

Date : 07/06/2006



“Moe Thauk Kye,” the First Burmese Library in Japan

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Meeting:	134 Library Services to Multicultural Populations
Simultaneous Interpretation:	Yes

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 72ND IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL
20-24 August 2006, Seoul, Korea
<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla72/index.htm>

Abstract

In 2000, a library named “Ahhara,” with 1,500 books was established only by the sole initiative of a Burmese volunteer group in Tokyo. The name of the library was changed from “Ahhara” to “Moe Thauk Kye” in November 2003. Currently, the number of books has increased to 5,000 volumes, which occupy an entire room in a small apartment. The Burmese population in Japan is not very large, but they have their own library in order to sustain and disseminate Burmese literature and culture.

In partnership with NGOs and groups which support them, this library provides services including lending books, offering cultural events, and assisting Burmese in need. Many Burmese living in Japan are living in unstable circumstances. Therefore, the library exists not only to read and borrow materials, but also as a place where people help and communicate with each other.

Burmese in Japan

The Burmese population in Japan is not very large and it is difficult to give the exact number of Burmese residents. Members of the community say that there are almost 10,000 Burmese, with 5,000 of them are living in and around the Tokyo metropolitan area. They are temporary immigrant workers, asylum seekers, students, and so on.

Establishment of Library, “Ahhara”

I came to Japan in 1996 from my country. I met Burmese friends in Japan, and we spent our free time reading Burmese books, magazines, both fiction and nonfiction. In general, Burmese people like reading books and writing poems. But the availability of materials in Japan was very limited. As individuals, we couldn't afford to get so many books and magazines on our own.

We tried to solve this problem. I had the inspiration to set up a library for the Burmese community. I talked with some like-minded friends about my idea of establishing a Burmese library. They all agreed, and then we discussed and exchanged our views.

Our next step was to define the aims of library. We reached the following conclusions. They are:

1. to collect hard-to-obtain books and preserve them.
2. to collect the historical writings of our country for the next generation.
3. to preserve and maintain the customs, tradition, language and culture of our country and
4. to encourage every library user to study Japan as well as our native country and to compare the differences of both societies.

Initially, five people were involved in this project. We started collecting books from our friends, and raised funds from our group for purchasing books in Burma through our friends living there. We announced the establishment of a Burmese library in Itabashi, Tokyo in 2000.

The library was named “Ahhara” which means Food for Thought in Burmese. It is human nature that people feel the constant need to have information, think freely, and communicate with each other. Our library is the place where people get access to materials and information. We believe information and knowledge are the power to make democratic society without violence.

We started library services with about 1,500 books, both fiction and nonfiction. Shortly afterwards, we also published a newsletter, “Ahhara Sasaung” (or The Food for Thought Bulletin) for free distribution in 2001.

From “Ahhara” to “Moe Thauk Kye”

The proper management of an increasing number of books and journals become a challenge. Therefore, in November 2004, we moved the library to a new place in Shinjuku where many Burmese are working and living. Simultaneously the name of the library was changed to “Moe Thauk Kye” which means the Morning Star hoping for a brighter future for the younger generation. The collection is growing and now occupies an entire room of 16 square meters in a small apartment with three bed rooms.

Library services

Fourteen people are now working for “Moe Thauk Kye” as volunteers. None of us are professional librarians. This means that we all have our own jobs besides library work. Unfortunately, none of us had education or experience in library work until our library was established.

Acquisitions

At first, some of the collection was donated by friends, and some was purchased in Burma through our friends living there. As more and more people became interested in our library, we have received donations of books from scholars and other people. Some authors have given us new materials which consist of writings banned in Burma under the present regime. We collect and even publish books that are banned in our country. There are now almost 5000 books on the shelves.

Lending

The library is open on weekends and public holidays from 11a.m. to 11p.m. We can also receive users during weekdays by prior appointment. The library is free to use and open to all people regardless of their nationality, race, religion, or political thought. Each person can borrow 2 books at a time for 2 weeks; and borrowers can also request on extension of one week. About 300 people a year use the library a year including not only Burmese but also Japanese.

Extension services

Fortunately, as the library is becoming well known among Burmese and interested Japanese society, more attention is being paid to the library, and its impact in the community is growing. This has enabled us to promote the extension of services to the Burmese community.

One of these services is the “Literary Day”, which is a lecture meeting on literature. It originated from a Buddhist annual event which is very familiar in our country. We hold it annually in November. Each time we invite authors, poets, and journalists who fled from Burma to various countries due to the lack of freedom of expression. Last November, we held the fourth “Literary Day” at a community center in Toshima, Tokyo. There were over 100 people in the audience, including some Japanese librarians and other interested people.

Secondly, we provide basic needs such as clothing and financial assistance for Burmese asylum seekers or displaced people at camps in the border areas of Thailand.

Thirdly, we also have a Burmese volunteer doctor for free health consultation in Burmese on every Sunday at the library.

Funding

Any one can use the library free of charge although the library budget is very tight. Library expenses are supported by the members' monthly fees and donations. Since July 2005, we have received financial assistance from the Refugee Assistance Headquarters (RHQ).

Partnership

We have various networks with NGOs, groups, and individuals in Japan, Korea, and our homeland.

We have been working in cooperation with RHQ. It was established in 1979 as a subordinate organization of the Foundation for the Welfare and Education of the Asian People. According to the RHQ homepage, "the RHQ is entrusted by the Government of Japan. We manage and operate the Kansai Branch and the International Refugee Assistance Center to promote the resettlement of Indo-Chinese refugees, Convention refugees, etc., in Japan. We also carry out various operations for refugee assistance." Financial aid by RHQ covers part of the expenses of publishing our monthly journal and inviting the lecturers from overseas to the "Literary Day" events. The RHQ has also offered to consult with us if the need arises. However, the location of the International Refugees Assistance Center which the RHQ opened in 2003 to assist the study of Japanese language and in getting jobs was not convenient for us. After some discussion, the RHQ opened Japanese language classes in Shinjuku near our library.

We also have a connection with the Shanti Volunteers Association. It was originally founded as the Japan Sotoshu Relief Committee (JSRC) in 1980. JSRC opened an office in Bangkok, Thailand and commenced mobile library services to Cambodian refugee camps. In 1981, volunteers of the JSRC established the Sotoshu Volunteers Association, now called the Shanti Volunteers Association (SVA). The SVA started library services for Burmese living on the boarder of Thailand in 2000. It is said there are 130,000 people who have fled from their country. NGOs from all over the world support their living needs and schools. The SVA decided to establish libraries and help people to operate library services. The SVA also publishes books for children because Burmese children have very few books. These books are donated to our library, too. We discuss and communicate with the SVA on how to provide library services.

We also have a relationship with other libraries and librarians in Japan. If there are multiple copies in our stacks, we donate them to the National Diet Library through our friend at the NDL. We also sometimes get advice from members of the Librarians Network for Culturally Diverse Society about services, conservation, and so on.

The affiliated libraries, "Thutathahaya" of Nagoya, Japan and "Shwethingaha" of South Korea associate and collaborate to organize literary lectures and publish books.

Our services hereafter

We continue to work on collecting hard-to-obtain books and publishing books written by well known authors and journalists with our affiliated libraries “Thutathahaya” of Nagoya and “Shwethingaha” of Korea because these books were banned by the military regime. To date, we have published five books.

We have also helped the MPU (Members of Parliamentary Union) to found a library at their office. They are the 1990 election winners who fled the country and now live in the Thai-Burmese border area.

We will continue to learn and improve the library in order to provide better services for our readers. We do our utmost within our volunteer capacity to create a library. Although we lack professional library qualifications and feel that we can not organize the materials in a completely professional manner, we nevertheless purchase books, mend them, and keep them organized on shelves. With the help and advice of Japanese librarians, we are going to make our library more systematic and effective.

Finally, in case of the Burmese who need more medical care, social assistance, and support; we will concentrate more on this area in the future.

(This paper was edited by Yasuko Hirata and Eiji Kurosaki with the assistance of Susan Clark.)