

The Shanghai Museum and the introduction of taxidermy and habitat dioramas into China, 1874–1952

LI-CHUAN TAI

Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, Taiwan (e-mail: tlc@mail.ihp.sinica.edu.tw)

ABSTRACT: The Shanghai Museum, which was established by the primarily British and American expatriate-led North-China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society in 1874 and continued to operate until 1952, had a major influence on the popularization of natural history knowledge in China. It contributed to training the first generation of Chinese taxidermists, many descendants of whom continue even today to hold positions in academic institutions related to natural history in the country. Moreover, the Museum's habitat dioramas, in particular, played a significant role in raising public awareness about environmental issues among local and foreign residents of Shanghai. This paper traces the salient aspects of the Museum's history, focusing on the key individuals involved in its development and the contributions that it made to the production, dissemination and popularization of natural history knowledge and techniques.

KEYWORDS: North-China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society – Arthur de Carle Sowerby – popularization of science – scientific exchange – exhibition – natural history – environmental issues – giant panda.

In historical research on the production, dissemination, and reception of scientific knowledge and techniques in China, scholars have focused on leading figures, schools of thought, academic disciplines, research organizations, and printed publications, but the role played by museums is generally ignored. To address this imbalance, this paper considers the Shanghai Museum, established in 1874 by the North-China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (hereafter NCBRAS) and emphasizes its contributions to the cultivation of local Chinese taxidermists and the introduction of habitat dioramas into China. A brief overview of the origins and development of NCBRAS is followed by a description of the history of the Shanghai Museum and the key individuals involved in its development. Two particularly important figures were the Irish naturalist John David Diques La Touche (1861–1935), who initiated the process of training the first generation of Chinese taxidermists, and Arthur de Carle Sowerby (1885–1954), who continued the cultivation of local experts and introduced habitat dioramas into the Shanghai Museum. The cultivation of Chinese taxidermists and the emergence of taxidermy techniques as a family tradition is described. Attention is particularly drawn to Sowerby's contributions to the “golden age” of the Museum, which helped to popularize natural history and raise public awareness about environmental issues at the time. This paper concludes by highlighting the legacy of the Museum and how, despite having ceased operations in 1952, its influence continues to this day.

ORIGINS OF THE NORTH-CHINA BRANCH OF THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY

The earliest reference to the predecessor of the North-China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, of which the Shanghai Museum was a part, can be found in the minutes of its

preparatory meeting on 24 September 1857 (Anonymous 1857). Held in what was commonly known as the Shanghai Library, one of the British Concession's earliest libraries, the 18 British and American expatriates in attendance passed six resolutions; they decided on the Society's provisional name, purpose, and organizational structure, and elected the Reverend Elijah Coleman Bridgman (1801–1861) as the Society's first president. Moreover, at that first meeting, a proposal to apply to become the China branch of the London-based Royal Asiatic Society (hereafter RAS) was also raised. This was supported by those attending and later approved by other members (Anonymous 1907).

On 16 October 1857, the Society held its second meeting and decided on the provisional name Shanghai Literary and Scientific Society (hereafter SLSS). Over the following months, while waiting for the RAS's reply, the SLSS welcomed several more prominent British and American expatriates to its ranks. The new members included Alexander Wylie (1815–1887), the director of the London Missionary Society Press and editor-in-chief of the *Liuhe Congtan* (*Shanghai Serial*); the British diplomat Robert Hart (1835–1911), who went on to become Inspector-General of China's Imperial Maritime Custom Service; and Samuel Wells Williams (1812–1884), a well-known missionary, linguist and sinologist (Old Mortality 1873). The proceedings of the meeting held on 20 July 1858 indicate that the RAS had accepted the SLSS as an affiliate. However, since another society based in Hong Kong had already adopted the name "China Branch" of the RAS in 1847, the SLSS decided to change its name to North-China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (Hu 1936: 393). The society's wish to affiliate with an existing European scholarly society can be seen as an effort to become a well-established and lasting organization and to enlarge its network outside China.

In its early years, British and American Protestant missionaries were the main driving force behind the establishment of NCBRAS. Besides having Bridgman as its first president, fellow missionary Joseph Edkins served as the Society's first secretary (September 1857–September 1858); Wylie, as the second secretary (September 1858–September 1859); and Edward W. Syle, as the third (September 1859–September 1860).

Bridgman's role as the first president shows that NCBRAS aimed to carry on the tradition of Protestant missionaries in China in the first half of the nineteenth century. Through their active pursuit of understanding all aspects of China and disseminating Western knowledge, the society's members sought to spread their individual and collective influence as earlier missionaries had done. At the invitation of Robert Morrison (1782–1834), an Anglo-Scottish preacher and the first Protestant missionary to set foot in China, Bridgman arrived in Guangzhou in 1830 as a missionary with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and the first American missionary in China (Lazich 2000). From 1832 to 1851, Bridgman's monthly journal, the *Chinese Repository*, provided English-speaking readers with insights into China's current affairs, history, geography, customs and culture, and it is seen as one of the pioneers in the establishment of sinology and related knowledge in the English-speaking world (Yin 2003; Anonymous 1903–1904).

NCBRAS drew inspiration from Morrison and had an intermediary role in the development of sinology as a scholarly subject. Many members later became influential educators in British and American universities in the field of sinology, including James Legge (1815–1897) and Thomas Francis Wade (1818–1895), the first sinology lecturers at the universities in Oxford and Cambridge; Samuel Wells Williams (1812–1884), John Fryer (1839–1928) and Friedrich Hirth (1845–1927), pioneering faculty members at Yale University, University of California, and Columbia University, respectively; and Hosea Ballou Morse (1855–1934), mentor to

John King Fairbank (1907–1991), after whom Harvard’s Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies was named (Fairbank *et al.* 1995).

After Bridgman’s death and the departure of some key members, this well-established institution’s activities ground to a halt at the end of 1861, but it was revived on 1 March 1864, thanks to vigorous efforts by members such as Wylie and Thomas William Kingsmill (1837–1910) (Anonymous 1864b: 175). Thereafter, the NCBRAS flourished, recruiting administrative personnel, diplomats and merchants in the foreign concessions of Shanghai (Anonymous 1907). NCBRAS had 250 members in 1892, of whom more than a quarter were customs officers (Fairbank *et al.* 1995: 94), and more than 800 by the time its activities were disrupted by the war in 1941 (Smith 1985: x).

At the first general assembly meeting of SLSS in 1857, Bridgman had articulated that Society’s primary aims, which included researching the Chinese empire, gathering and archiving reference materials in Chinese and foreign languages in a library, establishing an organized repository for Chinese natural history specimens and scientific items, and making its research contributions public through the publication of a journal to promote the dissemination of knowledge about China (Bridgman 1858). NCBRAS’s three objectives were later reiterated as the investigation of subjects connected with China and the surrounding nations, the publication of papers in a journal and the formation of a library and museum (Anonymous 1864a). The establishment of a museum can be seen as NCBRAS extending its influence on local society.

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE SHANGHAI MUSEUM

At first, NCBRAS lacked a fixed venue and therefore organized its talks, meetings and other activities at the venues of other organizations based in the International Settlement.¹ Later, the Society acquired land and funds, and in the autumn 1871, it built a two-storey building as its permanent venue with two large rooms on the second floor designated as the library and the museum.

Although the library promptly became operational, the museum was delayed and not formally established until 25 March 1874. According to William Burgess Pryer (1843–1899), the museum’s first honorary curator, there were two reasons that its establishment was delayed: the lack of a suitable venue and the need for a skilled taxidermist. Although the first problem had been solved in 1871, the second was not resolved until early 1874 when Wang Shuheng, an apprentice trained by the French Lazarist Father Armand David (1826–1900), came to help. The NCBRAS’s museum was China’s second modern museum, preceded only by the Zikawei Museum, which had been founded by French Jesuits in Shanghai in 1868 (Chen 1936: 25; Zeng 1943: 5; see also Tai 2017).

After its formal establishment, the NCBRAS’s museum was officially named The Shanghai Museum (RAS) (often simplified, as here, to The Shanghai Museum), and its Chinese name, Shanghai Bowuyuan, was derived directly from this. Although it was called a museum, it consisted in its early years of just one large room. In the early 1880s, the library had to be relocated due to an ever-increasing number of books, which allowed the museum to be expanded to occupy two exhibition rooms. In 1886, the Shanghai Municipal Council named the road on which the museum was located as Bowuyuan Lu (Museum Road), a decision clearly indicative of the increasing importance attached to the institution (Hu 1936; 399).