

# McGill's East Asian Collection —

## Past And Present

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by Macy Zheng

When I first started working as the East Asian Studies librarian, I knew nothing about McGill's East Asian languages Collection except that it was very small. There were about 5,600 titles in Chinese, 3,000 in Japanese and 500 in Korean. The total number of volumes within the Chinese, Japanese and Korean (CJK) collection was barely 15,000, which equalled about one-third the collection at the Université de Montréal, one-thirtieth that at the University of British Columbia, and was significantly smaller again than the University of Toronto's Cheng Yu Tung East Asian Library.<sup>1</sup> Later, to my great surprise, I discovered that McGill once had the largest and most famous Chinese collection in North America, the Gest Chinese Research Library.

The Gest Library was named after Guion Moore Gest (1864-1948),<sup>2</sup> founder of the Gest Engineering Company, whose operations required many business trips to China where he developed a great interest in Asia and Buddhism. Gest suffered from glaucoma and on the advice of his friend, I. V. Gillis, tried Chinese medicine that may have given him temporary relief, if not a complete cure, but in any event resulted in his developing a life-long interest in Chinese medical books. Among other things, Gillis had access to well-positioned Chinese families and many elite individuals, even the tutor of the Emperor. Over the years, Gillis assisted in purchasing so many books that Gest ran out of storage space. In 1926, the collection became an official library at McGill University. A few years later Berthold Laufer, an Asian studies expert, provided the following description of the Library:

The Gest collection is housed in the attractive library building of McGill University, where it occupies a large room on the second floor. The stacks are of steel, arranged in two stories, the upper one being entirely devoted to the great cyclopedia *Tu Shu Tsi Ch'eng*. The arrangement of the books is so systematic and splendid that any book can be traced at a moment's notice. The photographs taken by Mr. Gest himself in the Orient adorn the walls. The floor is laid with Chinese rugs, and Chinese antiquities in a glass cabinet.<sup>3</sup>

He also outlined the content of the collection:

The library is at present well equipped for research work. It is especially strong in dictionaries, historical works, catalogues, encyclopedias, and medicine. One of the greatest treasures of Mr. Gest is an extensive collection of sutras from a Tripitaka edition which were obtained in a remote part of China.<sup>4</sup>

Judging from Laufer's description, the Gest Collection was clearly rich and valuable, with many books being rare and difficult to find even in China. The total number of volumes surpassed 75,000; even by today's standards it is remarkable that an individual could have built up such a large collection. In fact, Gest impoverished himself by using all his money for the purchase of Chinese materials. Because of the Gest Library, McGill had the largest Chinese collection in North America in the 1920s and 1930s. It is easy to imagine the enthusiasm of the people who maintained this Collection. One of these was Nancy Lee Swann (1881-1966), a Chinese studies scholar, who served as the curator. For more than two years she received no salary, but even so contributed her

time and energy to managing the library. Finally, because of financial troubles resulting from the Great Depression, McGill gave up the Gest Collection, which moved in 1937 to Princeton University. Only some Japanese material from the Collection remains at McGill. During the next several decades, little appears to have been done to develop a collection of Chinese materials.

In the early 1990s, McGill expanded its East Asian Studies faculty appointments and course offerings. As a result, it became urgent to develop an East Asian collection to meet the information and research needs of students and faculty. In 1993, Maureen Donovan, an East Asian Studies librarian from Ohio State University — and Gest librarian at Princeton, 1974-1978 - was invited to conduct a review of McGill's East Asian Collection. Some of Donovan's recommendations included setting up a separate shelving area for East Asian language publications in the McLennan Library, and appointing an East Asian Studies Librarian. She also noted that most North American university libraries spent 1.5 percent to 3 percent of their total expenditures on East Asian materials, while McGill's expenditure for this purpose was much lower.<sup>5</sup>

A special grant of \$50,000 was provided by the Director of Libraries in 1994-1995 to strengthen the Collection. Creation of a CJK shelving area was undertaken in 1997, and a librarian hired in 1998. Large-scale acquisitions did not take place, however, until 2000; thereafter the Collection received significant funding from various donors, along with increased funding by the Library. Since then, the size of the East Asian Collection has almost quadrupled. The East Asian Studies faculty became actively involved in fund-raising and materials selection, with the Collections Coordinator playing an important role in expanding the Collection.

Formerly, when the Collection was of limited size, McGill users had to borrow a great deal of material from other institutions through

inter-library loan. In recent years, however, the Collection has enlarged to the point where McGill lends CJK materials to other libraries, and participates fully as a member of the North American East Asian library community. Distinguished features of McGill's Collection include: Chinese and Japanese video materials, books about Japanese cinema, Chinese local history, Siku Quanshu related series, women's studies, archaeology and art history. According to statistics prepared by the Council on East Asian Libraries, McGill's CJK collection has become the third largest such collection in a Canadian university library. This contrasts with the situation in 2000, when McGill ranked last among CJK collections in more than fifty North American university libraries. Although the gap between McGill and the two largest CJK collections in Canada - University of Toronto and University of British Columbia — cannot be filled in the short term, McGill is committed to moving over time in that direction.

In the report of her evaluation Maureen Donovan mentioned in particular that:

One of the things I most feared about the visit to McGill was that I anticipated hearing endlessly about the loss of the Gest Library. Well, it was mentioned a few times, but only fleetingly. I appreciated that very much. My sense was that everyone was looking to the future rather than the past, as well they should.<sup>6</sup>

Donovan's point is well taken. While it is unfortunate that the East Asian Collection once suffered a great setback, it is important now to build a new CJK collection whose quality will benefit faculty and students at McGill, and also scholars from other institutions.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Qiao and George Zhao. *An Annotated Bibliography of Chinese Rare Books in the Cheng Yu Tung East*

*Asian Library, University of Toronto*. Guilni, Guanxi Normal University Press, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Su Chen and Juming Zhao. "The Gest Chinese Research Library at McGill University, 1926-1936." *The East Asian Library Journal*, v. XI, no 2 (Autumn, 2004), p. 40-99.

<sup>3</sup> Berthold Laufer, *The Gest Chinese Research Library at McGill University, Montreal*. [Montreal, 1929?], 5

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 6

<sup>5</sup> Maureen Donovan. *Library Resources in Support of East Asian Studies: Review and Recommendations, 1993*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

