My Study at the Graduate Library School of the University of Chicago

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I was invited to the University of Chicago in the fall of 1947 as an exchange scholar from the National Library in Peiping (now Beijing). According to the original arrangement, I was to stay for two years, working full-time in the Far Eastern (now East Asian) Library and studying part-time at the Graduate Library School (GLS) of the University. After the first year, however, Professor H. G. Creel, who started the China Studies Program in Chicago, wanted me to extend my stay indefinitely and also to teach the graduate students. With the agreement of the National Library, I was appointed Curator of the Far Eastern Library and Professorial Lecturer in 1949, and later Associate Professor and Professor in the Department of Far Eastern (now East Asian) Languages and Civilizations. Also, a tuition waiver enabled me to complete my studies in the GLS in 1957 for a total of ten long years.

Founded in 1928, the University of Chicago’s Graduate Library School from its inception had been accredited the leading institution of librarianship, emphasizing research rather than merely training students for a career in library profession. So its programs were organized along the line of academic disciplines in humanities, social sciences and science, instead of the traditional curriculum of technical procedures only. It was also the first library school to confer doctoral degrees in library science. The GLS required full-time students to take 18 courses with a thesis to complete a master’s program and another nine courses or three quarters in residence with a dissertation for the PhD. In my case, I could only take one course each quarter for a total of four courses each year, including the summer. As a result, it took me five years to receive my master’s degree in 1952 and five more to obtain my PhD in 1957.

Back in the 1930s as a student at the University of Nanking, where my major was History and minor Library Science, I was inspired by a course on the History of Chinese Books offered by Professor Liu Guojun, and I decided to focus my academic interest at Chicago on the history of books and printing. My very first mentor was Professor Pierce Butler, whose The Origin of Printing was the classic in its field, but he retired the next year after my enrollment in 1947. It was a time when the library science program experienced a transition from humanities to social sciences, so the courses shifted to emphasize such fields as textual readability, content analysis, statistical application and mass communication. Since the fifties, the emphasis has again shifted to computer technology. Unfortunately, the GLS decided not to admit new students in 1994 because of fiscal difficulties.

Among the many notable GLS faculty members under whom I studied was Herman H. Fussler, the pioneer scholar on the preservation of library materials in microform and also the University Library Director, with whom I took a course on University and Academic Libraries. With Leon Carnovsky, I took Library Survey, which influenced me in the surveys on Far Eastern library resources I conducted every five years for CEAL since 1959. In the class on Theory and Practice of Classification given by Jesse H. Shera, I wrote a term paper on “A History of the Chinese
Bibliographic Classification," in which I compared the triad classification by Francis Bacon (1561-1626) of Philosophy, History and Poetry, which is the foundation of Western book classification systems, with the Chinese fourfold classification since the third century A.D. of History, Philosophy and Literature, excluding the Classics. Bacon further subdivided Philosophy into Divine, Nature and Human, a scheme which is exactly analogous with the Chinese thought of Three Elements, t'ian (Heaven), di (Earth) and ren (Man). Since Bacon quoted lavishly Chinese inventions and other things Chinese in his writings, I concluded that Bacon's system had most probably been influenced by Chinese thought. Professor Shera highly commended this paper and recommended its publication in the Library Quarterly (October 1952). This became the first article in English I ever published. He later joined Western Reserve University as Dean of its Library School and wrote a book review in 1963 of my Written on Bamboo and Silk, in which he says: “Of all the rewards of teaching – and there are many – there is none so great as to see the pupil outdistance the instructor.”

Lester Asheim was another instructor whose courses on Content Analysis and Mass Communication taught me new research methodology. I used the quantitative method following Hulme's Statistical Bibliography in writing my master's thesis, Western Impact on China through Translation: a Bibliographical Study (v, 246 pp.), in which I collected over 10,000 titles of Chinese translations from the 16th through the 20th centuries for analysis of their original language, subject matter, dates, quantity, motivations and influence to interpret the intellectual trends prevailing in different periods of time in China. The abstract of this thesis was published in the Far Eastern Quarterly in 1954 with commendation by its editor as a new approach to the study of modern Chinese history.

Professor Howard W. Winger was my most intimate teacher, mentor and friend. He joined the GLS faculty in 1953 when I began my doctoral study and offered courses on Library History and History of Books and Printing, which I took in addition to his seminars. He later assumed the Deanship and Managing Editorship of the Library Quarterly. There were many occasions on which his kindness to me remains in my memory. First, after the publication of my first book in 1962 and upon his recommendation, GLS offered me a joint professorship and concurrently a position on the Editorial Board of the Library Quarterly, assisting him in the reviewing of submitted articles. He also helped me in supervising the Joint Program on Far Eastern Librarianship, of which I was Director from 1962 on; organizing the GLS annual conference on Area Studies and the Library in 1964; and assisting me in the Summer Institute on Far Eastern Librarianship, supported by the U. S. Department of Education in 1969. On the occasion of my retirement, he presented me with a woolen scarf he knitted himself and chanted a poem he composed at the reception. His untimely death in 1985 was a shock to us. He is sorely missed by everyone who knew him.

Because my doctoral degree was interdisciplinary, involving GLS and the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, I also took a seminar with Professor Creel and wrote a paper on the classic text of Chan Kuo Ts'e, or Strategy of the Warring States, 468-221 B.C., which was later published in Chinese Classical Texts: a Bibliographical Guide, edited by Michael Loewe of Cambridge University (Berkeley, 1993). Because of Creel's scholarship and influence, I shifted my interest to the study of ancient China and wrote my dissertation, under his supervision, on the “Pre-printing Records of China: A Study of the Development of Early Chinese Inscriptions and Books,” which covers all written documents on shells, bones, bronze, clays, stone, bamboo, silk, paper and writing implements from antiquity to about 700 A.D., when printing was about to begin in China. Later, it was changed to a new title Written on
Bamboo and Silk: The Beginnings of Chinese Books and Inscriptions and recommended by the Dean of the GLS for publication by the University of Chicago Press, which was rather reluctant to accept it as the market was said to be very limited. However, the GLS made an offer to subsidize its printing cost and to include it in its Studies in Library Science series. Quite contrary to everyone’s anticipation, the first printing of 1962 was sold out in three months and additional impressions were made in 1963 and 1969. It was considered a companion volume of the classic work by Thomas Carter, The Invention of Printing in China and Its Spread Westward and used as a required reading in Chinese History and Library Science. Subsequently, the book was translated into Chinese, Japanese and Korean; the Chinese version has been reprinted four times since then and the new revised English edition will also be published soon.

With the training at the GLS, I learned to write with new conceptions and new methodology on different aspects of Chinese civilization. In conjunction with my teaching of Chinese Bibliography and Historiography as well as History of Chinese Printing at the University, I have published ten monographs and over one hundred articles on the history of the book, paper, ink and printing as well on East-West cultural exchange, librarianship, and other subjects. These include China: An Annotated Bibliography of Bibliographies (Boston: G. K. Hall; xxvii, 604pp.), which is a select catalogue of some 2500 bibliographies on China in different languages with annotations by James Cheng. As a sequel to my Written on Bamboo and Silk, a volume on Paper and Printing was published in Joseph Needham’s Science and Civilization in China series by Cambridge University Press in 1985. As a comprehensive study of China’s two great inventions, its first edition was sold out before publication with two more impressions in 1985 and 1989. Two collected essays in Chinese were published: The History of the Book, Paper, Ink and Printing, published in Hong Kong in 1992 with a revised edition in Beijing in 2002, and Chinese-American Cultural Relations, published in Taipei in 1998 with a revised edition to be published soon in Shanghai. In addition, I have co-edited two monographs, Area Studies and the Library with Howard W. Winger (Chicago, 1964) and Ancient China: A Study of Early Civilization with David T. Roy (Hong Kong, 1975).

In all, I have enjoyed my study, work, teaching, research and writing ever since my arrival in Chicago. With the kindness of the University and its Library Director Martin Runkle, I have been given an office in the Joseph Regenstein Library after my retirement in 1978 and, therefore, have an opportunity to continue my research and writing ever since.

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[Editor’s Note: Readers who are interested in learning more about Dr. T. H. Tsien’s distinguished career may consult the article by James K. M. Cheng “Fifty Years Embracing the Wall of Books: The Life and Career of Dr. Tsuen-Hsuin Tsien,” in Committee on East Asian Libraries Bulletin No. 82 (Sept. 1987): 29-35.]