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Community, scholars, librarians: the Multicultural Canada Digitization Project

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Abstract

Simon Fraser University Library, University of Calgary, Sien Lok Society of Calgary, and Multicultural History Society of Ontario are founding members in a project bringing together community, scholars and librarians to digitize and provide access to newspapers, photos, and papers relating to immigrants to Canada. This material has until recently been ignored. The Chinese community and MHSO provide content and libraries provide technical support, demonstrating the potential for such a collaboration to provide access to important resources for the cultural communities and for scholars. We are developing an informal coalition which will enable a wide number of partners to contribute.

Biographical information

Lynn Copeland is University Librarian and Dean of Library Services at Simon Fraser University (SFU). Previously she was Systems Manager, leading the development of the Open Source reSearcher discovery, linking, requesting and referencing software. SFU Library digitizes and hosts a variety of online digital products, hosts the PKP/UBC journal management/conferencing/OAH software and is part of the Synergies Canadian journal digitization initiative.

Introduction

Canada is a country of many nationalities. For example in the metropolitan area of Vancouver, where Simon Fraser University (SFU) is located, twenty-five percent of the population are Chinese, ten per cent are South Asian, and dozens of other countries are represented. There is a rich written, photographed and taped record of the Chinese, South Asian and other experiences in Canada. This material is held in libraries, archives, family homes, and institutions such as the Multicultural History Society of Ontario (MHSO). Many of the community newspapers have been microfilmed, including the *Chinese Times* newspaper, published in Vancouver 1915-1992 and the *Chinese Head Tax Records*, mementos of a shameful period in Canada's past.

The problem

Access to these records for scholars, community and young people has not equaled that available for similar English and French materials. For example, the Canadiana.org (formerly CIHM) project which resulted in the preservation of Canada's printed materials in microform, an astonishing and crucial contribution to our understanding of our past. Yet Canadiana.org includes only a scattering of material which is not in English or French.

Other efforts have resulted in the indexing of numerous both mainstream and community newspapers in English or French. Yet the rich history contained in newspapers such as the *Chinese Times* may only be accessed by scrolling through reels of microfilm, an extremely difficult task, if, like one researcher, one is investigating the history of Chinese opera in Vancouver. Two examples illustrate the serendipity of the value of digitizing these records of our Canadian past.

Within days of this writing (June 1, 2006), the Canadian government will be announcing its plan to provide some (as yet unknown) form of redress for the Chinese Head Tax. Crucial to being able to claim compensation will be the proof of family histories, not always the easiest thing to do given the passing of time, distancing of families and complexity of emotions and facts surrounding this event. A coincidence arising from University of British Columbia (UBC) historians Henry Yu and Peter Ward's research interests will greatly alleviate this process. Ironically, the officially sanctioned racial prejudice toward Chinese until relatively recently led to the keeping of detailed records about each immigrant, including their height, family name, place of origin and other factors. These formed the Head Tax registers, which Drs. Ward and Yu obtained a research grant to digitize, in order to study issues such as height variation and patterns of areas of origin. Partnering with the Library and Archives of Canada/Bibliothèque et Archives du Canada, the records created by the two researchers will be linked to the images of the pages, providing

an invaluable tool for individuals seeking to document their arrival in Canada and payment of the head tax.

A second example: the SFU Library, with the permission of the Chinese Freemason Society of Canada, undertook the digitization of the aforementioned *Chinese Times*. Hoping to provide the broadest possible access to this important record of Vancouver and of Chinese Canadian, we discussed the possibility of providing both a Chinese and an English index to the paper. During our investigations, we discovered the translations undertaken by the students of UBC's Dr. Edgar Wickberg of the newspaper articles from 1915 to 1970 in preparation for a book *From China to Canada* which he and others (most notably Harry Con) published in 1982. These translations, buried in Dr. Wickberg's academic papers, will form an English index to the paper without the prohibitive cost of (re)doing the indexing as part of the digitization process. Also of note is that, with the Optical Character recognition of the English material having been completed, it was used by researchers working on a project to document the history of five key buildings in Vancouver's Chinatown, under the auspices of the Chinese Canadian Historical Society of BC.

(Part of) the solution

What is the Multicultural Canada digitization project? It is a loose coalition of community organizations, libraries, archives and scholars, who are joined by the commitment to preserve in digital form and provide access to the record of Canada's peoples: newspapers, photos, family papers, government records, books, tapes.

One product of Multicultural Canada perhaps frames other multicultural historical Canadian digital resources. That is the Encyclopedia of Canada's Peoples. Published in 1999, this 1,340 page publication is the most complete record of Canada's rich multicultural history. With permission of MHSO, SFU Library was able to convert the Encyclopedia to an online database. Version one is now available on the Multicultural Canada website (<http://multiculturalcanada.ca>) and a more complex search and display as well as further enhancements through links to related materials is planned.

Other projects include the digitization of the *Chinese Times* and a number of other newspapers; interviews with Chinese Canadians in Southern Alberta, South Asians in British Columbia, Italian Canadians and others; conversion of Doukhobor materials at University of Toronto and SFU; conversion of photos at MHSO and Vancouver Public Library; and the records of the Chinese Benevolent Society in Victoria.

There are many organizations within Canada engaged in similar work. For the most part, these groups work in co-operation with their communities and researchers and receive their own funding to undertake this work. In many ways this is a necessity as

fundings work this way. The value of the relatively immature Multicultural Canada coalition is that, it is hoped, it will bring together these resources so that students, community and scholars can easily obtain access to the wide variety of resources, and that as digitization projects are planned, an inventory of such projects will enable organizations to identify others with similar projects in mind, and collaborate with them, or prevent their duplicating work unnecessarily. It will also enable us to work to increase understanding among funders and government of the lasting value of this material in defining our nation.

Conclusion

It is fair to say that Multicultural Canada is as yet an emerging concept. However, the value of working together on these common goals is understood by many of us who have seen important individual resources underused or unfunded because they are one small piece of a highly complex history and historical record.