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(1909-2015)

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IN MEMORIAM

Tsuen-hsui (T. H.) Tsien 錢存訓(1909-2015)

T.H. Tsien, scholar and librarian of East Asian studies, 1909-2015

Reprinted courtesy of the University of Chicago News Office; original found at: <http://news.uchicago.edu/article/2015/04/15/th-tsien-scholar-and-librarian-east-asian-studies-1909-2015#sthash.8vOpeNL0.uv7QDPXH.dpuf>

By Wen Huang
April 15, 2015

In 1941, T.H. Tsien risked his life to pack and ship thousands of Chinese rare books from Japanese-occupied Shanghai to the United States for safekeeping. But his devotion to Chinese books and culture did not end with that act of wartime heroism.

During his long and legendary career, Tsien, AM'52, PhD'57, fostered greater understanding between the East and West, and built one of the world's finest East Asian collections at the University of Chicago Library.

Tsuen-hsui (T.H.) Tsien, curator emeritus of the East Asian Collection of the Joseph Regenstein Library and professor emeritus of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, passed away April 9 in Chicago. He was 105.

"It is no exaggeration to say that T.H. Tsien was the most influential Chinese librarian in America," said Edward L. Shaughnessy, the Lorraine J. and Herrlee G. Creel Distinguished Service Professor in Early Chinese Studies. "Not only did he develop one of the country's greatest East Asian libraries at UChicago, but he also trained a generation of students for East Asian libraries around the country, including those who went on to head the East Asian libraries at Harvard and Princeton."

James Cheng, who now heads the Harvard-Yenching Library, was one of the more than 30 graduate students Tsien taught. "I can say that I owe my entire professional career to Professor Tsien," Cheng said.

Yuan Zhou, curator of the East Asian Collection at the Joseph Regenstein Library, said Tsien was admired by many for his skills as a scholar and librarian.

“He showed his true understanding of the scholar’s needs for research materials and had the scholarly vision and sustained focus to develop a top-notch collection for the programs on campus and for the field of East Asian studies in the nation,” said Zhou. “When he conducted research, he went out of his way with his librarian’s mind and skills to search for every relevant piece of primary and secondary resource accessible.”

From a ‘revolutionary’ to a librarian

Tsien was born Dec. 1, 1909 in Tai County in China’s southeastern province of Jiangsu. He grew up during an era of social transformation in China. Two years after he was born, revolutionaries overthrew the last imperial dynasty and founded the Republic of China. But the new government failed to unify the country, which was soon carved up by warlords and engulfed in civil war.

In middle school, Tsien joined a progressive youth group and edited a publication that advocated a national revolution against the warlords. He was arrested, along with his schoolmaster by the troops of a local warlord. The schoolmaster was executed, but Tsien’s life was spared thanks to his oldest brother, who had considerable influence. After Tsien was forced to leave his hometown, he joined the Nationalist army, which defeated the warlords and unified China.

Fearing for his safety, Tsien’s family persuaded him to leave the army. In 1927, he enrolled at Nanking University, where he majored in Chinese and Western history, and minored in library science. Upon graduation, he obtained a job at a university library in the nearby city of Shanghai before joining the Nanjing branch of the National Beiping (Beijing) Library and subsequently the library’s Shanghai office.

In 1937, Tsien took a tremendous risk to help 14 members of his extended family escape Nanking (now Nanjing) just weeks before the Nanjing Massacre. The Chinese government estimated that more than 300,000 were killed by invading Japanese troops during the massacre. In subsequent years, Tsien worked three jobs to support his large extended family, which lived with him in a one-bedroom apartment in Shanghai during the Japanese occupation.

After Japan captured Shanghai in 1937, Chinese library officials, who were concerned about the safety of their collection of rare books, sought help from the U.S. government. The Library of Congress agreed to take 2,710 ancient rare books in some 30,000 volumes, most of which were from the former Imperial Library.

Tsien was tasked with packing and shipping more than 100 wooden crates. It was a risky assignment in the Japanese-occupied city, but he succeeded. The books left Shanghai just days before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and made it safely to Washington D.C. In his memoir, Tsien considered this mission "a major accomplishment of my career in China."

Fortunes foretold

In his book *Collected Writings on Chinese Culture*, Tsien mentions an encounter in 1941 with a friend's father, who was a writer and a "gifted fortune teller" in Shanghai. After Tsien revealed the year, the month, day and time of his birth, the fortune teller wrote his predictions on a sheet of paper, which predicted that his fortune would improve every ten years of his life.

At the time, Tsien discarded the fortune-teller's words as superstition. But many years later, when Tsien accidentally discovered the paper in an old file folder, he said "the fortune teller's predictions seemed to match the events in my life almost exactly."

In 1947, Tsien came to the U.S. to retrieve the rare books he had sent there six years earlier. But just as he was preparing to leave, civil war between the Communists and the ruling Nationalists broke out, making his trip home impossible. At that hopeless moment, the University of Chicago issued him an invitation to work in its Far Eastern Library as an exchange scholar so he could catalogue its acquired Chinese books and pursue his advanced studies at the Graduate Library School. He accepted the offer and began a career at the university that would span more than six decades.

In 1957, Tsien obtained his PhD from the University and was promoted to professor seven years later. In 1967, Tsien was invited by Joseph Needham, a well-known British biochemist and Sinologist to contribute to a massive book project, *Science and Civilisation in China*. Tsien's contribution comprised the nearly 400-page section of the fifth volume "Paper and Printing." The series, published by Cambridge University Press, was on the Modern Library Board's 100 best nonfiction books of the 20th century.

In 1977, Tsien received grants from the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. In 1987, he was invited to China as a distinguished guest of his former employer, the National Library of China, during its 75th anniversary celebration. In 1997, UChicago named him a distinguished alumnus. In 2007, his alma mater Nanjing University opened the T.H. Tsien Library, to which he had donated his lifelong private collection—more than 6,000 volumes of publications in Chinese, Japanese and English.

During his distinguished career, Tsien published 17 monographs and books and more than 150 articles in English and Chinese.

"Tsien's published scholarship continues to have a profound influence on the fields of Chinese bibliography, paleography, and science and technology," said Shaughnessy, who wrote an afterword to the second edition of Tsien's acclaimed *Written on Bamboo and Silk: The Beginning of Chinese Books and Inscriptions* (University of Chicago Press). "He has made numerous contributions to the study and preservation of China's literary heritage."

Tsien retired in 1978, but continued his research and writing. From his home in Hyde Park, he kept in touch with former students through correspondence, conversation and occasional dinners.

Theodore Foss, the retired associate director of UChicago's Center for East Asian Studies, was a friend and colleague of Tsien's for 40 years. He described Tsien as a gentleman of culture, grace and faith and remembered fondly "his elegantly conceived course in the nuts and bolts of Sinological bibliographic research, a rigorous and enjoyable test in the best tradition of the University of Chicago."

"Tsien has established a legacy that will endure as long as scholars continue to value books," said Shaughnessy.

Tsien's daughter Mary Dunkel said she and her siblings grew up in a household deeply influenced by traditional Confucian teachings and principles. "Yet my parents were both modern and progressive in their approach to child-rearing," she added.

Dunkel said Tsien was an avid environmentalist who, as a young man, spoke of his wish to give the earth more than he took from it. "My father was the original recycler and was always frugal with what he took, very generous with what he gave. He was the epitome of patience and simplicity," she said.

Tsien is survived by daughters Mary Tsien Dunkel and Gloria Tsien, and his nephew Xiaowen Qian, along with many other family members in the United States and China.

Visitation will take place on from 4 to 7 p.m. April 15 at Drechsler, Brown & Williams Funeral Home, 203 S. Marion St., Oak Park. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made in his honor to Hyde Park Christian Reformed Church (5144 S. Cornell Ave., Chicago, IL 60615), the University of Chicago Library's East Asian Collection, or the University of Chicago Center for East Asian Studies.

Tsuen-hsuin Tsien, Curator Emeritus of the East Asian Collection, 1909-2015

Reprinted courtesy of the University of Chicago Library News; originally posted at <http://news.lib.uchicago.edu/blog/2015/04/13/tsuen-hsuin-t-h-tsien-1909-2015>; updated 9/16/2015

Edward Shaughnessy, Lorraine J. & Herrlee G. Creel Distinguished Service Professor in Early Chinese Studies, The University of Chicago

Tsuen-hsuin (T.H.) Tsien, Curator Emeritus of the East Asian Collection of the Joseph Regenstein Library and Professor Emeritus of Far Eastern Languages and Civilizations (now East Asian Languages and Civilizations) of the University of Chicago, passed away in Chicago on April 9, 2015, at the age of 105.



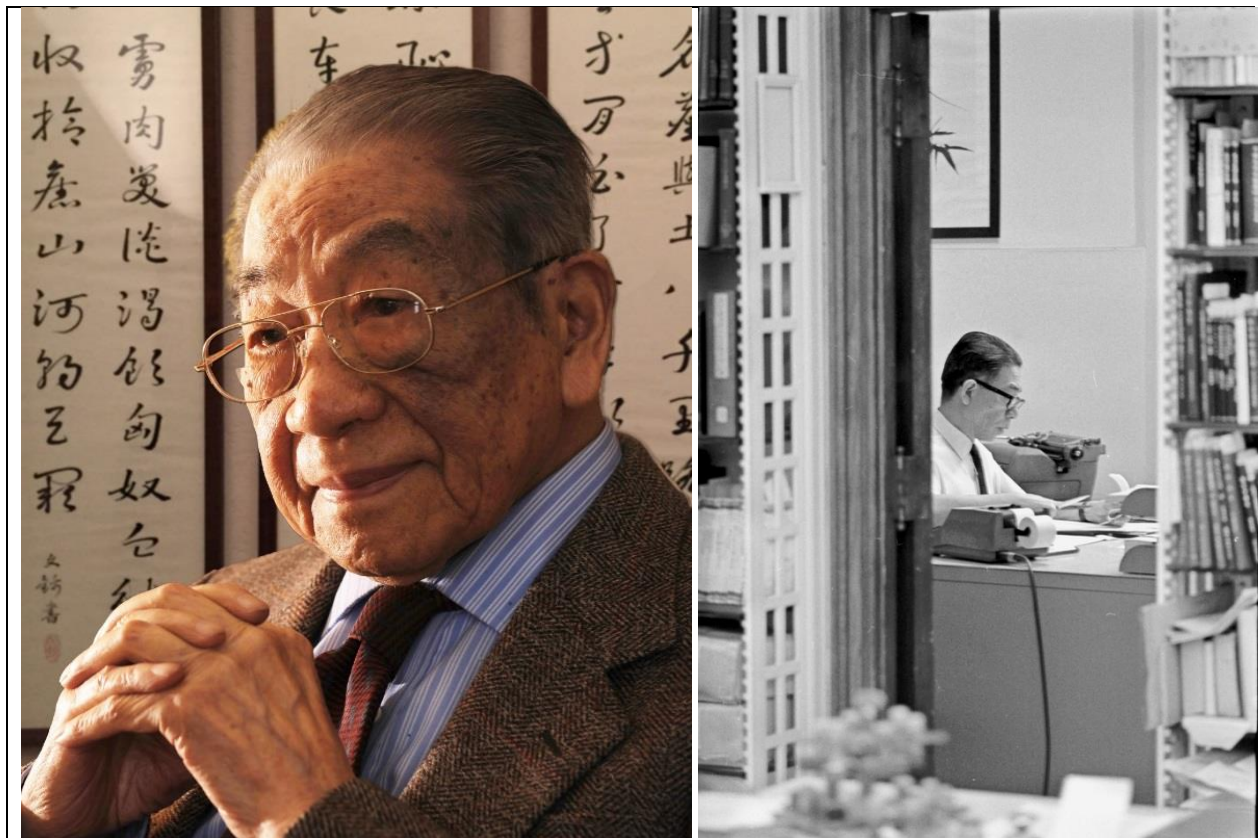
Dr. Tsuen-hsuin Tsien (center) with Professor Edward Shaughnessy (right) and Mary Tsien Dunkel (left) at the conference "Texting China—Composition, Transmission, Preservation of Pre-modern Chinese Textual Materials" at the University of Chicago Library in 2012. (Photo by Jason Smith)

T.H. lived a long and extraordinarily full life. He liked to say that he was born under the last emperor of China, in 1909, in Taixian (today's Taizhou City), Jiangsu, China. In 1927, before entering university, he participated in the Northern Expedition, a military effort of the Nationalist government of China that resulted in the unification of China. In 1928, T.H. entered Jinling University (the precursor of Nanjing University), from which he was graduated in 1932 with a degree in Library Science. After graduation, he worked first in Shanghai at the Jiaotong University Library, and then in Nanjing at the Nanjing Branch of the Peking Library (the forerunner of the National Library of China). In December, 1941, he was personally responsible for shipping rare books from the library to the United States Library of Congress for safe-keeping during the war, arranging for 2,720 individual titles in some 30,000 volumes to be crated for shipment. The books left the port of Shanghai, then still an open city, just days before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and made it safely to Washington. After the conclusion of the war, T.H. went to Washington to arrange for the return of the books. However, the outbreak of civil war in China made their return at the time impossible, and T.H. remained in America together with the books. In 1947, Herrlee G. Creel (1905-1994; Martin A. Ryerson Professor Emeritus of Chinese Studies at the University) invited T.H. to the University of Chicago to manage the Far Eastern Library (now East Asian Collection). T.H. remained in Chicago thereafter.

It is no exaggeration to say that T.H. Tsien was the most influential Chinese librarian in America. Not only did he develop one of the country's greatest East Asian libraries at the University of Chicago, but he also trained a generation of students for East Asian libraries around the country including those who went on to head the East Asian libraries at Harvard and Princeton. In addition, his published scholarship continues to have a profound influence on the fields of Chinese bibliography, paleography, and science and technology. He received a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1957; his dissertation, published by the University of Chicago Press in 1962 as *Written on Bamboo and Silk: The Beginnings of Chinese Books and Inscriptions*, is still regarded as a classic in the field. In 1978, after retiring from his position as Curator of the East Asian Collection, T.H. accepted an invitation from Joseph Needham to participate in Needham's great *Science and civilisation in China* project. In 1984, T.H. contributed Vol. 5.1: *Paper and Printing*, the first volume in the series to be published under a name other than Needham's. After this time, he remained active. In 2011, his book *Collected Writings on Chinese Culture*, was published by the Chinese University of Hong Kong Press. It includes thirty essays on "Ancient Documents and Artifacts," "Paper, Ink, and Printing," "Cultural Exchange and Librarianship," "Biographies of Eminent Scholars," "Memoir of a Centenarian," and "Essays about the Author." The volume also contains prefaces by Edward L. Shaughnessy and Anthony C. Yu, his

colleagues at the University of Chicago, relating many more of his contributions to the University and to scholarship.

T.H. Tsien has now rejoined his beloved wife Wen-ching Hsu, who was one of the first instructors of Chinese at the University, and his eldest daughter Ginger, both of whom passed away in 2008. He is survived by two other daughters, Mary Tsien Dunkel and Gloria Tsien, as well as by his nephew Xiaowen Qian, Assistant to the Curator for the East Asian Collection of the Regenstein Library. He has established a legacy that will endure as long as scholars continue to value books.



Photographs courtesy of The University of Chicago Special Collections Research Center

A memorial Service for T.H. Tsien was held Sunday, October 4, 2015 in Bond Chapel on the campus of The University of Chicago. Speakers included Dean Martha Roth, Professor James Cheng, Professor Edward Shaughnessy, Dr. Yuan Zhou, and the family of T.H. Tsien.