Hong Kong. Over its 53-year history, it has emerged into a unique library and information professional body, engaging local librarians from all sectors, while also having a global reach. This paper gives a brief overview of the history of the Association and its major developmental stages. In the past two decades, the Association has been actively advocating for the library profession both regionally and internationally. From the perspective of Greater China, the Association has been serving as a "bridge" to facilitate communication between library associations in Mainland China, Taiwan and Macau. In response to the fast changing library scene in the Asia-Pacific region, this paper points out that the Association can play a more active role by collaborating more closely with regional library associations and societies. The Association can also provide more consultancy services to help professionalizing the library associations of developing countries in South East Asia. Apart from mounting international and regional conferences, the Association has attempted to collaborate with other professional bodies, such as the former IEE (HK) Management Section and the Evergreen Education Foundation, in order to foster international cross-disciplinary co-operation. This paper also highlights the increasingly diversified needs of the Association's membership and the major challenges encountered by the Association which - unlike many other library associations in the region - is not a publicly funded organization. This paper also discusses the possibilities of reviewing the role and structure of the Council of the Association, in order to meet these challenges in the global era.

**Keywords:** Hong Kong Library Association; Internationalization; Regional Collaboration; Greater China; Management of Library Association

### **INTRODUCTION**

Since its inception in 1958, the Hong Kong Library Association (HKLA) has developed into a unique library and information professional body comprising all types of librarians with a global reach. This paper firstly gives a brief overview of the history of the HKLA and its major developmental stages. Then the authors focus on how the HKLA has been actively advocating for the library profession both regionally and internationally during the past two decades. Through collaboration with both library associations and other organizations, the HKLA has built up networks with other professional bodies to support the library and information community in Hong Kong. Finally, this paper recommends possible strategies for the development of the HKLA Council in response to the fast growing demand for broader professional and community services.

### **HONG KONG LIBRARY ASSOCIATION: A BRIEF REVIEW**

In the 1950's, the provision of library services in Hong Kong was not as comprehensive as today. Like many other countries in the region, Hong Kong was still gradually recovering from a series of wars. At that time, libraries were few. While there were academic libraries at the University of Hong Kong - which was the only university in Hong Kong in the 1950's - and at several territory institutions such as New Asia College and Chung Chi College, a public library system as we now know it was not yet in existence. Publicly accessible library services were primarily provided by individual cultural and community societies, such as the British Council, the United States Cultural Centre, the Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association, the Salvation Army, and the Buddhist Library of China, as well as via private libraries such as The Hok Hoi Association of Hong Kong, and the Royal Asiatic Society. There were also some government department libraries - such as in the Education Department and the Fire Services Department -

but these existed specifically to serve their departmental needs. (Rydings, 1973) There was no connection among these libraries, because there was no common platform for them to communicate and work together for the betterment of the profession in Hong Kong.

In early 1958, Mrs. Dorothea Hayward Scott, the Librarian of the University of Hong Kong, recognized the pressing need for establishing an organization to unite the library practitioners in different library and information sectors for the long term development of the profession in Hong Kong. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April, over 40 participants from cultural organizations, publishing houses, booksellers, libraries from different sectors and other individuals attended a meeting convened by Mrs. Scott at the Fung Ping Shan Library of the University of Hong Kong to discuss the possibility of forming a library association in Hong Kong. The participants agreed to form the Hong Kong Library Association (Figure 1), and the proposal was realised seven months later when the Inaugural General Meeting of the Association was held on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September. Mrs. Scott was elected the Chair of the Association, and a Committee was formed. (Kan & Leong, 2003) Within a short period of time the HKLA attracted practitioners from various cultural, academic, government and private organizations - as well as scholars and individuals - to join as members. (Kan, 2008) The founding of the HKLA was certainly a milestone in the development of the library and information profession in Hong Kong.



Figure 1: The Preparatory Meeting Was Reported On 5<sup>th</sup> April 1958 *Kung Sheung Daily News*.

Soon after its establishment, the HKLA realised the importance of educating and training a strong workforce of para-professionals and professionals in Hong Kong. Thus, an Education Committee was formed in 1960. Through the hard work of this Committee, the first library course in Hong Kong - Library Techniques 1 - was organized by the Department of Extramural Studies of the University of Hong Kong in the same year. (Kan, 2008) Since then, the provision of professional education and training for librarianship and information science has been one of the core businesses of the HKLA. Today, Hong Kong provides a board spectrum of library and information science programmes, ranging from certificates and diploma courses to undergraduate and postgraduates degrees organized by various universities and institutions. There is no doubt that the library scene in Hong Kong would be totally different if the HKLA did not take this visionary step towards providing education and training opportunities to the library community in the early years.

Apart from organizing local activities such as talks, seminars, library visits, and so on, in the past two decades the HKLA has placed much emphasis on building up connections and networks with library associations and institutions in the region and overseas. Strategically, these goals were achieved through two major forms, namely mounting international conferences

locally, and going on study trips overseas. The following two sections give a much more detailed account of these strategic directions pursued by the HKLA since the 1990s.

From the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the HKLA has been actively advocating for the benefits of the profession, as reflected in two major incidents which occurred in Hong Kong. In early 2002, the Government of the Hong Kong SAR began to collect the views of the public on the introduction of national security legislation (the so-called “Article 23”). After surveying members’ opinions, the HKLA expressed its concern about this legislation through the media and to the government officials, pointing out that people could be prosecuted by merely possessing materials that offer a different political view for the country. The proposal was shelved the next year, after a major public demonstration. (Yeung, 2008) In addition, in 2006 the HKLA coordinated with the Concern Group of the Education Sector on Copyright Law and the Task Force on Copyright in Education of the Heads of Universities Committee in Hong Kong, to express their strong views on library-related copyright matters. Eventually the Government incorporated the comments of the HKLA into the proposed changes to the copyright law. (Chan, 2008) These two recent incidents clearly indicated that the HKLA, as a professional body, could exert considerable influence on government policy.

Over the past 53 years, the HKLA has striven to enhance the development of the local library and information profession, to uplift the professional status of library practitioners and to unite their interests through a range of programmes and activities. The HKLA is now the largest association for library and information professionals in Hong Kong. (Figure 2)

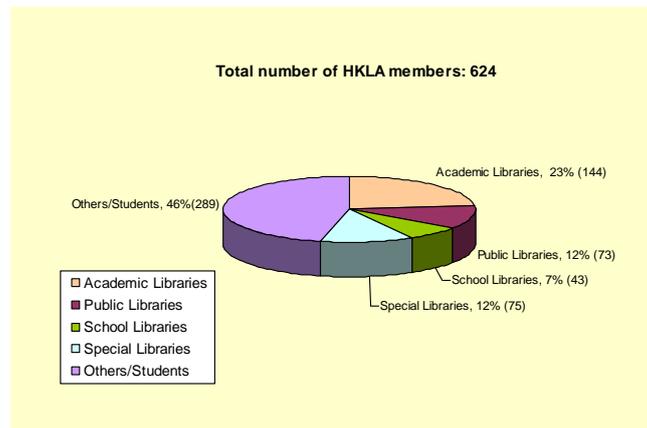


Figure 2: HKLA Membership Distribution in 2010

## FROM REGIONAL TO INTERNATIONAL

Throughout the years, there have been two driving forces that make the HKLA take a proactive and leading position in the region. Members’ ability to command bi-literacy and tri-lingualism (i.e., his or her ability to speak, read and write in both English and Chinese, and to speak the Cantonese dialect) is the key of success in collaboration with various bodies within the region and beyond. Also, at the outset the HKLA has been aware of the importance of collaboration and cooperation at the local, regional and international levels. One of the objectives of the HKLA is to provide for librarianship and information work, a focal point as well as a network of formal and informal communication channels within Hong Kong, and with China and other countries. The HKLA has been organizing library visits, in particular locally, for many years. In 1999, the HKLA Council decided to begin organizing study trips to Mainland Chinese and overseas libraries, aiming at fostering networking and communication with overseas counterparts as well as facilitating professional sharing with other successful libraries. The Association started with a half-day trip to visit the Shenzhen Library in 1999. The trip was very well received, and consequently encouraged the HKLA Council to organize larger-scale study trips in Greater China and Asia on a regular basis. Since then, the HKLA has arranged library visits to Shanghai (2000), Taipei (2001), Macau (2002), Singapore (2002), Guangzhou (2004), Zhejiang (2004), Beijing (2005), Seoul (2006), Nanjing and Suzhou (2008), Zhuhai and Macau

(2008), Xian (2009) and Taiwan (2010). (Wong, 2008). Very often, when a study trip is being planned, the HKLA will approach the local library societies of the places being visited to organize library and cultural visits. In the past, the HKLA worked successfully with organizations such as the Library Society of China, the Library Society of Juangsu Province, the Library Society of Zhejiang Province, the Library Society of Guangdong Province, the National Library Board of Singapore, the National Central Library (Taiwan), and the Macau Library and Information Management Association in organizing these visits. These overseas study trips have become almost the “signature” of the HKLA in its annual plan of activities. Through organizing these study trips, the Association has begun to serve as a “bridge” between library associations in the Greater China region over many years and has also gradually extended its collaborations to other Asian countries.

Another major area of collaboration with other library bodies has been to organize regional and international conferences. In the very beginning, co-operation was limited small scale. For example, the Guangdong Library Society collaborated with the Macau Library & Information Management Association (MLIMA) to organise the 2001 Annual Academic Conference of the Guangdong Library Society. The HKLA sent a few representatives to make presentations, with the aim of exploring further collaborative opportunities. (Yeung, 2001) The next year, six members of the HKLA Council were invited to participate in an exchange programme, including a seminar and local library visits, jointly organized by the MLIMA and the Civic and Municipal Affairs Bureau of Macau on the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> October 2002. Participants from Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong and Macau all benefited from exchanging experience in their respective countries or areas, and agreed to co-operate more closely in future. (Ko, 2002) In the same year, the HKLA joined the Annual Academic Conference organized by the Guangdong Library Society on the 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> November 2002, as an officiating representative. Participants shared their views on various concrete projects and broader issues on library development, fostering deeper and broader collaboration in the future. (Yeung, 2002)

The first time in which the Association actively collaborated with other library societies in organizing an academic forum for library professionals in the region was in 2007. A Joint Annual Conference on “Innovation, Development and Transformation in Libraries” was organized by the Library Society of Guangdong Province, the Library Society of Fujian Province and the Hong Kong Library Association. There were about 160 participants at the Joint Conference, among which twelve librarians and one student were from Hong Kong. Out of the fourteen presentations, six were made by the Hong Kong representatives. (Cheng, 2007) The Joint Conference was a great success and it was anticipated that the “co-operative spirit and goodwill which emerged at this conference could be continued in the organization of other collaborative events in the future.” (Robinson, 2007, p.4) To commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the HKLA, the HKLA 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference was held on the 4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> November 2008. The Conference was intended to bring both international speakers and delegates from overseas to Hong Kong, serving to raise awareness of HK libraries, but which also underlined the Association’s growing capacity and sophistication in being able to organize and host such a major international conference. The Conference was a very successful one with over thirty-five submitted papers and more than two hundred participants from within the region and around the world. (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Michael Robinson, President of the HKLA, 2007–2008, delivers the opening address at the HKLA 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference.**

Apart from Greater China, the HKLA has tried to play a more active role in collaborating with other Asian library associations, especially those in developing countries. The Graduate School of Librarianship and Information Science (GSLIS) at the Simmons College has been taking a lead in training Vietnamese librarians since 1995. In addition to formal studies in Boston, Vietnamese librarians took training programs at the Mortenson Centre, visited a number of libraries in the USA, and took courses and internships at the Learning Resource Centres in Hue, Danang and Cantho. In 2007, the GSLIS liaised with the HKLA to arrange for a group of 25 Vietnamese librarians to do a study trip in Hong Kong. The Association arranged various library visits for them and provided them the opportunity to join in other professional events during their stay in Hong Kong. As a result, the Association fostered an excellent opportunity for Vietnamese librarians to meet their counterparts in Hong Kong, and to experience some of the activities that a professional library association is typically involved in. Building upon this successful experience, the HKLA was approached by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) to undertake a workshop in 2008 for the Vietnamese Library Association and Laos Library Association in order to assist them to develop the strategic plans of their library associations for the next three years. It was certainly encouraging for the HKLA to engage in regional co-operation with these professional associations. A delegation of six Vietnamese and Lao librarians travelled to Hong Kong between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> November to attend the workshop. The President and some Council members organised a strategic planning workshop, “with the aim of establishing both a constitution and a program of activities on behalf of each association” (Robinson, 2008c, p.4) This valuable experience pointed the way in which the HKLA could work and coordinate more closely with regional library associations in the future.

## COLLABORATION WITH OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

In promoting librarianship and information work in Hong Kong, the HKLA has adopted a more progressive approach towards fostering international cross-disciplinary co-operation with other professional bodies and philanthropic organizations. Co-organizing with the IEE Hong Kong Management Section for the first time, the HKLA held a very successful one-day Symposium on “Knowledge Management – Towards Organizational Excellence” on the 8<sup>th</sup> of July 2005. (Chan, 2005) The IEE Hong Kong is one of the largest branches of the IEE, an international organization dedicated to the advancement of electrical, electronic, manufacturing and information technology engineering in the world, whereas the HKLA is the largest professional organization dedicated to the advancement of information science and librarianship in Hong Kong. Even though the IEE Hong Kong and the HKLA are quite different in nature, they collaborated through a common interest in promoting Knowledge Management (KM). The Symposium provided a very good platform to share and exchange ideas on recent trends and successful applications of KM among more than 200 engineers, information practitioners, librarians, academics, senior managers and researchers. This event not only raised the profile of the HKLA, but also encouraged Council Members to look for cross-over opportunities when designing the HKLA’s activities. (Figure 4).



**Figure 4: Symposium on “Knowledge Management – Towards Organizational Excellence”**

Considering the strong professional background of the HKLA membership, in 2008 Michael Robinson (President of the HKLA, 2007-2008) proposed the setting up of a HKLA Philanthropic Foundation, with the view that:

“[t]here are a number of philanthropic foundations which provide support to libraries and librarians in Mainland China. This can include the construction and development of libraries in rural and remote areas, donations of library books and other materials, and professional training and development programs. .... Members possess several advantages in working in projects on the Mainland, as they can often speak Mandarin, may have experience of travelling or working in the Mainland, and through professional experience may have an understanding of the needs of Mainland libraries.” (Robinson, 2008d, p.1).

In order to generate more interest on philanthropic library development in underprivileged areas in Mainland China and to give members some indications of how and where to best focus our efforts, the HKLA collaborated with three non-government organizations (NGO), namely the Evergreen Education Foundation, the Education Foundation of the Federation of the Alumni Associations of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and the Faculty of Education of the University of Hong Kong, to deliver a seminar on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 2008. The seminar focused on the types of philanthropic library projects which were happening in rural China, what benefits have emerged, and where the HKLA might fit into these projects. Although the HKLA Philanthropic Foundation has yet to be established, the discussion with these NGOs - all of which had extensive experience in Chinese school and library development projects - about the provision of professional services and support to libraries in rural China was certainly an inspiring experience to its members. (Figure 5).



**Figure 5: Dinner with guest speakers after the seminar on philanthropic library development in rural China**

## **CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Looking back at the development of the HKLA in the past 53 years, it is perhaps not difficult to make the following two observations: firstly, the HKLA has been engaging in a diverse range of professional services in addition to traditional library and information activities. Secondly, the HKLA has been actively taking part in the library and information community globally. In what way should the HKLA respond to these challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?

Since its very beginning in 1958, the HKLA has been a self-funded organization and its revenue comes mainly from the membership fees. With its limited annual budget, the HKLA cannot afford to hire staff to administer the Association. In view of the fact that the HKLA is a voluntary organization, it is a logical step to look at the current capacity of the HKLA Council to see what is the best way forward in meeting these challenges. The Council is the governing and executive body of the HKLA. The current structure of the HKLA Council has served the objectives of the Association well for decades, as well as meeting the expectations of its members in many ways. However, with the expanded roles and services of the Association, there is an emerging need to review the current form and structure of the HKLA Council to find ways in which the HKLA can best meet the demand of a fast evolving library and information

community. Since the inception of the Association, each Council member has been given a particular function relating either to the administration of the Association or to representing the library sector concerned. However, as the HKLA attempts to provide more diversified services, it may be necessary for the Association to develop different Council responsibilities as well. For example, since the HKLA has been holding local and international conferences on a fairly regular basis, it would be appropriate to assign one Council member to act as a "Conference Officer" on behalf of the Council, to take care of the planning and management of conference matters. Likewise, if the HKLA is to take a lead in serving as a contact point for community development projects, it would be necessary to assign a Council member to manage these activities too. Some other possible Council functions that could be considered include:

**Marketing and Publicity Officer** to promote the Association in traditional media platforms as well as in fast emerging social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

**Affinity Programs and Partnership Officer** to develop a program of benefits (e.g. discounts on book purchases) for members and to encourage greater membership.

**Philanthropic Programs Officer** to co-ordinate the Association's proposed program of support to philanthropic organizations and to act as liaison and contact for prospective members wishing to volunteer. (Robinson, 2008b)

In terms of library education and training, the HKLA could also consider becoming a body for the accreditation of programmes on librarianship and information management, archives management, and so on offered by local universities and institutions. In fact, the HKLA Council set up a task force in 2005 to study the possibilities and practicalities of formulating a policy on recognition/accreditation of local library education programmes. Proposals such as co-offering library programmes with local education institutions, and inviting the American Library Association, Australian Library and Information Association or Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals to accredit local programmes were recommended. Though these recommendations have not yet been realised, it indicates that the HKLA Council was aware of the long-standing need to have a local means of accrediting library education programmes in Hong Kong. (Cheung et al., 2005)

Looking ahead, it is perhaps the right time for the HKLA to review the current roles and responsibilities of the Council in order to meet the challenges of being a member of the global community. As rightly pointed out by Michael Robinson in his annual report in 2008,

"our Association needs to be stronger, with a larger membership base and a greater range of programs and services which are relevant to the needs of the professional community we serve." (Robinson, 2008a, p.6)

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

As noted by Kan Lai-bing (President of the HKLA, 1961-1962, 1970, 1976, 1982),

"[t]he association has from the outset been very conscious of the wider world of librarianship and of the importance of library co-operation at the local, regional, and international levels." (Kan & Leong, 2003, p.1207)

In the past twenty years, the HKLA has been serving as a "bridge" to facilitate communication between library associations not only in Greater China but also in the Asia-Pacific region. This paper points out that the HKLA can play a more active role by collaborating more closely with regional library associations and societies. With 53 years of experience, the HKLA could also provide more consultancy services to help professionalizing the library associations of developing countries in South East Asia. This paper suggests that the roles and responsibilities of the HKLA Council be reviewed in order to meet these challenges in the global era.

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