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My Early Years at the University of Chicago

Tai-loi Ma

In September 1970 I left Hong Kong to study Far Eastern Librarianship at the University of Chicago. I stayed for the next 29 years working at its Far Eastern Library until returning to Hong Kong in late 1997. Much of what I know about librarianship I learned from Dr. T.H. Tsien, initially in the classroom but more importantly by observing how he dealt with different situations. He showed me the best practices. I would have had a completely different career had I not known Dr. Tsien.

My family was not well-off. I worked two years before entering the University of Hong Kong and one year after graduation. I was able to go to the University of Chicago only because I was awarded a full fellowship (tuition and a monthly stipend of \$225). Although Dr. Tsien never mentioned it, I am quite certain that he played a crucial role in the process. The Graduate Library School did not have much funding to support its students, and my fellowship came from the International House. Dr. Tsien had first to convince GLS's Dean of Students (Professor Ruth Carnovsky) to recommend me to the International House. I was not better qualified than my fellow incoming students (David Tsai and Ming-sun Poon), but both of them had already obtained library science degrees from American universities. What impressed me most was that in my application to the GLS I enclosed an article of mine which cited Dr. Tsien's research but disagreed with it. Dr. Tsien took no offence and instead went the extra mile to get me the necessary financial support.

I worked as Dr. Tsien's research assistant during my first year in the GLS while David and Ming-sun took part-time jobs at the Far Eastern Library. My main assignment was to edit the Chinese translation of Dr. Tsien's *Written on Bamboo and Silk*. I learned a lot in the process. I had to compare every translated sentence with the original. This is the only time I have ever done close reading of a modern monograph. Dr. Tsien accepted most of my changes.

In the Chinese Bibliography course, Dr. Tsien asked each student to write an essay on a traditional Chinese edition he assigned. He gave me a photocopy of the edition of *Ju lu* 橘錄 (Treatise on Orange) from the library of Joseph Needham. Needham believed that it was a Song edition. Its value was further

enhanced with two handwritten colophons by famous Qing bibliophiles Huang Pilie 黃丕烈 and He Zhuo 何焯. I went through various bibliographies, and Dr. Tsien helped me get a microfilm of the *Ju lu* in a Song edition of the *Bai chuan xue hai* 百川學海 from the National Peking Library (now the National Library of China). Dr. Tsien might have been the only librarian in the States able to do that in 1971. Eventually I came to the conclusion that Needham's copy was not an individual Song edition but was from a Ming facsimile edition of the *Bai chuan xue hai*. Then by chance, I came upon a facsimile of Huang Pilie's colophon in a collection of facsimile pages. It was almost identical with the *Ju lu* colophon except that certain key words were deleted in Needham's copy, including the title of the work described! I reported that the *Ju lu* colophon was a forgery. Dr. Tsien thought that I had made a hasty conclusion. On further reading of the collection of facsimile pages, I found He Zhuo's colophon for another work. Again it had additional words, including the title, which were deleted in Needham's *Ju lu*. The two colophons in Needham's copy were traced from the 20th century facsimile collection.

Dr. Tsien revised his own essay on Needham's copy of the *Ju lu* and it was published in the *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*. My contribution was mentioned. Apparently Needham was not too happy with the new discovery. A few years later when he came to the University of Chicago to receive an honorary degree I was not introduced to him. He also took a very critical view on my study of the *Nanfang caomu Zhuang* 南方草木狀. He regarded it as the earliest Chinese regional botanical study written in 304. I am certain that it is a Song forgery. In his monumental work, *Science and Civilisation in China*, he criticized my study in *T'oung Pao* harshly. It was a badge of honor for me. I may add that it was Dr. Tsien's positive citation of Needham's use of the *Nanfang caomu Zhuang* that I disagreed with back in the seventies. As I mentioned, Dr. Tsein's reaction was completely different from Needham's.

I joined my classmates and worked part-time in the Far Eastern Library in my second year at Chicago, mainly as a cataloging assistant. I was appointed a professional librarian after I received my MA degree from GLS in 1972. Dr. Tsien was my "boss" at the library until his retirement in 1978. He continued to come to the library regularly; in fact, he was given an office a floor below.