

Johnston Collection Project

Objectives

In 2006 August, I submitted an application for funding from the Sino-British Fellowship Trust in order to facilitate scholarly access and promote use of the books in the Johnston Collection.

At SOAS Library, the individual items in the Johnston Collection are at present scattered among the Library's stock, chiefly in the China Section.

The project will enable staff to remove the Johnston books from where they are currently housed and to reassemble the collection, thus making it a discrete, coherent collection and more accessible to scholars.

Sir Reginald Fleming Johnston (1874-1938)

Sir Reginald was born in Edinburg, Scotland in 1874. He studied at University of Edinburgh and later at Magdalen College Oxford.

At the age of 24 in 1898, he began his career as Colonial Office administrator, first in Hong Kong and then in Weihaiwei, Shandong Province. (Weihaiwei was leased to the UK from 1898 to 1930).

While in Hong Kong, he studied Chinese, first Cantonese and then Mandarin. He later learnt about the culture, people and the society of China. He also built up his library and started writing books.

During this time he made several expeditions into the hinterland of China visiting Buddhist holy mountains and also staying in the temples.

He had the intention to retreat to Putou Shan in Zhoushan and live a life of reclusion and meditation.

1919-1924

In 1919, age 45, he was appointed English tutor of 13 years old the last Qing Emperor, Puyi.

He was also the Manager of the Summer Palace

During this time he met many prominent politicians, and literary authors

After Puyi was ordered to leave the Forbidden City in 1924, he returned to his administrative work as Secretary to the British China Indemnity Delegation and became last commissioner of Weihaiwei which was returned to China in 1930.

1931-1937.

1931, Johnston was appointed Chair of Chinese Studies at the School of Oriental Studies (SOS)

1938 SOS became School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS).

The post came up in 1929 but he hesitated to apply this job, he said:

I am very doubtful about my qualifications for such a post I am not really a Chinese scholar, I merely know a few words of Chinese and can recognise a few Chinese characters when I see them.

He was chosen in preference to his fierce competitor, Dr Evangeline Dora Edwards because of his prestige and contacts and because he was a public figure of the time (amongst the 20th century British establishment.).

He thought as a Professor of Chinese that he would have the opportunity to write and publish, rather than to supervise the teaching of basic Chinese to businessmen, missionaries, army personals, colonial administrators, etc.

He was not a trained scholar and he did not like his colleagues and he hated the administrative work of running the Chinese Department.

Despite being a prominent figure for the position, no financial benefit for the School was gained from his excellent Chinese establishment connections. This left the Chinese Department in an unsatisfactory situation.

He retired in 1937 and lived in a small island, Eilean Righ which he bought in 1924.

The Collection

The Johnston collection has been described by my predecessor, Mr Charles d'Orban, as "One

of the finest collections of Chinese and Far Eastern books in the country". The collection,

which consists of some 16,000 items, was presented to the Library by Sir Reginald F

Johnston's executrix, Elizabeth Sparshott, after he died in 1938.

The collection is particularly rich in books pertaining to Buddhism, mountain chronicles and

the literature of the 1920s. Included in the collection is a book of flowers paintings by the artist

Chen Shu (1612-1682) which is autographed by Pu Yi when he presented it to Sir Reginald

Johnston. Among this collection are autographed editions of prominent writers such as Xu

Zhimo (1897-1931) and Hu Shi (1891-1962).

The description of Johnston's library in the publication entitled: Reginald Johnston by Shiona Airlie:

Chinese books: Puyi had presented to him during his years in the Forbidden City.

Some printed in the imperial Palace for the use of the imperial family and household and have never been obtainable in the book-market.

Chinese encyclopaedia in 1,734 volumes

Complete collection Buddhist scriptures in 1,500 volumes

Compendium of Chinese literature 1,200 volumes

Mountain chronicles in 250 volumes

Biography

Shiona Airlie, *Reginald Johnston*, 2001.

Robert Bickers, *Coolie work: Sir Reginald Johnston at the School of Oriental Studies, 1931-1937*, [Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society](#), Series III, 5, 3 (November, 1995).

Raymond Lamont-Brown, *Tutor to the Dragon Emperor: The Life of Sir Reginald Fleming Johnston*, 1999.

Published works

- *A Chinese Appeal to Christendom concerning Christian Missions*, R.F. Johnston under the pseudonym Lin Shao-yang (London: Watts and Co., 1911)
- *Buddhist China* R.F. Johnston (London: John Murray 1913 - in U. Toronto Library) Republished 2008 [\[1\]](#)
- *Letters to a Missionary* R.F. Johnston, (1918)
- *Twilight in the Forbidden City* Reginald Fleming Johnston, (1934) Republished 2008 [\[2\]](#)
- *From Peking to Mandalay* R.F. Johnston, (1908) Republished 2008 [\[3\]](#)
- *Confucianism in Modern China* R.F. Johnston, Republished 2008 [\[4\]](#)
- *The Chinese Drama* Reginald Fleming Johnston, (1921)