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Pu Shu, Sunning the Books

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Before the advent of modern technology when insecticides, steel cabinets, and temperature and atmospheric controls were used to preserve Chinese books in their traditional formats, book sunning was a convenient and widely used method to ward off bookworms and prevent mildew. In the late Ch'ing and early Republican periods, when modern libraries were first established in China, book sunning was routinely included in their operation manuals as one of the necessary housekeeping chores. As recent as in the 1950s, the National Taiwan University Library in Taipei was known to have sunned its thread-bound books on the roof tiles. Most interestingly, in the new National Central Library building in Taipei (completed in 1986), along with the abundant modern equipment and provisions for book preservation, there is a balcony area designed for the use of book sunning. This balcony is located adjacent to the preservation room on the fourth floor. The intent of this article is to trace the historical and often colorful background of this commonplace practice.

Adhering to the custom of sunning the books proved to be a pivotal event in the life of Ssu-ma I 3 , recorded by Wang Yin in his Chin shu. During the waning years of the Han dynasty, Ssu-ma was summoned to appear before Ts'ao Ts'a'o, the powerful duke of Wei. Feeling still loyal to the Han and not wanting to serve under Wei, Ssu-ma excused himself on the pretense of illness. It happened to be the seventh day of July and Ssu-ma was out sunning his books. When this activity was reported to Ts'ao, Ssu-ma was once again summoned. Thus began his illustrious career with Wei that led to the eventual establishment of the Chin dynasty by his grandson. Ssu-ma had bestowed on him the title of Emperor Hsuan 宣帝.

Another tale of book sunning deals with a humorous man in the fourth century A.D. by the name of Ho Lung 洞 陵. Ho prided himself on being a well-read man, a man with a "bellyful" of literature and classics. On the seventh day of July, seeing the neighbors all sunning their clothes, Ho Lung lay on his back in the courtyard facing the sun. When people asked him about this behavior, he replied, "I'm just sunning the books in my belly."

Exposing items to the sun to prevent mildew and gnawing by insects and worms was a common practice in ancient China. Books, along with paintings, clothes, and furs, were subjected to this treatment. Although July 7 was cited in the two anecdotes above as the traditional date for book sunning, June 6 was also mentioned as an auspicious day set aside for this undertaking. In a Ming dynasty guidebook on Peking, the capital city of the time, the author, Liu Tung, observed that "on the sixth day of June the riding gear for the imperial cortege was sunned, while among the denizens ... old scholars and poor women turned their torn books and tattered clothes in the sun." Again, in the master calendar section of Ku-chin tu-shu chi-ch'eng, June 6 was noted as the day when scholars sunned their books, farmers their wheat, and women their clothes. During the Ming dynasty on this day, the Imperial Archive would sun the official histories and imperial writings in its collection. In Wan-ch'uan county, Kiangsi province, every Buddhist temple would hold a gathering to observe the sunning of rituals and sutras.
The two dates were indicative of the season in which book sunning could best be done. Since this activity was largely dependent on the cooperation of the weather, to wait for a fixed date to fulfil this annual obligation might not be the most practical thing to do. Regional differences also played a part in carrying out this obligation. In the fifth century A.D., when books in China were still in the roll format, Chia Ssu-hsieh suggested that "during the humid and hot season of the fifth month, bookworms are hatched. If the books are not unrolled during the summer, there are sure to be insects in them. Between the fifth month and the twentieth day of the seventh month, book rolls must be unrolled and rolled three times."5 Su-ma Kuang, the noted Sung dynasty collector, instructed his son to wait for a clear, sunny day between the month of July and early September to carry out this activity.6 In fact, in southern China August and September were thought to be a better time than July because "in July the sun is so hot that it will dry up the pages. July is also the month when rain showers will occur without warning."7

Little has been recorded as to how the task was actually carried out when the collection contained hundreds and thousands of rolls and volumes. Sun Ts'ung-t'ien, perhaps, was the only bibliophile who left detailed instructions:

Book sunning should be done in the hot months of summer. It should be done case by case, each taking a full day to complete. The books should be placed on four planks, each measuring two feet wide and fifteen or sixteen feet long. These planks are then placed on high stools in the sun. The part with stitchings should be on the top; then the books should be turned, so that both sides will be sunned. [After sunning], the books on planks should be put in an airy place and allowed to cool thoroughly before being returned to the cases. If it rains, it is most convenient to move the books inside on these planks. The best time for placing books on planks is early morning rather than when the day gets hotter since sweat from hands may leave marks on the books. The same rule applies when putting books back in the cases. Check the title lists posted on the cases when placing books back so that nothing will be amiss. If certain books need rebinding, make note of the titles so they can be taken care of. Book sunning can also be done in early autumn.8

The word "p'u", as in the term "p'u shu", means "to dry in the sun" or "expose to the sun", according to the dictionary, Kang-hsi tzu tien (Taipei: 1979 edition). As to whether books should be directly placed under the sun, Chia Ssu-hsieh, in his typically plain-spoken manner, had this advice to offer: "[Book sunning] should be done on a clear day in a spacious house which is aired and cool, and books should not be exposed directly to the sun for its rays will turn the paper brownish."9 In the late Ch'ing and early Republican periods, when regulations governing book collections were more formalized, this annual ritual was often referred to as shai liangle sun and air or feng shai "air dry". Judging from the terms some literati used in naming their written works or their studios, such as Chao I's work Yen-pu tsa-chi (Miscellaneous Notes while Sunning under the Eaves), or Chu Tsun-i's studio Pu-shu-t'ing (Pavilion for Sunning Books), one may safely conclude that true bibliophiles were aware of the perils of direct sunning and the activity was often carried out under some kind of shading.

It appears that inventory activities also took place following the operation of sunning and airing. As Sun Ts'ung-t'ien instructs in the quotation above, proper reshelving required checking the books against title lists posted in the book cases.
Books needing repair were also noted down at this time. In late Ch'ing and early Republican times, academy and library regulations called for meticulous and careful temporary assistants to be hired for making this inventory. Officials in charge of these institutions were also required to make on-site inspections to ensure that all volumes were accounted for.

For government collections during the Ming dynasty, the officials in charge were members of the Han-lin yüan (Hanlin Academy). Ch'iu Chün, Grand Secretary under Ming Hsiao-tsung, in 1493 memorialized the throne proposing the establishment of a national policy of searching for and collecting books. Copies of these books would then be made and deposited at three locations. He further proposed that, every year during the hot summer months, personnel from the Hanlin Academy would go to the depositories to supervise the sunning of the books. The memorial met with the approval of the throne and the proposal was adopted. During the Ch'ing dynasty, in anticipation of the completion of his grand imperial library, Wen-yüan-ko, Emperor Ch'ien-lung appointed sixteen members from the Hanlin Academy as sub-editors to oversee day-to-day operations at Wen-yüan-ko which included seasonal book sunnings. The appointments, stated the emperor, were made to emulate the precedent established in the Sung dynasty, a time when book collecting was entering a golden age.

It is also in the records of the Sung dynasty that we are shown a glimpse of the lavish book-sunning parties given by the Sung emperors. These parties served to display the imperial wealth and, at the same time, to air the collected items. Books, paintings, and imperial writings, as well as ancient vessels and inkwells, were exhibited. Bookrooms were unlocked and guards posted at the doors. Wine and food were abundant. Only officials above a certain rank were invited to attend. The parties concluded with the emperor's bestowal of strings of cash and copies of books to the officials invited whose names were then carved on tablets to commemorate the event. We may infer that gathering for the annual book sunning was considered among the literati of the time to be an event of great refinement. Poetry was composed on such occasions by friends of the emperor and scholar-officials. Besides these imperial parties, the literati also had gatherings of their own for book sunning. They would invite their friends to these gatherings and poetry would be composed. One poem by Ch'ien Hsieh, which seems to have been written on such an occasion, has survived in the collection, Sung shih chi shih.

In more recent times, when book collections had evolved into libraries for public use, book-sunning days became official holidays for the libraries. The regulations for the Number Two Kiangsu Provincial Library stated that the period for conducting book sunning should not exceed twenty days each year. During this period the library would be closed to the public—a practical necessity on one hand and a convenient holiday on the other.

The collections amassed through the painstaking efforts of one generation, unfortunately, often became overwhelming burdens to its posterity. In the hands of indifferent heirs, maintenance fell into disuse and collections deteriorated or were scattered. A case in point is the famous Tien-i-ko collection in Chekiang province amassed by Fan Ch'in during the Ming Chia-ch'ing reign (1522-1566). In its hey day the collection boasted over seventy thousand volumes. By war and through careless management, its number dwindled to thirteen thousand by the Republican period. In a 1931 description of this collection, it was stated that the responsibility for maintenance was entrusted to six branches of the Fan clan, and that the annual book sunning existed in name only, when representatives from the six
branches gathered annually to unlock the doors and take a look at the collection. No books were actually moved to be sunned and aired; consequently, most pages of the surviving volumes bore evidence of being gnawed by insects and mice.\textsuperscript{17}

Even for government collections, the practice of book sunning was at one time ceased by decree. Shortly after the completion of the imperially commissioned \textit{Ssu-k'u ch'\'uan-shu}, Ch'ing emperor Ch'ien-lung proclaimed that inept book sunning in the government depositories often caused more damage to the books therein than not sunning them at all. Henceforth, he declared, the practice need not be continued.\textsuperscript{18} The sad state of a deteriorating collection was vividly described by Sun Shu-li in his \textit{Shan-pen shu-shih chi}. Referring to the Pao-ching-lou Library of the Lu family, Sun lamented: "[The descendants] have leased out the lower floor to be a storehouse for medicines. The money set aside each year for book sunning was squandered away during days of drinking bouts. When my friend and I did transcribing there, pages of books moved with the squirming of silverfish."\textsuperscript{19}

Besides book sunning, other preservation measures practiced in ancient China have been expertly discussed by Tsien\textsuperscript{20} and Martinique.\textsuperscript{21} These measures include treating the paper with insecticidal substances, mixing book paste with special ingredients, building book cabinets with certain woods to minimize dampness, and using a fragrant herb, \textit{yun-hsiangi} (ruelto ward off insects. In times of neglect, however, these measures too would fall by the wayside.

Ku Jung, a Ch'ing dynasty poet and book collector, summed up the sentiments of book sunning in his poem, "Thoughts upon Sunning the Books":

\begin{quote}
Cicadae buzzed in the warm breezes,
Trees in the yard rustled softly.
Long were the bright days seen through the window,
The scarlet sun blazed in its full glory.

No time to be scornful of idle dreamers,
I carried the fragments of my books to sun.
The scent of rue scattered with the wind,
The silverfish crushed under my hands.
Torn pages bore witness to the ravages of time,
Alas, my brushes were worn from collating.

I have never regretted that I emptied my purse for book buying,
I have never complained that my hands were calloused from copying,
Not totally impoverished yet, this bed, this roof are still in my possession.

Cared less and less for worldly concerns,
This collection was akin to my flesh and bones.
What could I hand down to posterity?
What an amount my life was too short to read?
Sighing while opening the pages -- these words,
in whose eyes would appear?

Things assembled,
will be scattered,
Shouldn't I know that is the natural law in life?
Laughing at myself and forgetting my weariness,
For now, let me put the books back in cases.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}
NOTES


13. Ibid., p.1173.


16. Li Hsi-mi, Chung-kuo ku-tai ts'ang shu, p.318.


