How Chinese Rare Books Crossed the Pacific at the Outbreak of World War II: Some Reminiscences

Tsuen-hsuin Tsien

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jeal

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jeal/vol1993/iss101/25

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of East Asian Libraries by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
HOW CHINESE RARE BOOKS CROSSED THE PACIFIC
AT THE OUTBREAK OF WORLD WAR II: SOME REMINISCENCES

Tsuen-hsuin Tsien

Chicago, Illinois

In 1941, just before World War II began, some 30,000 volumes of rare books were shipped from China to the United States for safekeeping and microfilming. This was an important event in the history of Sino-American cultural relations and also for international sharing of Chinese rare resources, yet very few people know the story of how these rarities were able to cross the Pacific Ocean during a time of world crisis. Twenty-six years later, I recalled this incident in an article in memory of the late Dr. T. L. Yuan revealing how I risked my life in order to accomplish this difficult mission. In that account, I mentioned how an accident made this shipment possible and how the last shipment reached the States was a puzzle, since the vessel supposedly carrying it was reported to have been captured by the Japanese navy. Today, over fifty years later, it still remains a mystery.

After the war, I was commissioned by the Chinese government in 1947 to go to the States to bring back these books, but the outbreak of civil war in China prevented their return. Instead of going to Washington, D.C., I ended up in Chicago and have been here ever since.

Before my arrival in Chicago, I worked at the Shanghai Office of the National Library of Peiping for ten years. The office was established in 1934, when many rare books were moved from Peiping (now Beijing) for safety after the Japanese occupation of Manchuria. Among them were some 60,000 volumes of old paintings, manuscripts, Tun-huang documents as well as artifacts, maps, and rubbings, which were stored secretly in several locations in the International Settlement and French Concession in Shanghai. In 1937, when the Japanese occupation of North China seemed imminent, the headquarters of the National Library was moved from Peiping to the hinterland cities of Changsha, Kunming, and then Chungking and I was assigned to work in the Nanking and later the Shanghai office undercover.

Besides the custody of rare books, my job in Shanghai consisted of publishing Chinese and English editions of the Quarterly Bulletin of Chinese Bibliography, contacting libraries and cultural institutions in the West for supplies of research materials for the hinterland, and acquiring publications printed under the Japanese occupation. The most difficult and exciting task assigned to me during this period was the shipment of the rare books then stored in Shanghai to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., under the agreement of the Chinese and American governments.2

In those days, shipment of rarities to the U.S. was all but impossible since the Shanghai harbor and customs were already under Japanese control. There was no way of getting these rare materials out of the city without being approved by the Japanese authorities.
Many attempts had been made by the State Department in Washington, D.C., through the American Consulate General in Shanghai and by myself to negotiate with the Director-General of the Shanghai Customs, but they all ended in failure. Nevertheless, an accidental and unexpected turn of events enabled the books to be shipped out of Shanghai without approval of higher authorities but at great risk.

It happened one day that one of my wife’s former schoolmates visited us and, from our conversation, we learned she had a brother working as an inspector of the Shanghai customs. She arranged for me to meet him and he expressed his patriotic sympathy about this shipment and agreed to help on the condition that we keep it top secret. The books were already packed in 102 wooden crates, sealed with galvanized iron sheets inside. This inspector suggested that these rare materials should be sent in installments at intervals and disguised as if they contained new books acquired by the U.S. Library of Congress. I acted as a book dealer and made out an invoice of large sets of new publications. Each time I accompanied the crates, which were loaded on a hand-pulled cart, on the journey to the customs when this inspector was on duty. These crates of rare books were then examined by him and immediately cleared as ordinary cargo. About ten crates were sent each time, so it took almost two months to complete the shipment of all the books. The final batch was understood to have been to the SS President Harrison and delivered on December 5, 1941, just two days before Japan’s surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and the beginning of World War II, followed by the immediate occupation of Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, the Philippines, and other parts of Southeast Asia by the Japanese army.

A few days later, it was reported in the newspaper that the President Harrison had been captured by the Japanese navy just outside Shanghai Harbor. We were in great anxiety and suspense, believing that the last shipment must either have been seized or, worse still, destroyed by the Japanese. Six months later, however, to my great surprise, a dispatch from Lisbon by a German news agency reported that the U.S. Library of Congress had announced that all 102 crates of Chinese rare books had arrived safely in Washington, D.C., and microfilming had already begun. Nevertheless, how the last shipment reached the U.S. still remains a puzzle since the carrier was reported captured by the Japanese.

In order to solve the puzzle, Dr. Edwin G. Beal, Jr., the former Head of the Chinese and Korean Section of the Library of Congress, made an inquiry in 1983 to find out when SS President Harrison left Shanghai and whether it had been seized by the Japanese or had reached San Francisco. After combing its archives, the American President Lines, Inc., released some exciting information concerning the fate of the President Harrison during the war, together with the names of the Master and one of the crew of the vessel and their reflections at the time of the capture.

According to this information, on December 8, just after the outbreak of war, the SS President Harrison was on its way from Manila to Chingwontao in North China in order to evacuate American marines stationed in Peiping. As the vessel approached Shanghai, it was trapped by a Japanese cruiser and the Japanese liner Nagasaki Maru about forty miles off
the coast. The Master of the vessel ran the ship aground on Shewieshan Island at full speed, hoping to prevent the Japanese from using it. Afterwards, however, a Japanese salvage firm succeeded in refloating the ship, which was renamed the *Kakko Maru* and later, *Kachidoki Maru*. It was used by the Japanese until September 12, 1944, when it was torpedoed and sunk by an American submarine in the South China Sea. At the time, it was transporting some 900 U.S. prisoners of war from Singapore to Japan, among whom only some 500 were rescued.

It seems quite clear, however, that the last shipment of Chinese rare books was not on board the *President Harrison*, which was scheduled to run between Shanghai and San Francisco, but which had apparently been recruited by the U.S. government for the evacuation of Americans in China before they were caught in the war. The last shipment of ten cases of rare books must have been placed on some other ship sailing from Shanghai, though this transfer was not reported, nor could the name of the ship be traced.

Dr. Beal said he had also examined the documents at the Library of Congress, hoping to find some bills of lading or other indications of how the final shipment had arrived and by which vessel. Though his search did not answer all the questions, it is now understood that all the crates reached San Francisco and were in temporary custody at the University of California at Berkeley before they reached their final destination in Washington, D.C. However, the puzzle remains unsolved as we do not know how the final shipment arrived, though it seems clear it could not have done so on the *President Harrison*, since the latter never reached Shanghai or ever again came near San Francisco.

After a quarter of a century, on the death of Dr. Yuan, who was in custody of the Chinese rare books at the Library of Congress, these books recrossed the Pacific in 1965 and were transferred to the National Central Library in Taiwan at the request of its Director, Dr. Chiang Fu-ts'ung. They were shipped on board the U.S. naval vessel, *General H. Guffey*, together with other rarities from Taiwan exhibited at the World's Fair in New York. After being checked with the original packing list drawn up in Shanghai, a separate rare book catalog of the National Library of Peiping in the custody of the National Central Library was published in 1969.

After Dr. Chiang became Director of the National Palace Museum in Taiwan, these books packed in the 102 original crates were moved to the new building of the Museum in Taipei. In 1984, I visited the Museum and was very much impressed by the physical facilities of its rare book stacks. These books have been very well cared for with good security, proper temperature and humidity control. I was also surprised to see that all the original labels, which had been used to seal the crates in Shanghai fifty years ago, were still there. These rare materials are China's national treasures accumulated through many dynasties over the past thousand years. It is hoped that they will eventually be returned to their owners before too long.
NOTES


3. A total of 2,070 titles were filmed on 1,070 reels of microfilm.

4. I am grateful to Dr. Beal for sending me his correspondence with Mr. Collette Carey of American President Lines' Archives together with all the related documents.

5. For the return of this collection to Taiwan, see Chiang Fu-ts'ung 楊復聰, "Yun kuei kuo li Pei-p'ing t'u shu kuan ts'un Mei shan pen kai shu" 運歸國立圖書館存美善本書概述, Chung Mei yueh k'an 中美月刊 11, no. 3 (1955), pp. 5-6; and see the article by P. Chang 昌彼得, "Kuan yü Pei-p'ing t'u shu kuan chi ts'un Mei-kuo ti shan pen shu" 關於北平圖書館寄存美國的善本書, Shu mu chi k'an 書目季刊 4, no. 2 (1969.12), pp. 3-11.