A Royal Library That Is Open to Everyone in Denmark and Worldwide

Bent Lerbaek Pedersen¹, Heather Rogers²
¹The Royal Library, Copenhagen, Denmark; ²McGill University, Montreal, QC, Canada

Introduction

The Royal Library (Det Kongelige Bibliotek) was founded in 1653 by Frederik III, King of Denmark (1609–70), as a personal library and opened to the public in 1793. Bent Lerbaek Pedersen (Fig. 15.1) is a long-time research librarian in the Far Eastern section of the Royal Library, Copenhagen, and has mainly worked with (and published about) its Chinese holdings. The Chinese collections at King’s Library began as a need by the Danish court at the time for an understanding of their trading partners in Qing Dynasty, China. Over the years, the Library has grown, and Bent Lerbaek Pedersen outlines in detail how the Library’s Chinese collection has contributed to the Danish understanding and research of China.

Could you begin this interview by first introducing yourself, Bent, your training and background and your major roles and duties at the Far East collections at the Royal Library of Denmark¹?

I was educated at Copenhagen university in Chinese culture, which does not actually exist anymore, and was one of the few students who completed this educational programme. During my employment at the Royal Library of Denmark, I received librarian training for half a year, and from that, I continued to work in the business of libraries. What I did at that time was to purchase books from China especially, catalogue the books and then also take care of different kind of questions to the collections. At that time, we only had the (printed) card catalogues, and it was somewhat confusing to our patrons, so we have to guide them on how to find things. But nowadays, it’s a little bit different because we have online catalogues, so we do not get so much of those types of questions anymore. My work has shifted to more specific inquiries from users, particularly to help and guide them in examining certain types of works or certain types of books about research areas.

¹ The Royal Library of Denmark – Homepage. Available at: http://www.kb.dk/en/.
Your library is called the Royal Library (of Denmark). Is it because it was founded by King Frederik III of Denmark, or does it have any relations to the library located inside the royal palace with materials previously used or donated by members of the Danish Royal Family?

It was founded as a King’s private library in 1660s. Because Denmark had just gone through a war, it received a lot of books as part of the war booty, so the King decided to make a library in the castle in Copenhagen. His thinking at the time was to inaugurate a special building for the library, planned in the 1670s. Although it was initially for the use of King and his supervisors, it became open to the public in 1793. Of course, ‘public’ in that sense meant people who had the right connections and could read, write and read. Since that time, it has been separated from the royal castle since the Library is actually physically located outside the castle. Fortunately, because the castle was burned down twice, the collection survived because it was not physically part of the castle. Today, the Library is seen as a special place in Denmark.

According to you, the Royal Library of Denmark used to belong to the Royal Palace and was meant to be used by the Danish King and the members of the Royal Court only. You also mentioned that this Royal Library was set up during the mid-17th century, and they already had valuable books and other precious materials that came from Qing Dynasty, China. My questions are: What were the original aims of setting up this Chinese collection inside the Royal Library at that time? What kind of benefits would they gain from building this Chinese collection inside the Royal Library? In addition, was the Danish Court trying to develop an understanding of the Qing Dynasty of China culturally, politically, religiously and socially, with the hope of doing trading business or forming diplomatic relations with China? Or they were trying to spread the word of the Christian God?

There was no separate Chinese section in the Royal Library; the Chinese books and documents were just a part that could be shown to visiting guests by the King.
The Danish court was mostly interested in trade. The spread of Christianity to China from Denmark was not first really organised until the latter part of the 19th century.

The Danish Royal Court was only interested in trading with China. So what were the Danish Court trading with China at that time? Tea and silk or other goods? Was trading done via sea?

Tea, porcelain, silk and a few furniture pieces. Trading was carried out by sea. Denmark was, at that time, a strong seagoing nation.

During the 17th century, what kind of people at the Danish Royal Court would have the language skills and knowledge to understand and manage these collections from the Far East?

There was no knowledge of Chinese at the Danish Royal Court both in the 17th and the 18th centuries. Only a few civil servants might have known a little Chinese.

A few civil servants from the Royal Court might be able to speak and read Chinese. How did they acquire the Chinese language skills? How would they find someone to teach them Chinese in Denmark during the 17th century in Europe?

I do not know if there was anyone in the civil service who know a little Chinese, but if they did, it was by trade both within Europe and Far East. We had a lively trade with the Netherlands.

The official name of the organization as of 1 January 2006 is the Royal Library, the National Library of Denmark and Copenhagen University Library. So, is the Royal Library of Denmark a national library, an academic library or a public library?

The Royal Library of Denmark is also the National Library of Denmark, and part of the Library is the Copenhagen University Library, both institutions in one. The National Library (of Denmark) part receives all books printed in Denmark as the Legal Depository. Selected parts of books printed in Denmark are purchased for the University Library for lending, as Danish books in the National Library only can be seen in our research reading room. We tie our collection to the University of Copenhagen, where we then share our purchases with our pooled funding of money.

So the National Library of Denmark itself is considered a research library. It’s not, in a sense, a public library, but that does not mean that that you can’t use it as a public patron. Everyone is allowed to use our Library. A big part of our collection is actually open for lending. But if a book is 100 years old, it’s not allowed to be out of the Library. You have to use it in our reading room or Rare Books and Manuscripts department.

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3 Copenhagen University Library – Homepage. Available at: http://www.kb.dk/en/kub.

Why do not we delve into a little bit about your background as a librarian? At what age and how did you develop interest for East Asian languages and cultures?

When I was about 17 years old, I was interested in poetry; I was actually interested in the translated poetry of the Chinese poet, Li Bai (701–762), so fellow students and I developed a discussion group to study Chinese poetry. When it was time to apply for the university, I thought, why not try Chinese and, by extension, Chinese culture. It became an excellent fit, so that, I suppose, it was this interest in poetry that actually attracted me to Chinese studies.

Chinese poet Li Bai (701–62): as a university student, why did you find his poetry so appealing? In your opinion, are there sentimental values behind his works that would speak to all people, regardless of their ethnic and cultural backgrounds? In addition, over the years, you have gained a better mastery of the Chinese language and culture? Has this, in any ways, helped you deepen your understanding and appreciation towards Li Bai’s work? In addition, your interest in Chinese art: what styles (Confucius, Taoist and Buddhist) and periods of Chinese art interest you most? In addition to being aesthetically pleasing, do they speak to you on a spiritual level? If yes, please describe in detail.

Li Bai’s poems are simple and straight to the point. After entering the University of Copenhagen, I concentrated on Chinese culture in general, but developed an interest in forming decoration on Chinese architecture and early Chinese lacquer wares. I find it fascinating to follow the development of patterns, for example, from a naturalistic drawn bird to an abstract form, which you can see among others on lacquer wares from late Zhou and Han. It is an aesthetic enjoyment to trace these types of changing forms.

How many different languages have you and did you master in school and right now? Are such foreign language skills vital for performing your daily work at the Library in your position?

Well, in the school we could choose between different types of European languages. English, of course, was one of the more popular ones, and then either French or German, so I knew a little bit French, a little bit German and, of course, a lot of English. But it was in university that I learned Chinese.

Could you describe a typical day at work for you?

Over time, I realised that regardless of how you plan for your day, it rarely goes according to plan because I get all sorts of inquiries from users. In the past, it could be by telephone or (postal) mail, but inquiries are mainly by email today. It can be about almost anything.

It could be how to locate a book, or more specific questions include, do we have this type of item in the Library? Then I have to help guide the patron to actually find books inside the Library.

Another example is when the directors of the Library need some kind of information for making a policy or whatever it could be, I have to be ready to give them this at
any time and all the time, of course. When I am on duty at the reading room, I help my users and guide them in using the resources, which do not necessarily have anything to do with my Chinese and Japanese studies knowledge.

Could you provide us a brief introduction to the collections at the Far East collections at the Royal Library of Denmark?

The Chinese, Japanese and Korean collections form a holistic collection based on old traditional types of subject areas (see Figs 15.2–15.7 for works from the collections). We also have a base collection for the study of ancient China in philosophy, history, linguistics, etc. Because of my education in Chinese culture, I have also developed an interest in archaeology and art, and so I have been trying to develop a collection on some basic works on art and archaeology, but it’s not one, which we could call a large collection. In that sense, we fulfill basic works on China so one can start research at Library, and then move onto libraries from Europe or from China if you need more materials in a more in-depth area of study.

What is the size of the collections? What are some highlights?

If one calculates how many volumes we have, then I say maybe 80,000 in the Chinese collection, maybe 50,000 in Japanese and maybe 20,000 or 30,000 in Korean

Figure 15.2 Jin’gang banruo boluomi jing, printed 1591.
collections. But it is very difficult to say because this number does not account for the digital materials in the online databases, and they include Korean, Japanese or Chinese materials, etc.

Where we’re a little bit weak in is the East Asian modern studies area collections, especially in politics. Although we have tried to develop this area of the collection, it is a difficult subject to capture, and in my experience, these new or so-called modern areas of interest are difficult to collect because there’s a lot of
what I call rubbish. For example, a title could not be giving much important information other than a few nominal ideas. Thus, we can never know until we actually purchase the item.

What would you say is a highlight of the collection?

We have 16 manuscripts from Dunhuang, which were donated to our Library by a Danish telegrapher in 1916, which are quite interesting. Nice calligraphy is also something that I like very much, because I’m very much interested in (traditional Chinese) art. Calligraphy is undoubtedly an important form of art in China.
Chinese calligraphy, why do you find it so interesting? In terms of its key concepts, do you think in some ways are similar or comparable to the modern abstract expressionism that appeared in Europe and North America in the late 19th and early 20th century?

Well, you can see Chinese, Japanese and Korean calligraphy as forms, abstract forms if you like, but the meaning and the sound of the characters also add to the pleasure to view a piece of calligraphy. Of course, some types of calligraphy are difficult to read, so there the forms alone are important. My knowledge of modern abstract expressionism is not very big, but some of the Western artists were clearly inspired by Far Eastern art and calligraphy.

Could you tell me about the staffing structure of the Far East department of the Royal Library of Denmark?

Well it’s a bit of a sad history. When I was employed in the Library in 1970s, we were in what was then called the Oriental collection. We had nine full-time staff members employed, but today I’m the only one left in the Oriental collection. That means I represent 100% of the entire East Asian language studies areas, including Asia, North
Africa, Arabic, Italian and so on. We’ve been cut down so much so that I am the only one left in the Library.

What are the major difficulties and challenges that you and your library colleagues are currently facing?

I think it’s the same for most libraries around the world. It’s about digitisation and e-books. In terms of e-books, how do we cope with all of these different types of electronic materials that are coming to us? Most of these databases we can buy access to are extremely expensive, and how do you select the one database, which is benefiting for our readers? That is a major problem.

Fortunately, it is not a large problem for us as we have a Nordic Collaboration and it has an institute which takes care of these type of things, so we sit in the background and advise them on what we think readers would like so I do not have to choose them myself. We have chosen certain things, and we have gotten very, very positive feedback from our users, so they are, of course, quite happy. But unfortunately, the prices of such materials are going up and the budget for the Library is going down.

So we have a problem there, and that, by the way, is not limited to just East Asian resources. It also covers European and Western sources. It’s a general trend in libraries. The price goes up and the library receives less money each year, so that is a challenge for the library world and for me too, of course.

What scholarly and professional associations are you a part of and how do they assist in your work?

As a professional librarian, I belong as a member to the European Association of Sinological Librarians.

How does that assist you with your work in terms of connecting with other librarians?

It is nice because you get the personal contact, and if you get some kind of question, where, you know, my collection can’t cover it, or you do not really know it, then I just know which colleague I can contact. It can be in France; it can be in Great Britain. It can be in Austria and so on. Because I know a particular individual, I get an immediate response when I go to him or her for assistance, especially since it will be professionally good advice. So that’s good.

Who are the majority of Far East collections users, and that is, perhaps to clarify, who comes to see you about your collections? Are they mostly professors or students from higher educations? Or are they people from outside the postsecondary sector, namely, the public?

5 NIAS, the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, is an academically independent Nordic research and resource centre, focusing on modern Asia from a predominantly social sciences perspective. NIAS is an integrated part of the University of Copenhagen with the status of a centre under the Department of Political Science. http://nias.ku.dk/nordic-collaboration/university-copenhagen.
Well, it’s a mix. I would say the biggest group we have is actually students and then maybe researchers or professors is next. Because we’re a part of the Danish network, we get a lot of questions and requests from public libraries. Because it’s a free service that everyone can go to, we do not know necessarily know who are our users. Is it a researcher who lives someplace outside Copenhagen? Or is it just a person who is just interested in a particular subject area? So we do not know. However, we do know that geographically, a lot of our readers are actually from China, Japan and Korea who come for short periods of time to do research in Denmark. They sometimes come to request certain books or ask for certain things, such as for their research, for leisure or entertainment. It’s a bit mixed, so our user group consists of very different types of people. It can be ‘lay’ people or it can be highly educated people.

Do you have any statistics of the number of people studying Chinese the number of people studying Chinese or Japanese languages at university in Denmark? Are they available? Do you know?

There is probably some kind of official figure. I would think at the moment, there are about 100 individuals who are active in Chinese studies, about 80 in Japanese and maybe 20 in Korean. But we also have Southeast Asian languages, so we also have these types of users of the Library, too.

But although there are actual ‘official’ statistics, they might not be accurate in that they do not indicate who is actually an ‘active’ and an ‘inactive’ learner. In principal, everyone can attend a class at the university. Of course, these who go there are enlisted in the university as a student. For example, when I began university in 1970, my university had a lot of people from outside the university who attended classes, but who were not actually registered in the classes.

You talked a little bit about the users, your typical day at work and some of the things you do. Can you give examples of research inquiry issued by scholars or researchers at the Far East Division at the Royal Library of Denmark?

Some of them are quite specific. We do have those types of questions, which a patron asks for a type of work or a specific title, which they could just as easily find in an online catalogue. Yet, there are also those, which are immensely interesting, ones that we must do some further research in the subject area and help guide the user to find those books and materials, which we have in our collection or outside the Library.

Since we have other types of libraries in Copenhagen that also have Chinese and Japanese materials, we might refer them there if we do not happen to have it in our Library. Those are very interesting research questions, and I find it very rewarding if I can help people conduct their research because it’s not always so easy to know that one library outside the Royal Library has actually collections of Chinese materials as well, especially if the user does not know that it’s available out there, and I happen to know it exists.
As the Librarian of the Far East collections, how do you acquire and evaluate your collection? This is particularly interesting as you are the solo librarian there. How do you acquire and evaluate your collection?

As I mentioned earlier, we’re not so strong in the area of Far East modern politics and economics. If you want to study China, Chinese culture, Chinese history or Chinese philosophy or religion, we might have the basic works that would give you a good start. Otherwise, we would look to other libraries in Europe and tap into the inter-library loan system, which can help us easily get books from other libraries free of charge, especially if you’re a student or researcher. For the local community users, they would pay a certain fee to get those books, but it’s still a very good service for those who need it. My colleagues and I can also point to other libraries if they need to have the materials.

In the past few years, the Far East division of the Royal Library of Denmark has been engaged in the digitisation of some of its collections. What are the projects and what future plans are there for future digital collections?

Because our division is only a small part of the Royal Library, we do not have much money for that type of digitalisation, so we have to fight every time to get something lined up for digitisation. We prioritise what our users need access to for digitisation and especially those materials, which only are available in the Library’s reading room. If there is enough money, we can get it digitised, but I must fight for it. I have to fight for it to get this done.

For example, our digitised Dunhuang manuscripts are actually not located in the Royal Library collections. It’s actually part of this International Dunhuang Project (IDP) because we cooperated with them in order to have it digitised. We partnered in the funding of this digitisation project; we digitised the manuscripts and IDP made the online access because it would be open to a global audience and not just limited to the Royal Library in Copenhagen. Nobody actually knows that we owned the scrolls, but what’s important now is that everyone in the world can see this international project.

Could you describe the fascinations towards the Dunhuang caves and their treasures amongst the scholarly community in Europe?

The Dunhuang materials are important for both the study of Daoist and Buddhist religions and also for the Chinese administrative system in early times. I am personally attracted to the magic materials and the calligraphy. Some of the Dunhuang materials are unique, for example, we have a unique part of Juan 15 of the Huayanjing lun (Avatamsaka Sūtra/華嚴經 Fig. 15.8) in our small collection of 14 Dunhuang scrolls, including 16 manuscripts, etc.

6 Dunhuang International Project – Homepage. Available at: http://idp.bl.uk.
How does the collection catalogue and provide access for users? Now, particularly with a non-roman script, what challenges does this present to cataloguing, or are there any at all that you faced in your years as a librarian?

We have an online catalogue, and it started with Pinyin, only with Pinyin transcription for Chinese, Hepburn for Japanese and the Reischauer for the Korean ones. The majority are still only in these transcriptions, but 8 years ago, we added Chinese characters or Hangul for the Korean one. These transcriptions are increasing, too. At the moment, I’m using what you call my ‘free hours’ to add Chinese characters to the Chinese catalogue. Close to one-third of the Chinese collection has Chinese characters where they are searchable in the catalogue, and the Japanese has about one-third transcribed, where the Korean collection has only 20% or so, but I add as many characters as possible on a continuing basis. This is important since we are a member of the WorldCat (www.worldcat.org), where our books are available by search, so we get quite a lot of requests, even though we do not have scripts for a lot of the titles.

Because our collection is searchable online, I think we can search for most titles, but one of the problems is the searching of individual characters, for instance, how do you, in Chinese, put the translation into a Romanisation? I do it separately, every word or not. I put them together because I still find it odd that renmin (人民), for example, is split into ren (人) and min (民). I mean I see it as a concept, renmin, one word, not two.
The themes and needs of libraries, archives and museums, or LAMs, as it’s somehow referred to them, have increasingly converged. I mentioned this earlier on as well; I guess we should put galleries in as part of that. What are your experiences and thoughts of cultural institutions whose work and best practices now all often overlap?

In Denmark, we have a strategy to cooperate as much as possible, no matter if you are an archive, library, art museum or historical museum. For instance, we have the Danish National Museum, which actually has quite a lot of books as well. In fact, we have a project of printed catalogues on East Asian materials housed in the National Museum (of Denmark),\textsuperscript{7} the Royal Library and the Danish National Archives,\textsuperscript{8} so in that sense, we have been in collaboration since the 1960s. So, in this case, a printed catalogue is cross-listed in all of these cultural institutions. As you can see, cooperation among us is very important.

Lots of the connections have already been there for a very long time, but I think it is because our library system’s philosophy is that every citizen in Denmark can use the library system, and that belief also extends to archives and to museums. As a result, this cooperation between these different institutions is our tradition and is extremely important.

According to information found on the web, between 1968 and 1978, the Library saw one of the largest books thefts in history. Someone had managed to steal some 1600 historical books worth more than 50 million, including prints by Martin Luther and first editions by Kant, Moore and John Milton. Can you describe the security system of the Royal Library during its early days and why such precious items could be stolen by a regular user?

First, I have to say, the thief was my former boss. He was employed by the Library, and so we think, at that time at least, that the employed were loyal to the institution, but he wasn’t. He was taking books out.

So the security was, of course, quite lax in the 1960s when he was employed. I think he was employed in 1968, and according to what we can find out, he started at the time to take books home. At that time, the security was not the same level that we have today because society was different back then. People did not steal from public libraries or museums. You had to really be a hard-core criminal to do that type of thing, so the security was not so strict, but after the late 1970s, after the discovery of lost books in the Library, our security was totally changed. There was much stricter control of people when they left the Library. They checked what patrons took out of the Library. Today, we have chips embedded in the library books, which set off an alarm if you take them out of the Library without permission. So in that sense, the security is much stricter now today.

We have in the Library, in the reading rooms, security cameras filming people all the time, and people working in the reading rooms are supervising what people are

\textsuperscript{7} The National Museum of Denmark – Homepage. Available at: http://en.natmus.dk.

\textsuperscript{8} The Danish National Archives – Homepage. Available at: https://www.sa.dk/en/about-us/danish-national-archives.
doing, and if you want to have some access to some special materials, you have to have a special pass, which you must register as a special user, and we take a photo of these particular patrons in order for us to process those passes. Moreover, if the patron is coming from outside Denmark, we take a copy of his identity, passport or ID cards or whatever he might have on hand. So regulations are much tighter today than before, when only staffed employees could steal from the Library.

Now, it is not uncommon to see librarians with no interest in music or visual arts taking up positions as heads and directors of music and visual arts libraries. They’re hired because they’re effective administrators, good managers and good at IT, and not because of their knowledge or research skills in related fields. Now, there are also librarians who are hired to manage East Asian Library collections, only because they can speak and read these languages, and not because they have an active scholarly or cultural interest in the materials themselves. Now here’s the question: being an effective administrator versus being a respected scholar, with well-grounded knowledge in the field, which do you think is more important to serve as a good librarian, being a respectable scholar or being a good administrator?

I think you have to be a scholar because an administrator does not know the content of the collection. I remember when I started, I did not have knowledge of the more ancient Chinese history. I had just a general knowledge of the area. But after working for many years, I have acquired quite a lot of knowledge of what the different eras would contain which works, what can they be used for and how they might benefit a student or researcher. An administrator is not interested in that type of thing. They just want to make sure that books are signed out, where I can give an academic or researcher much more direct and a personal kind of advice and help him do his research. Luckily, our current director of the Library is very much oriented into research. He thinks that we must be able to help researchers and students; they are ultimately our core users.

You also talked about your training and your background. What best prepared you for your current position as a librarian?

I think it was when I was a student, I obtained a student job in the Institute’s library. I realised and saw how a library functions. It was very interesting work, and I think from that point on, I was quite interested in the job in a library. When I became a regular employee and received library training, it all really helped me understand how an entire library functioned and how the life in that type of world existed, how things worked and how you understood it. That was all very interesting to me. From my training as a student assistant to librarian training, both were very important experiences for me.

Which part of your job as librarian do you find the most rewarding? We’ve talked about challenges, but what are the most rewarding aspects of your job as a librarian?

A happy patron! Someone who can express that they have gotten good help. Another thing I also find today is even more interesting is the sense is that I can provide, via
our Library’s website, something that can help people to understand what type of resources we have and what we actually can provide, so I make available smaller items available on our website, which I think are interesting to our users. It can be a digitised item, for example, or it can be a library research guide on how to locate things in the Library or on the web.