9-1-1987

Fifty Years Embracing the Wall of Books: The Life and Career of Dr. Tsuen-Hsuin Tsien

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Reading and working with books as well as teaching and writing about books have been the life-long interests and career of Dr. Tsuen-hsui Tsien, a scholar-librarian loved and respected by the many colleagues, friends and students who know him well. For over a quarter of a century, Dr. Tsien has given the University of Chicago, the field of East Asian studies, the profession of Far Eastern librarianship, and the East Asian collections in America the most distinguished service and admirable leadership.

He has offered to the library profession fifty years of devoted service in both China and the United States, and to the world of scholarship a better understanding of China's contribution to the history of the book and printing. He combines the rare qualities and abilities of scholar, teacher, librarian, and administrator all in one—a combination that has seldom been matched. Thus, Tsien's life and career have truly fulfilled what the Chinese proverb says: Tso yung shu ch'eng, "Sitting and embracing the wall of books."

Family and Early Life in China

Born on January 11, 1910, in Taihsien, Kiangsu, China, Tsuen-Hsui Tsien (Ch'ien Ts'un-hsun) came from a family of scholars. His great-grandfather, Ch'ien Kuei-sun (1827-1899), was a scholar-official who served in the Hanlin Academy and as Commissioner of Education and Chief Civil Service Examiner of Anhui Province. He was an author on etymology with a private library known as Chiao ching t'ang. His father, Ch'ien Wei-ch'en (1885-1935), was a Buddhist scholar and an editor of the Buddhist journal Hai ch'ao yin, under his Buddhist name, Ch'eng Shan. Professor Howard W. Winger, former Dean of the Graduate Library School, University of Chicago, wrote in a poem dedicated to Tsien on the occasion of his retirement from the University in 1978:

From China to Chicago he made his scholar's way
With cakes of ink and classics and charm of old Cathay.
From Upper Sung to Lower Sung and majesties of Ming,
Of their calligraphy and thought he was acknowledged King;
For there were scholars in his line and culture in his blood.

Tsien began his formal education in 1916 under the guidance of a private tutor. He entered the Taihsien Number 2 Secondary School in 1918 and studied at Huai-tung High School between 1922 and 1926, during which he was quite active in student activities and edited a youth magazine, Ch'ing nien hsun k'an. When he joined the army as part of the Northern Expedition Forces, he was stationed in Peking and Yang-liu-ch'ing for one year (1927-28). He then enrolled at the University of Nanking in 1928 and started his library career working part-time in the Ginling Girl's College Library, first as a cataloger and then as Acting Librarian in 1930. One year later, he returned to full-time studies and graduated from the University of Nanking in 1932 with a B.A. degree in history and a minor in library science. His course with Professor Liu Kuo-ch'un at the University of Nanking on the History
of the Chinese Book sparked an interest that he has carried with him to the present. He took a few courses while working at the Ginling Girl's College Library, including one on translation taught by Tseng Hsu-pai. Two of his course papers were later published in two influential magazines in Shanghai and Nanking, an experience which greatly encouraged his interest in writing and publishing.

After graduation Tsien worked as Assistant Librarian at the National Chiao-t'ung University Library in Shanghai (1932-37) under its director, Doo Ding-u, one of China's leaders in the modern Chinese library movement during the 1930s. He was also manager for two years of the China Library Service, an agency specializing in publishing books on library science and in providing periodical subscriptions and library supplies and equipment. In 1936 he married Hsu Wen-chin in Nanking, and subsequently three daughters were born in Shanghai.

In early 1937 Tsien joined the staff of the National Library of Peiping under the direction of Dr. T.L. Yuan and became Librarian of the Engineering Reference Library in Nanking, which was a depository library for all the complete sets of scientific and technical journals in foreign languages transferred from the parent library in Peking before the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. A few months later, he was transferred to the Library's Shanghai Office where he was custodian of the Chinese rare books moved from Peking. For ten years, he also worked as editor and manager of both the Chinese and English editions of the renowned Quarterly Bulletin of Chinese Bibliography, taking charge of liaison work for the National Library of Peiping (then located in Kunming and Chungking) with libraries in America and Europe for the exchange of information and publications. He was also charged with the responsibility of collecting materials published in the Japanese-occupied area of China.

In 1941, under extremely dangerous conditions and just before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Tsien supervised the secret shipping of some 30,000 volumes of Chinese rare books to the U.S. Library of Congress for safekeeping and microfilming for preservation. For this difficult task, he was cited in 1943 with a Distinguished Service Award from the Chinese Ministry of Education. In 1947 he was commissioned by the Chinese government to travel to Washington, D.C., to oversee the shipment of the return of these rare books to China, but by that time communications in China had broken down due to the outbreak of the civil war, and the shipment was cancelled. Thus, this collection of Chinese rare books remained at the Library of Congress for many more years.

Curatorship and Professorship at the University of Chicago

Tsien joined the staff of the University of Chicago in the fall of 1947 as an exchange librarian from the National Library of Peiping. He began to process the Chinese collection started by Professor Herrlee G. Creel in 1936 which had grown over the intervening ten years to about 100,000 volumes. Tsien almost single-handedly brought the entire collection under bibliographic control, thus laying the foundation for its rapid and systematic expansion during the following three decades.

In 1949 Tsien was promoted to Curator of the Far Eastern Library and concurrently served as Professorial Lecturer in Chinese Literature in the then Department of Oriental Languages and Literatures. During this time, he served full-time in the Library while teaching part-time in the Department and studying part-time in the Graduate Library School, from which he received both his M.A. degree in 1952 and Ph.D. degree in 1957. He was promoted to Associate Professor in 1958 and was
Professor of Chinese Literature in the Department of Far Eastern Languages and Civilizations from 1964; concurrently, he was also Professor of Library Science in the Graduate Library School. At the time of his retirement in 1978, he was named Professor Emeritus in the Department and in the Library School, as well as Curator Emeritus of the Far Eastern Library.

Over the past thirty-one years, Tsien has built an outstanding Far Eastern collection at the University of Chicago. During the first ten years of his service at Chicago, from 1947 through 1958, he concentrated his efforts in bringing the initial collection of about 70,000 volumes of classical literature and about 20,000 volumes acquired from the Berthold Laufer Collection plus a number of major sets of monographs and periodicals under proper bibliographic control. During the following two decades, he oversaw the acquisition of research materials on modern China, especially periodicals, official gazettes, materials relating to local administration, and original documents on student movements and publications from wartime China during the 1930s. It was also during this period that a Japanese collection was established, with initial acquisitions on literature and history, plus complete sets of collected works and learned journals. At the same time, the acquisition of rare materials continued, including over 200 Ming editions, rare manuscripts, hishi copies of rare Chinese books in Japanese collections, local histories, official administrative codes, and samples for the study of the history of the Chinese book such as sealing clays of the Han dynasty, Tunhuang manuscripts, wooden tablets in facsimile, woodblocks, movable types, paper money, and various samples of early printing.

Tsien also planned and executed the move of the Far Eastern Library from the basement of the Oriental Institute building to the crowded quarters in the Harper Library in 1960, and finally to the present spacious quarters in the Joseph Regenstein Library in 1970. With holdings of nearly half a million volumes, the Far Eastern Collection has many unique items and covers areas that are not likely to be duplicated elsewhere. The Chinese collection started in 1936 is especially strong in classics, philosophy, history, local gazetteers, archeology, art, and literature; the Japanese collection, built up since 1958, has distinguished holdings in literature, history, fine arts, history of religion, sinology and learned journals. The acquisition of the Berthold Laufer Collection from the Newberry Library in 1943 added many rarities to the collections in different Far Eastern languages, including Manchu, Mongolian and Tibetan.

Professor Chauncy D. Harris, former Vice President for Academic Resources at the University of Chicago, made the following remarks on the occasion of Tsien's retirement:

I wish to express both my great pleasure at having worked with you over the years and official gratitude for the outstanding leadership which you have provided for building up the Far Eastern Library of the University of Chicago. You have played the key role in the transformation of a small collection on China into a major national library on the Far East. You have also provided national leadership in coordination of efforts by Far Eastern librarians. You have happily combined the roles of scholar and librarian. The Far Eastern field, the Library, and the University have all been greatly enriched by your many contributions. Your thirty years of devoted service leave behind a priceless heritage. I count it as a high privilege to have been associated with you over these years.
Teaching and Promotion of East Asian Librarianship

As a teacher, Tsien has guided many students through their programs in East Asian studies and Far Eastern librarianship since he first joined the faculty of the University of Chicago in 1949. His courses on Chinese Bibliography and Chinese Historiography had been very popular among graduate students, whose dissertation topics were often developed in his classes through systematic searching of source materials for scholarly research. These courses proved to be so useful that they have become required for all Ph.D. students at Chicago since 1958. From 1964 until his retirement, Tsien directed the Joint Program on Far Eastern Librarianship, a joint degree graduate program between the Graduate Library School and the Department of Far Eastern Languages and Civilizations. Over the years, more than thirty students have graduated with master's or doctoral degrees from this program and are serving in various positions in East Asian collections in American and elsewhere. A number of their theses or papers have been published by the Chinese Materials Center under the series title, Studies in East Asian Librarianship, with an introduction to each volume by Tsien. And in 1969 Tsien directed a Summer Institute of Far Eastern Librarianship sponsored by the U.S. Office of Education in which thirty-one in-service librarians and students in East Asian studies participated.

Over the past thirty years Tsien has also lectured at Columbia University, the University of Illinois, Indiana University, the University of Minnesota, Ohio State University, the University of Pittsburgh, and the University of Wisconsin. He was Visiting Professor in Asian Studies at the University of Hawaii in the summer of 1959. In 1982 he was appointed a Fellow of the Joseph Needham Research Institute in Cambridge, England. In 1984 he attended the third International Conference on the History of Chinese Science in Peking, chaired its section on the History of Chinese Technology and presented a paper on the "Chinese Background of the Beginnings of European Printing." And in November-December 1984, he was invited to attend the Workshop on the Authentication and Preservation of Rare Materials held in Taipei, Taiwan, at which he presented papers on "Chinese Rare Books in European and American Collections" and "Chinese Movable-Type Printing."

As a librarian, Tsien has not only built a first-rate Far Eastern library at the University of Chicago but has also made outstanding contributions to East Asian librarianship as a whole, especially to the development of the Committee on East Asian Libraries (CEAL), which acquired its present name and by-laws under his chairmanship from 1966-68. He also served as its Executive Member (1971-74), Chairman of its Subcommittee for Liaison with Chinese Libraries (1968-73), and Chairman of its Subcommittee on Resources and Development (1974-80). Another invaluable tradition he developed for CEAL is the periodic surveys of East Asian collections in American libraries undertaken during the past thirty years. These surveys carefully documented the history and development of all East Asian collections between 1869 and 1975; they have been extensively used by library administrations and funding agencies in the planning and support of East Asian libraries in North America.

In recognition of his contributions, Tsien was cited for a Distinguished Service Award by CEAL at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting in 1978. He was also cited for a Distinguished Service Award by the Chinese-American Librarians Association at the American Library Association Summer Conference in 1985. Moreover, Tsien served as a member of the China and Inner Asia Council when it was first organized by the Association for Asian Studies (1970-72);
Executive Member of the Asian and African Section, Association of College and Research Libraries (1972-73); Member of the Advisory Board, International Association of Oriental Librarians (1968-72); Advisor to the National Central Library in Taiwan since 1970; Advisor to the Government-Academic Interface Committee on International Education, Task Force on Library and Information Resources, American Council of Education (1974); Member of the ACLS-SSRC Task Force on (Chinese) Libraries and Research Materials (1974-75); and Consultant to the National Library of Iran (1975). He has also served as representative to CEAL from the Association of College and Research Libraries, American Library Association.

Research and Publications

Like every true scholar, Tsien is a prolific writer who has made tremendous contributions to the world of scholarship. He has published more than 100 books, articles and book reviews in Chinese and English, many of which have been translated into Japanese and other languages. His works on the history of the book, paper and printing in China have shed much light on our understanding of these great Chinese contributions to world civilization. His book, *Written on Bamboo and Silk: The Beginning of Chinese Books and Inscriptions*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 1962, has since gone through three impressions. It is the first comprehensive study on the history of Chinese books, documents and inscriptions before the invention of printing, covering a period from about 1400 B.C., when the earliest known Chinese writing is found to have been recorded, to about A.D. 700, when printing was about to begin in China. "Written in a simple and direct style, for the layman as well as for the scholar, it will find a hospitable place on many shelves," wrote Arthur W. Hummel in his review of the book in the *American Historical Review*. "Tsien's study is a triumph of modern sinology...[It] is as definitive as extant research data will permit," declared the review in *Library Journal*. Among other reviews, Joseph Needham wrote in the *Journal of Asian Studies*: "From its character and its size, it was evidently conceived as a companion volume to T.F. Carter's classic *The Invention of Printing in China and Its Spread Westward*, and we may say at once that it need not fear any comparison with that wonderful book." So it was no wonder that a revised Chinese edition, entitled *Chung-kuo ku tai shu shih*, was published by the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1975; and yet another updated Chinese version will soon be published in China by incorporating new archeological data unearthed in recent years in the PRC. A Japanese edition, translated by Professor Akira Utsugi and Harutsugu Sawaya and two others from the Toyo Bunko, was published by the Hosei University Press in Tokyo in 1980. Moreover, Tsien has published about thirty articles on the origin and development of paper-making and printing in China, including one in a special issue for the International Book Year of the UNESCO *Courier*, published in 1972 in fourteen different languages.

His most significant contribution to the field is perhaps Tsien's study of the paper, ink and printing in Chinese civilization. In 1968 Dr. Joseph Needham of Cambridge University invited him to join the East Asian History of Science Project to contribute a section on this subject. With a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies for 1968-69, Tsien visited Cambridge and many libraries and museums in Europe and America to explore opportunities for research materials. During the next few years, basic sources were collected and screened, lecture-discussion sessions were held at several universities, and a seminar on the History of Chinese Printing was set up at the University of Chicago in 1972 and offered again in 1974 and 1977 for a systematic examination of the source materials and discussion of the various problems involved.
Since his retirement in 1978, Tsien has been able to concentrate most of his time and energy on this study, again supported by several research grants, including ones from the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities from 1977 to 1980. Additional support from the Center for Far Eastern Studies of the University of Chicago and the East Asian History of Science Trust at Cambridge made it possible for him to complete the work after another visit to Cambridge in 1982 to finalize the project. This book, in its entirety some 300,000 words with 2,000 entries in the bibliography and 200 illustrations, had taken him almost fifteen years in preparation for publication.

The volume on "Paper and Printing" was published by the Cambridge University Press in 1985 as Part I of Volume V in the monumental Science and Civilization in China series. This was the first volume written by a single author rather than in collaboration with others, as Needham points out in his Foreword. The book has been well received, with the first printing sold out upon publication. So far, it is the most comprehensive and up-to-date treatise on these subjects and will be a standard reference work for students in the field for many years to come. As one reviewer says in the Printing Historical Society Bulletin:

No short review can do justice to so notable a book about so remarkable a chapter of history, providing so great a display of historic detail from more than a thousand years of Oriental printing, and explaining the nature, method, materials, circumstances, and effects of mankind's most enduring form of communication.

Another review says in Fine Prints:
He brings his thorough knowledge of the subject to the Western reader with a clear and precise style. It is a rare talent, and one that makes this important book also genuinely enjoyable to read.

The Chinese version and a Japanese translation of this volume are now in progress.

Another area of Tsien's interest is the topic of East-West cultural relations. He wrote his master's thesis on "Western Impact on China Through Translation," a resume of which was published in the Far Eastern Quarterly in 1954. His research on the first Chinese-American exchange of publications in 1869, published in the Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies in 1964/65, not only traced the origin of the then Orientalia Collection at the Library of Congress, but also signals a centenary celebration by the two countries in 1969. A collection of ten papers on this subject in Chinese, entitled Chung Mei shu yuan will soon be published.

Tsien is also credited with a pioneering role in the introduction of area studies into American librarianship. He was co-director with Howard Winger of the 30th Annual Conference of the Graduate Library School, University of Chicago, in 1965 on "Area Studies and the Library," the proceedings of which were published by the University of Chicago Press in 1966. This was the first time that studies of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin American, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and their impact on traditional Western librarianship were formally discussed by scholars and librarians; and the conference drew the attention of library administrators and educators. Tsien has also published a large body of articles on East Asian librarianship, bibliography and historiography. His latest reference work, China: An Annotated Bibliography of Bibliographies, in collaboration with James K.M. Cheng, was published by G.K. Hall & Co. of Boston in 1978. Another scholarly work, Ancient China: Studies in Early Civilization, co-edited with Professor David T. Roy of the University of Chicago, was published by the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1978.
It is heartening to note that Tsuen-Hsuen Tsien has retired only from his administrative and teaching duties at the University of Chicago. His wise counsel is available for a long time to come as he still remains very active in the profession and in his own research. He continues to give lectures by invitation from time to time and to revise and edit his previously published monographs and articles, which are mostly written in English, for publication in Chinese editions. Two collections of papers on different subjects and two monographs on the history of the Chinese book before and since the invention of printing are in progress. His forthcoming publications in Chinese will broaden the base of his audience, who are interested in the wide dissemination of information on and the interpretation of these very important subjects.
1) On the History of the Book, Paper and Printing


**Paper and Printing in Chinese Culture.** Revised Chinese version of the above to be published.

"Technical Aspects of Chinese Printing," *Chinese Rare Books in American..."


2) On Chinese-Western Cultural Contacts, History and Biography


3) On Bibliography and Historiography


4) On East Asian Librarianship


