

Back Talk — Silence is Golden if You are in the Market for a Dead Library

Column Editor: **Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson** (Library Director, University of Hong Kong; Phone: 852 2859 2200; Fax: 852 2858 9420) <ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk>

Silence is golden, or so it is said. However, living in a city of 7+ million provides few opportunities for silence or the gold it is to produce. We live on Hong Kong Island in an area known as the mid levels — that is, an area in the middle between the harbor and the mountains. Hong Kong is mostly mountains with few if any people living in what might be seen as jungle. But in the 20 or so percent of the territory where people do live, we live cheek-to-jowl in apartment houses. Trucks seem to be banned from our street between midnight and 6 AM so there is a bit less noise during these hours but you can always hear cars and people down on the street, or at times the crying of children through the concrete walls above and below our flat. Last summer I did have a total silence experience. I took a trip to Mongolia which included two nights at a *Ger* camp, that is, a camp where tourists live in felt yurts in order to pretend they are sheep herders. Out on the rolling hills of Mongolia it is so quiet you can seemingly hear the beating of your own heart — excited by the occasional howl of wolves in search of wandering sheep.

Well, enough of this tourist nostalgia about silence in Hong Kong and Mongolia. My plan for this column was to deal with the topic of silence in libraries, specifically, to look at the value of having silent areas in the library. My motivation for thinking about this stemmed from a few patron complaints that our new food, drink, and conversation ambiance was getting in the way of their getting their research work completed.

I thought that if I surfed the Web/library literature to find the pros and cons for silence in the library, I would get enough to finish this essay (and silence **Katina**'s nagging me to finish). What I found, however, was a hornet's nest of anger and words about the topic.

For example, I found an enormously entertaining essay by **Art Plotnick** entitled "The Liberation of Sweet Library Lips."¹ **Plotnick** noted that in 1967 he was responsible for a pull out centerfold sign in the *Wilson Library Bulletin* "printed on heavy yellow stock and framed in an antique border [with] . . . the hot pink words, NO SILENCE" inscribed. He goes on to say "I've got nothing against silence. Some of my best friends are silent. I've got nothing against it except what it's done to the image of libraries



and librarians: it has WASTED us!" By this he means that by requiring librarians to go around "shushing" people we have marginalized ourselves and made librarians archaic symbols of musty archives worthy only of ridicule.

Traditionally we have had of course a number of fans who have encouraged us/demanded that we to stick to shushing people. **Plotnick** provides two excellent quotes from those who truly believed in the value of quiet libraries:

- **John Ciardi** called for libraries to be "a place for the soft rustle of pages and the quiet stir of thoughts over the reading tables."
- **Jesse Shera** said that the library "is almost the last outpost of silence . . . There is nothing wrong with the library as a 'quiet storage place'; indeed, it has been exactly that from its beginnings, for it was as a storage place that the library was brought into being."

But libraries have changed and most of us have listened to **Plotnick's** call for an end to silence in at least parts of our libraries. At the **University of Hong Kong** we now have green (food, drink and conversation); yellow (water but no food or conversation), and red (nothing to eat or drink and no conversation) zones. Since we have an aversion to police state tactics we don't heavily enforce these restrictions but most people seem to follow the rules. But where those demanding silence wander into the green zones or when noisy eat and drink patrons insist on taking up residence in a yellow or red zone, we do have trouble.

Apparently my library isn't the only place with this problem. A non librarian columnist in the UK recently noted,

Libraries have long provided silence to those without enough of it elsewhere in their lives. That's an essential provision, not any sort of discrimination. Now our librarians want to put a stop to it, making libraries too participate in the noise of urban life, the "fun." They should hold their silence. Or cease to dishonour the name of librarian.²

So what are we to do? For our library I think we will stick

with our zoning system but work to make it clearer where noise is and is not appropriate. A few years ago during a tour of Australian academic libraries I noticed some libraries with glass walled off "deep silence" areas. Etched in the glass were quotations about the value of silence, e.g., Silence is golden, let us be silent that we may hear the whispers of the gods. I found this to be a nice touch though a bit smaltzy. I have an idea if I were a student at these schools I would want to paste post-it-notes with contrary views:

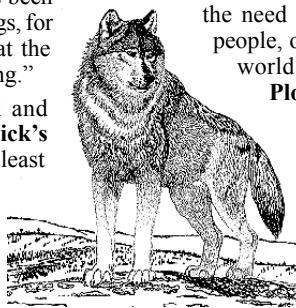
- **Francis Bacon**: Silence is the virtue of fools.
- **Abraham Lincoln**: To sin by silence when they should protest makes cowards of men.

I have an idea that **Francis Bacon** probably wanted his libraries deathly quiet but I fear that unless we loosen up our rules about the need for silence and stop shushing people, our libraries will be dead to the world. I probably also agree with **Plotnick** who in another part of his essay said:

When I am working in a library, I much prefer a general hub-bub to the sound of my own breathing or of catalog trays slapping closed or of somebody's acid indigestion. Oh, once in a while

I might enjoy a brief period of near-perfect silence during a particularly meditative study. But I will gladly sacrifice that occasional pleasure for the privilege of, say, reading a good passage aloud to a companion across the table or breaking the tedium of study with a joke and with funky laughter, and so on.

If you have time and want more about the value of silence, click to **Youtube's** rendition of Silence Is Golden by the Tremeloes <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wP3YCZvuB6A>.



Endnotes

1. **Plotnick, Art**. The liberation of sweet library lips. In **Celest West, Elizabeth West**, et al (Eds.) *Revolting Libraries*. San Francisco: Bookleggers Press, 1972. Retrieved April 7, 2009 from <http://owen.massey.net/libraries/revolting/lips.html>.
2. **Sexton, David**. (April 7, 2009). The sound of silence is all we want in our libraries. *Evening Standard (standard.co.uk)*. Retrieved April 7, 2009 from <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23560632-details/The+sound+of+silence+is+all+we+want+in+our+libraries/article.do>.