

## Guangzhou Library's "Return of the Historic Images" Collaborative Project

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### **Abstract:**

*In 2014, the Guangzhou Library, the New Zealand Consulate-General in Guangzhou, and the Presbyterian Archives Research Centre (PARC) New Zealand began collaborating on a project based on a collection of images taken by Presbyterian missionaries from New Zealand in China's Guangdong Province from the late Qing Dynasty to the early 1950s after the founding of the PRC. The project has produced a successful photography exhibition and other achievements which gained widespread media coverage and overwhelming public support. In February 2015, the PARC has delivered 2,000 digitized images concerning old Guangzhou to the Guangzhou Library. Based on these images, the Guangzhou Library has chosen to further pursue collaboration and give the city more access to its unique past.*

*The project exemplifies the library's effort to preserve and promote the city's cultural heritage, and how libraries and other cultural institutions can collaborate across borders to bring to light our shared history. This paper will trace the evolution of the project; elaborate our goals and accomplishments so far, and project our goals for the future.*

**Keywords:** Guangzhou, Historic Images, New Zealand, Missionaries.

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Guangzhou, a city known as the "South Gate" of China, boasts a time-honored history of international relations. Due to the policy of One Treaty Port during the Ming and Qing Dynasty (16-18 century), Guangzhou used to be the only connection between the old China and the world outside. It was the destination for foreign merchants, travellers, diplomatic

envoies and missionaries. Since the arrival of Saint Francis Xavier, at Guangdong's Shangchuan Island (Taishan, Guangdong province) in August, 1552. Foreign missionaries gravitated to China's Pearl River Delta area and served as bridge builders between east and west.<sup>1</sup> After the First Opium War (1840-1842), missionaries came to China on a large scale. Today their meticulous record keeping serves as crucial data for local historians.

In the 1860's New Zealand was undergoing a gold rush in the South Island region of Otago. Guangzhou was experiencing an exodus of men seeking their fortunes abroad and many Cantonese arrived in Otago to work as miners. The mining community that settled in Otago was well received by the local Presbyterian Church, which later inspired missionaries from New Zealand to explore south China. This resulted in an active Presbyterian Mission in Guangzhou between 1890s and early 1950s. A project spearheaded by notable missionaries such as Alexander Don, James McNeur and the legendary Annie James.

It has been over a century since the missionaries arrived in Guangzhou. During their stay, they took many photographs of old Guangzhou. Those precious images were taken back by the missionaries when they returned to New Zealand in the 1950s. Quite recently, George McKibbens, an American expatriate living in Guangzhou came across some of the images from the Presbyterian Archives Research Centre (PARC) New Zealand. These images offer glimpses of Guangzhou's past, from the late Qing Dynasty, through the Republican period and the Sino-Japanese war, to the founding of the People's Republic of China.

The resurfacing of the photographs aroused the interest of the New Zealand Consulate-General in Guangzhou and the Guangzhou Library. As a result, the two organizations began a collaborative project entitled, "Return of the Historic Images". There are three purposes behind the project. First, we aim to preserve this history and bring to light these documents which are records of the city's evolution. Secondly, we plan to make use of these images to conduct thorough historical research on the connection between China and New Zealand and the spread of Christianity in Guangzhou. Lastly, we aim to engage more cultural institutions and ordinary citizens in the preservation of the city's cultural heritage. While further plans are still in process, this project has already made some notable achievements.

## **1. "A Shared History: New Zealand Connections with Old Guangzhou" Photography Exhibition**

George McKibbens is a lecturer in historical preservation, who is quite familiar with the history of Guangzhou. When he came across the old photos of Guangzhou for the first sight, he was eager to bring these photos into the public view. The first idea in his mind was a photo exhibition. Coincidentally, 2014 was the 25th anniversary of the establishment of sister city relations between Guangzhou and Auckland. To commemorate this occasion, the Guangzhou Library was seeking for cooperation with the New Zealand Consulate-General in Guangzhou. George's leadership aroused the interest of both sides.

In June 2014, with the help and coordination of George McKibbens, Guangzhou Library received dozens of digitized images authorized by the PARC. From June 20 to July 10, we hosted an exhibition entitled, "A Shared History: New Zealand Connections with Old Guangzhou" in collaboration with the New Zealand Consulate-General and the Foreign

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<sup>1</sup> Wu Qing, "Guangzhou, in the Eyes of Europeans between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century," *Jinan University Master's Thesis*, China National Knowledge Internet (January, 2006): 10.

Affairs Office of Guangzhou Municipal Government. 43 photographs appeared in public for the first time. George McKibbens acted as the curator. The exhibition was inaugurated as the opening of a series of events commemorating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary between the two cities. It was also the first phase of the “Return of the Historic Images” project. Over 20 days, we received over 3,000 visitors.

Data from the PARC shows that most of these photos were taken by Alexander Don, a missionary from New Zealand. He visited Guangzhou with missionary group in 1896. They settled on Chinese miners’ hometown and built a hospital named Universal Love out there, which grew to be the Canton missionary village, called Kong Chuen. According to the missionary’s map 100 years ago, Kong Chuen was located at Panyu district on the north of Guangzhou. However, today “Panyu” refers to the southern district of Guangzhou. Since the city’s borders have since expanded and villages annexed through district rezoning; no contemporary experts were able to identify the accurate location of “Kong Chuen” village. Nevertheless, the exhibition itself brought surprises more than we expected.

### 1.1 Uncovering the mystery of Kong Chuen

Before the exhibition took place, George McKibbens has tried every possible means to figure out where the mysterious Kong Chuen is. He got some important information after consulting relevant experts. However, it is during the exhibition period that significant breakthrough occurred. Some local citizens contributed valuable clues to the historic background of the images.

Tang Guohua, Professor of the School of Architecture and Urban Planning in Guangzhou University, gave clues to the location of the past Panyu district. There were Upper (North) Panyu and Lower (South) Panyu in the past. The past North Panyu is today’s Baiyun District.



*Tang Guohua, Guangzhou, 2014*<sup>2</sup>

Zhuo Zixiong, an 80-year-old resident born and bred in Guangzhou, gave clues to the specific location of the missionary village and the hospital according to his memory of my youth.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Forgotten Canton Archives*, directed by Vankey Cai (2014; Guangzhou: Guangdong Radio and TV Station, 2014), DVD.



*Zhuo Zhixiong, Guangzhou, 2014*<sup>3</sup>

The building of Universal Love Hospital was finally found. A majority of the building still exists just like 100 years ago. It was taken over by Southern Medical University and renamed to Jiangdu Hospital. It is now a mental hospital.



*Universal Love Hospital, Guangzhou, 1910*

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<sup>3</sup> *The Forgotten Canton Archives*, directed by Vanckey Cai (2014; Guangzhou: Guangdong Radio and TV Station, 2014), DVD.



改名江都医院  
and renamed to Jiangdu Hospital

*Jiangdu Hospital, Guangzhou, 2014*<sup>4</sup>

## 1.2 Appearance of Alexander Don's Descendant

More Out of surprise, a special guest attended the exhibit dramatically. By pure coincidence, the New Zealand Consulate-General in Guangzhou got in touch with Sam MacKay, the great great grandson of pioneering missionary Alexander Don. MacKay is now working at the New Zealand Embassy in Beijing as Senior Education Manager.

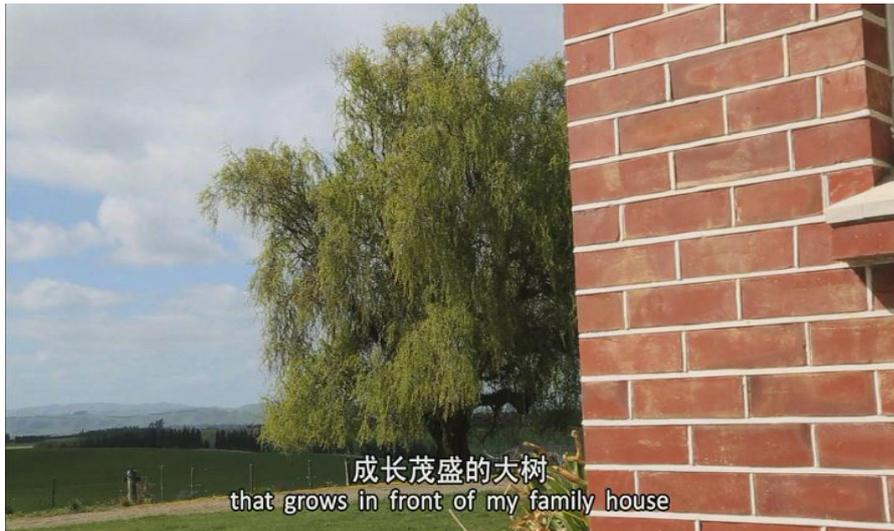


*Sam Mackay, Alexander Don's Descendant, was regarded as a piece of living history. Guangzhou, 2014*<sup>5</sup>

Sam Mackay did not know about his family's connection to China early in life, but rather he learned during his professional career after returning from his first visit to China. Growing up the tree growing in front of MacKay's family home was cut from Guangdong, and brought over by Alexander Don himself generations ago. At the opening of the exhibit McKay told this story and explained how he learned of this living and very 'tangible connection' between his family and China.

<sup>4</sup> *The Forgotten Canton Archives*, directed by Vanckey Cai (2014; Guangzhou: Guangdong Radio and TV Station, 2014), DVD.

<sup>5</sup> *The Forgotten Canton Archives*, directed by Vanckey Cai (2014: Guangzhou: Guangdong Radio and TV Station, 2014), DVD.



*The tree brought by Alexander Don from China  
Riversdale, New Zealand, 2014<sup>6</sup>*

## **2. Living Library Activity: New Zealand Edition**

Apart from the photography exhibition, we also organized a Living Library activity (New Zealand edition). The main idea behind this activity is to give the audience a chance to have an open dialogue with a “Living Book” so as to introduce the rarely-known stories behind the historic images on display. George McKibbens and Rebecca Needham, the Consul-General of New Zealand were invited to act as “living books” for the New Zealand edition.

George McKibbens was a “living book” entitled *Searching for Guangzhou’s Oversea Legacy*. By taking the historic photography exhibition for example, George shared his own experiences and ideas in the field of heritage preservation and promotion, in order to evoke citizens’ awareness of cultural heritage protection.



*George McKibbens during the Living Library activity  
Guangzhou Library, 2014*

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<sup>6</sup> *The Forgotten Canton Archives*, directed by Vanckey Cai (2014; Guangzhou: Guangdong Radio and TV Station, 2014), DVD.

Rebecca Needham, on the other hand, gave emphasis on the relation between New Zealand and Guangdong Province, including their early connections, communication at present, and prospect in the future.



*Rebecca Needham during the Living Library activity  
Guangzhou Library, 2014*

### **3. Production of a Documentary Film**

George McKibbens is also a guest host of Lingnan Voices, a historical and cultural radio program of the local media network GRT. The radio program was the first platform which George unveiled the story with an interview with photographic curator Myke Tymons. As media attention spread, GRT director Vankey Cai shot a documentary film on the story, titled *The Forgotten Canton Archives* was produced and debut in November, 2014.

With George McKibbens as the key figure, the film mainly documents his involvement in the project. It not only reveals the mystery of the historic images, but also gives a glimpse into the early connections between China and New Zealand, including the life of Cantonese labours in New Zealand and their relation with local missionaries. The film has already been nominated for many documentary awards in China.

### **4. Introduction of 2,000 Digitized Historic Images of Guangzhou**

According to Mychael Tymons, the photograph curator of the PARC New Zealand, they housed altogether 180,000 photos, with about 4,000 of those related to China. Half of them were described and half not described. Some of these images used to be kept in a box in Wellington while others in Auckland. The PARC got them in about 1984, the same year of its foundation.

*“Few a big described part which belongs to Canton. Canton is the main area we (the missionary group) worked in. But nobody from Canton even hears them.” said Mychael Tymons.<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> *The Forgotten Canton Archives*, directed by Vankey Cai (2014; Guangzhou: Guangdong Radio and TV Station, 2014), DVD.

With the coordination of George, we got in touch with the PARC and reached a consensus on cooperation on the digitization of around 2,000 historic images concerning old Guangzhou. In October 2014, a delegation from Guangzhou Library paid a visit to the PARC in New Zealand. The two sides signed a contract and made a timeline for photo digitization and delivery. 4 months later in the end of February, 2015, we received all the 2,000 digitized images. After being kept abroad for more than 100 years, the images of old Guangzhou finally came back to their hometown and will come to the view of Guangzhou citizens very soon.

## 5. Handing-over Ceremony of the Historic Images

In April 13, we held an official handing over ceremony of the photos on Guangzhou from the PARC New Zealand. Being witnessed by governmental officials, local Medias and Guangzhou citizens, the ceremony took place in the Library of the People and Culture of Guangzhou, a service area focused on the promotion and preservation of Cantonese culture.

John Mckinnon, the new Ambassador of the New Zealand Embassy in China, attended the ceremony and handed over the photos to Fang Jiazhong, general director of the Guangzhou Library. It was John Mckinnon's first visit to Guangzhou after he assumed his new post since January, 2015.



*Handing-over Ceremony, Guangzhou Library, 2015  
(Left: Fang Jiazhong, Right: John Mckinnon)*

From June 2014 to April 2015, the “Return of the Historic Images” Collaborative Project has lasted for near a year. During the 10 months, we worked across the borders with the government, cultural institutions and local media. Meanwhile, citizens and experts of Guangzhou also got involved in the project and made inneglectable contribution. In the coming months, we will continue to collaborate with the New Zealand Consulate-General, the Guangdong Radio and TV Station and other institutions to hold a series of activities called “Approaching the historic images”. By making the photographs available on the

library's website, we will engage citizens and experts to help us record this part of Guangzhou's history.

Moreover, the "Return of the Historic Images" project marks the start of a larger project the Guangzhou Library will embark upon entitled, "Searching for Guangzhou's Overseas Legacy". We plan to cooperate with international agencies with archival material relevant to Guangzhou, and also domestic institutions interested in the preservation of the city's local documentary history. In March of 2015 the library was informed that amount of archives relevant to Cantonese residents working abroad in early days are housed in the Royal BC Museum of Vancouver, Canada. We are now in contact with the museum for potential cooperation.

According to the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto adopted in 1994, promoting awareness of cultural heritage should be one of the core missions of public library services.<sup>8</sup> In 2009, the World Library and Information Congress: 75th IFLA General Conference and Assembly took place in Milan, Italy. The congress theme was "Libraries create futures: Building on cultural heritage". The congress put an emphasis on libraries' role on heritage preservation. Libraries should keep pace with the change brought about by history and technology, helping to shape the future through the resources inherited from the past for example cultural heritage.<sup>9</sup> In order to fulfill the mission of a public library, we will seek every chance to work together with foreign archives and relevant institutions in the future. More importantly, we will engage more and more citizens of Guangzhou in our process of preserving the city's cultural heritage and its unique history.

## **Acknowledgments**

We gratefully acknowledge the help of the New Zealand Consulate-General in Guangzhou, the Presbyterian Archives Research Centre (PARC) New Zealand and the Guangdong Radio and TV Station. Our deepest gratitude goes especially to George McKibbens. He is the initiator of the project and has done a lot to facilitate the communication and collaboration.

We also would like to thank Mychael Tymons, Rebecca Needham, Xie Pianpian, Vankey Cai and Sam Boss for their effort and contribution. Without you, we can hardly work things out like this.

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*The Forgotten Canton Archives*. Directed by Vankey Cai. 2014. Guangzhou: Guangdong Radio and TV Station, 2014. DVD.

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<sup>8</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), "UNESCO Public Library Manifesto", 1994, Accessed: May 10, 2015, <http://www.unesco.org/webworld/libraries/manifestos/libraman.html>

<sup>9</sup> International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, "General Guidelines for Papers", *World Library and Information Congress: 75th IFLA General Conference and Assembly*, 2009, Accessed: May 10, 2015, <http://conference.ifla.org/past-wlic/2009/callinfo-en.htm>.

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