

**The Judaic Library of the
Jewish Community Centre of Hong Kong**
An Interview with Brenda Yi,
Librarian of the Jewish Community Centre of Hong Kong

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Introduction

Hong Kong has long embraced internationalism. For that reason, Hong Kong has always attracted tens and thousands of foreigners to work, to live, and to create new business opportunities. Amongst these foreigners, there are many Jewish families from different countries. The very first group of Jews came to Hong Kong during the mid-1850s. According to the Beit Hatfutsot, the Museum of the Jewish People, "the current Jewish community's population [in Hong Kong], as of 2010, is estimated to be approximately 5,000 and is comprised of mainly expatriates originating from countries that include UK, US, France, Australia, South Africa, Israel and Canada who worship in seven congregations."

With the aim of further promoting Jewish culture and heritage through holiday celebrations, the Jewish Community Centre of Hong Kong (JCCHK) was built in 1995 to replace the former Jewish Recreation Club (JRC). It is the only Jewish Community Centre in Hong Kong and it serves all Jews from Ultra Orthodox Jews to Reform Jews. The Centre aims to provide communal programmes that cover a wide spectrum of interests, ranging from recreational and athletic to academic and cultural programmes, e.g., seminars and lectures from renowned scholars in the fields of Jewish history, international political affairs, and Jewish genealogy.

Unknown to many local people, the JCCHK is also equipped with its own Library, staffed with a full-time librarian. Despite its small size, the Centre's Library is best-known for its unique Sino-Judaic archive, which is considered the best-stocked Judaic Library in the Far East. In fact, many local as well as overseas academics, journalists, historians and students come to this Judaic Library to conduct their research, because its Sino-Judaic Collection keeps all sorts of information on the Jewish communities in Hong Kong, in the People's Republic of China, and in the neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia. In the following interview, conducted at the Jewish Community Centre of Hong Kong on April 3, 2013, the Librarian, Brenda Yi, discusses her interesting first-hand experiences as a native Hong Kong Chinese person, working as a librarian for a foreign community centre in her home city.

Patrick Lo (PL): Could you please begin by first introducing yourself, your training and your background?

Brenda Yi (BY): My name is Brenda Yi and I have been working at this Judaic Library, Jewish Community Centre of Hong Kong (JCCJL)¹ since May 1996. I am the only person working in this fairly small community centre library serving our members only. So you can say that I am the 'Solo Librarian'. Our collection is made up of about 4,500 items of printed materials, plus a few hundred items of audio-visual materials.

With reference to my training and background, I had worked for the Hong Kong Public Libraries² for close to 10 years. In 1991, I immigrated to Canada and stayed there for 5 years. I came back in 1996, and I have been working at this Judaic Library since then.

PL: Have you also obtained a master degree in library and information science (MLIS)? Is this professional library qualification also part of the job requirement?

BY: Yes, I have an MLIS degree. Actually, after I joined the Hong Kong Public Libraries in the early 1980s, I undertook a diplomaprogramme in library science. And when I went to Canada, I also studied for a diploma course in library science at Seneca College in Toronto. When finally I returned to Hong Kong in 1996, the JCCJL offered me a job as a librarian. Although the JCCJL did not require me to have a master degree at that time, I still thought that it would be a good idea to further study. Hence, I undertook the MLIS programme in Hong Kong. It was a joint master's programme offered by Charles Sturt University in Australia and HKU-SPACE.³

PL: May I ask what you studied for your bachelor's degree?

BY: My bachelor's degree was in business studies, nothing to do with libraries or information science.

PL: Can you tell me about the brief history of this Judaic Library?

BY: This Library was first developed as a private library. We had a Jewish gentleman named Dennis Leventhal. In 1980s he donated a lot of books from his own library, which form the basis of this library. Mr. Leventhal returned to the United States in the late 1990s. When I first came in 1996, the Library was quite empty because we have more space in these new premises. I spent a lot of time finding books and other materials to enrich the collection of this Library. So there was quite a lot of purchasing and cataloguing in the beginning.

¹ Judaic Library, Jewish Community Centre of Hong Kong – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.jcc.org.hk/jcc-library.php>

²Hong Kong Public Libraries – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.hkpl.gov.hk/eindex.html>

³ Master of Information Studies programme offered by Charles Sturt University at HKU-SPACE. Available at: <http://hkuspace.hku.hk/prog/master-of-info-studies>

Despite its small size, this Library has a little bit of everything. We have a strong collection on Jewish holidays and Jewish festivals because these topics are the most popular amongst our users. And we also have a big section of Jewish fiction, because our users tend to travel a lot. Very often they would like to come to our Library to pick up one or two books to read while they are traveling.

We also have a rather large collection of children's literature, because a large percentage of our users are children or young adults. The children love to read stories about their religion, holidays, festivals, traditions and culture. For this reason, our Library also provides a lot of picture books, story books and DVDs on these subjects for the youngsters.

PL: Would you say that you are one of the founders of this Library, i.e., establishing and developing the whole Library from scratch?

BY: No, I am not a founder. The founders are Dennis Leventhal and a Chinese gentleman called Mr. Sui-Jeung Chan. They were very devoted to keeping Jewish traditions, history and culture. Thus they decided to start a Judaic library. I just help develop the collection for this Library and manage its daily operations.

PL: Could you please tell me about the cultural and informational roles of this Library at the Jewish Community Centre in Hong Kong?

BY: In my own opinion, this Library is quite complete in terms of its collection, because I try to buy books that cover a wide range of subjects, as long as they are related to Jews and Judaism. However, due to the limited space in the Library and budget constraints, I have to be more selective when it comes to acquiring new resources for the Library.

The purpose of this Library is to provide the Community members with information for their spiritual needs and their use in daily lives. For example, the section on religious studies is for the more observant members. The range of books on Jewish holidays can help our members to prepare for the various festivals. We also have materials on life cycles that people can consult when preparing for the occasions like Brit Milah (circumcision), Bar/Bat Mitzvah (coming of age), marriage, sickness and death, etc. Also, as I said earlier, the best sellers are for people to read in their leisure time.

There is also a unique collection in the library. This is the Sino-Judaic Collection. It consists of books, journal and newspaper articles and multi-media items on Jews in Hong Kong, in China and in countries of the South-Eastern Asia. These resources are mainly for research.

PL: I noticed that many of your books are in Hebrew or in other foreign languages, is that correct?

BY: Yes, we do have a small collection of Hebrew books, and it will be expanded.

PL: Did you receive any training in handling Hebrew-language materials?

BY: I have taken Hebrew classes at this Centre. Unfortunately, language is something if you don't use it, you lose it. I think I have forgotten most of what I have learned apart from a few simple sentences. I will resume the study if new classes are offered in the future.

PL: How would you handle all these library materials in Hebrew, in terms of cataloguing or buying new Hebrew books?

BY: I would get help from someone who knows the language and the subject matter. I would ask them for opinions on selecting the Hebrew books. When the books arrive, I will ask them to briefly tell me about the subject contents, and the book titles in English. With the necessary information, I can catalogue them.

PL: What does it feel like to be a foreigner working for a Judaic Library?

BY: It was a little bit difficult at first, because I am not familiar with the subject matter. Hebrew is not a big problem because the majority of the members use English. When I think deeper, it would not be different from managing a small special library – in that sense, the subject contents of the book collection should not be an 'issue'. Take a law library as an example, very often the law librarian is not exactly a lawyer himself/herself. His or her professional knowledge may not be comparable to a practicing lawyer. It is the same story with the medical librarians - how many medical librarians do you know who have finished medical school? So I take this attitude, and I just concentrate on the subject contents of the books that need to be processed.

I am glad to tell you that I learnt a great deal about the Jewish culture and their history by cataloguing these Jewish books. My normal routine is to begin by reading a lot of trade catalogues, and also the book reviews. . . . In addition, I also consider the book suggestions from the Community Centre members, etc.

When the books finally arrive, I will have to read parts of the books, in order to determine the subject contents. By doing so, I have learnt about their culture, their religion, their festivals and their history. Without such basic knowledge, I would not be able to process the books at all. Having acquired the basic knowledge, the acquisitions and cataloguing parts of my work have become much easier now. However, occasionally if the subject content still turn out to be 'tricky' or 'not so obvious', I would simply need to do more reading and research, in order to determine what the book is really about.

PL: You said that it was a bit difficult in the beginning – was it because you had to overcome many of the cultural and language barriers?

BY: I think the most difficult part was that I was not familiar with the subject matter and the terminology. When I first came here, I had a great deal to learn. Every culture has its own set of vocabulary. At first I did not know what people were asking for because they told me in the terms that I had not heard of. However, after working with the books for some time, I have gotten some basic ideas of the major

holidays and festivals around the year and the major happenings in the history of their race and country, and my work could proceed more smoothly. It was very rewarding to know about their festivals like Shabbat, Pesach and Hanukkah. So I know Brit Milah, Bar/Bat Mitzvah, and the various wars the Jews fought in the past century to defend their country. It was a whole set of knowledge that I might never had known had I not worked for this library.

And when the cook books came, it became a very good opportunity for me to learn about the special dishes they prepare for various festivals. In this regard, the Jews and the Chinese are very similar in that we all make use of every occasion to hold big feasts with family and friends. We all love food.

I would like to think that our Library is helping the Jewish community in Hong Kong to preserve their culture, traditions and heritage by sharing and passing them down generation by generation. The mission of this Community is, *"To provide a centre for all Jews living in Hong Kong, which will strengthen fellowship, enrich family life and enhance Jewish identity. The centre will be a focal point for Jewish culture, education and heritage for all members of the Jewish Community."* The Library fits in here and provides a supportive role.

PL: What you have just described is all related to the processing of the library materials. I wonder if you have also encountered any difficulties or barriers when you were interacting with the Jewish users in the beginning?

BY: In the beginning, I did encounter many difficulties, e.g., they would tell me a term in Hebrew or in a vocabulary that is pertinent to their culture or religion, and I had absolutely no idea what they were talking about. Then I would start a reference dialogue by asking, say, *"Could you please explain more to me about what you are looking for, and what do you want to do with such information?"* Eventually, I was able to find something for them from the Library, from the Internet resources or from the discussion group of Jewish librarians around the world. If more religious topics came up, I would consult the Rabbis because they are very knowledgeable in this regard. They are the 'walking encyclopedia' to me. After so many years of working in here, I have already mastered some basic Hebrew vocabulary. In addition, I am by now far more knowledgeable about their information needs and their reading interests within the Jewish context. This streamlines my work a lot. In case the books or materials requested are not available in our Library, I buy them in order to fill the collection gaps.

PL: During the initial period, when you were not able to fulfill their information needs immediately, were they understanding and sympathetic towards your situation, because they knew that you are Chinese and not Jewish, or did they expect you to have learnt all these before you took up the position as the Librarian at JCCJL?

BY: They were very understanding and they still are. At the beginning, when users asked me for resources and I was not familiar with the subject matter, they were very patient in explaining to me what they were looking for. They would tell me something about the subject matter. In this way I learnt a lot from them. Very often,

I “open my ears”, and listen to the good books that they talk about among themselves. Being non-Jewish has its advantages. People are more willing to teach me about their culture, history and religion. These add to my knowledge bank of Judaism. Our Centre receives a lot of visitors every year and most of them visit the Library too. I have quite a few users and visitors asking me if I am Jewish, of course jokingly.

PL: As you mentioned earlier, the role of this Library is to support the information needs amongst the Jewish community in Hong Kong. So can you tell me what kind of reference enquiries do you usually receive from the users of this Library? What would be a typical reference question for this Library?

BY: The reference questions that I receive can broadly be divided into two categories. One is simple questions. People ask for a particular book, or books by a certain author. They also seek recommendations on a certain subject. On the lighter side, I receive enquiries from visitors on information on transportation and sight-seeing spots.

The other category is in-depth research questions. The most-asked topic of course is the local Jewish community: how and when they came, where they came from, what their life was like. This Judaic Library is the only place to answer these questions, and we collect all the information on our community in all formats as far as we can. On a wider scope, researchers would ask for information on Jewish settlements in big cities in China, like Kaifeng, Shanghai, Harbin, and Tianjin. The Jewish community in Kaifeng has always been a very popular research topic because this is where the first Jews settled in China in the Zhou Dynasty of the Five Dynasties Period (951-960 A.D.). The Kaifeng Jews came from Central Asia along the Silk Road as small businessmen.

Some cities are also quite popular [reference inquiries]. Harbin and Tianjin are large cities in northeast China where the Russian Jews immigrated to during the World War I and the pogroms in Russia. As for Shanghai, it was an open seaport during the Holocaust, when the Nazis tried to persecute all the Jews in Europe. There were not too many countries that would issue visa for Jews to enter. China was one of the few exceptions. As a result, thousands of Jews fled Europe and entered China via the seaport in Shanghai. A lot of Jewish people from different countries come and tell us that they went back to Shanghai to visit the places where they lived during the World War II as refugees, or to see if their old houses were still standing. Sometimes they pass through Hong Kong. We can often read this kind of stories in newspapers or journals. It is no surprise to hear them say, “Wow, this is the house we used to live in, and there are still people living there! And the current [Chinese] occupants seem to be doing well; and we used to have a table here; and the bed was here and...” So there are numerous stories of happy reunions amongst the Jews: stories about their nostalgic old days; or fond memories that they still cling to.

Researchers come to this Library because they know that we have a Sino-Judaic Collection which collects all sorts of information on the Jewish communities in Hong Kong, in Mainland China, and in the neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia This

collection is still growing and expanding and will continue to serve people who need the information therein.

PL: For people who are making these kinds of research questions or enquiries, are they mostly academics, professors, researchers or university students? Are they usually local or overseas?

BY: The users include all of the above. I have also journalists, historians and students, some local, some overseas. The extent of the research depends on the requirements of their assignments. Some people engaging in bigger projects come to the Library in person to consult the materials, while others may ask for information by email.

I can give you some examples on how people use our resources and what their products are. Once a secondary school teacher and a few students came and looked for information on the history of the local Jewish community. They also interviewed some leaders in the community. The product was a multi-media project to enter a competition on cultural heritage among schools. Another one was two teenage sons of a librarian friend of mine who needed more in-depth information on Judaism than their own library could provide. They were studying in the U.K. and needed the information for their assignments. So while they were in town for vacation, they consulted the materials here.

PL: If overseas researchers or journalists want to look for information about the Jews in China, why would come to ask you, instead of contacting the other Jewish information centres or librarians in Mainland China instead?

BY: When I first joined this Library in the 1990s, there were not so many libraries in Mainland China that had sizeable collections of books on Jews in China or Judaism. So most researchers would use the resources in our Library. Within the past few years, I can see that there is an increasing number of universities in Mainland China offering Jewish studies courses and they set up their own libraries. These libraries are quite well-equipped with resources that are specific to their studies. So I see more and more people are heading to Mainland China for information on the local Jewish communities. But for whatever reasons, if they still choose to use our Library or to supplement their research, I am more than happy to help them in any way possible.

PL: As the 'Solo Librarian' of a very small community library in Hong Kong, what kind of challenges are you currently facing?

BY: We [used to] have space problems . . . but new bookshelves have just been added, so this is not an urgent matter for now. But then I have budgetary problems. I have a small budget and I always don't have enough money to buy all that I want to add to the collection. Since there are so many new and good titles on Jewish topics being published every year, and with a limited budget, I have to be very selective in acquisition.

PL: Does the senior management of the JCCJL give you complete free hand when it comes to selecting/buying books or other materials for the Library? Are you the sole person who makes all the decisions regarding what to buy, what to be selected, what to be acquired?

BY: Basically, yes. But I also have the Jewish Historical Society of Hong Kong to help me when it comes to 'big issues'. For example, for the annual book order, I submit a suggested book list. They examine it and make necessary amendments. Also when bigger library policies are involved, they give advice or take up the matter with the management. In terms of the daily operations, I make the decisions.

PL: When you first came to work for this Library, did you also need to develop policy or maybe even a procedure manual for running this Library?

BY: There was not a formal policy in place at the very beginning. However things got straightened out and they form the precedent. Since it is a small library, guidelines are formed as we proceed.

PL: Since you are the only person working in this Library, why do you think a policy or a procedure manual is necessary for this Library's daily operations?

BY: It is always nice to have a policy in place. When problems arise, the policy or the procedure manual can provide guidelines on the way to handle the situation. In addition, policy and procedures are always useful when you need to justify yourself to a third-party, or to the senior management on why you have made such a decision. However it is a small library, a lot of things can be treated with greater flexibility.

PL: What is the most rewarding part of your work as a librarian at the JCCJL?

BY: Well, at the beginning, my biggest satisfaction was to see the how the library was gradually filled with books and multi-media materials. Basically, every single item in this Library was catalogued by me personally. When people ask me, "Do you have this book?" I more or less had an idea whether we had it or not, and my memory is still good.

Later my satisfaction shifts to see more and more people using our Library. I love to see people leaving the library with a smiling face either because they got the material they wanted or they are happy with my service. My happiness also comes from people I have helped with their research. Very often I receive thank you notes from users after they get the information they need and they make my day too. Indeed, this library is unique in a way that we keep a lot of information on the local Jewish communities, the Jewish communities in the big cities in China, and those in the neighbouring Southeast Asian countries. It is really a "one-of-a-kind" Sino-Judaic Collection. In addition to books, we also collect conference papers, manuscripts, newspapers and journal clippings on various topics related to the Jews in this region. In fact, some of the items which we collect are rather unique, such as our in-house magazines.

PL: Could you please tell me about the highlights of your collection at this Library?

BY: Our collection highlights is definitely our “Sino-Judaic Collection” which I have just mentioned. Some of the books in this Collection are in fact rare books. Some are very old; and I was told that one or two books were bought from auctions. And many of them are already out-of-print and they have been locked up for safe keeping—no doubt they are all quite valuable.

PL: Since you are the only person working in this Library, what happens if you go on leave or you are sick and cannot come to work?

BY: If I go on a long vacation, the Library remains open so that people at this Centre can come and use it. The users can also take out books by filling out the loan forms which we prepare for them. All of the users know where we keep the loan forms. They just need to insert the completed loan forms into this little box here. So when I return to the Library, I will know which books have been taken out. And if the Library is not open, they can always return the borrowed book to the Centre’s Reception.

PL: Do you have to collaborate with other departments in this Centre to co-host events, cultural activities?

BY: As the Librarian in the Community Centre, I do organize activities for children and also play a supporting role in events held here. Occasionally I organize competitions for young children from age 4 to 9 years old. I have done the bookmark design and book cover design competitions based on the books in the Library, and organized a creative writing competition. The main purpose is to make children and parents aware of the resources we have here. Regular notice of new books is sent out to the whole Community Centre so that members know about our new additions. For major holidays, or festivals, I set up book displays with the relevant materials in one place so people need not go to different places to look for information. I help storytellers to identify interesting books to be read to the little children for storytime. Also, students in Shorashim (equivalent to the Sunday school) come to the Library every other week. Their teacher may read a story to them or they can read on their own. Each child signs out a book to take home too. It is always a pleasure to meet these lovely children who add life to the quiet Library.

PL: Do you have anything else to add before closing this interview?

BY: As I said, it is a small but very unique Library. Though the facility is for our members only, the resources in the Library can be made available to researchers who cannot find similar materials elsewhere. Over the years, I see there is a growing interest in Judaism, history of the local Jewish community and Jews in Mainland China. There are more non-Jews visiting our Centre. There are more students from local secondary schools working on assignments on Judaic topics. There are more university students and professors showing interest in Jews in Hong Kong and China. As far as I know, academic libraries have a special collection on Judaism if religious studies programmes are offered in the university. However given our special focus

and our unique role, I am confident in saying that our Library is considered the 'ideal place' in the Far East for conducting research on Jews, Judaism, the Jewish culture, country, and history, as well as the Jewish communities in Hong Kong, in China and in countries in the South-Eastern Asia. So I would like to encourage the faculty and students of universities and theological colleges to come and use our library materials for their assignments or research.

As the world becomes a global village, we can help make it a better place to live in by learning from each other and understanding the culture and religions of other peoples. Through understanding and empathy, we can minimize conflicts and live in harmony. I think it can be called "Tikkun Olam" – a Hebrew phrase for "repairing the world".

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Photos of the JCCHK Library

