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Donated to Asian Library at Claremont Colleges Library

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John Sheng Collection of Republican-Era School Textbooks Donated to Asian Library at Claremont Colleges Library

In May 2019, a collection of over 4,450 volumes of the Republican-era Chinese textbooks and educational materials were donated to the Asian Library at Claremont Colleges Library. These books were collected and curated by Shen Zhifang and his descendants.

Shen Zhifang 沈知方 (1883-1939) was a book collector and well-known entrepreneur in the modern Chinese publishing industry. He was the founding father of the three most important publishers and distributors of Chinese school textbooks in the republican era: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, Commercial Press 商務印書館, and World Book Company 世界書局. Shen Zhifang’s publishing career and talent was carried on by his descendants, including Sherman Sheng 沈志明 and Vena Yin Sheng 應文嫺 (Chinese American poetess and novelist, and former librarian at Hoover Institute, Stanford University). They established publishing houses and book stores in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Taiwan throughout the 1930s and 1940s. After 1949, the Sheng family publishing business moved from Shanghai to Taiwan. The family’s book collection was also brought to Taiwan and taken care of by John Sheng 沈中行, who continued to run the family's bookstores in Taipei until May 2018 when he passed away.

The Sheng Family has a long connection to Claremont and has been very impressed by the Claremont Colleges' excellence of teaching, learning, and research opportunities in Asian studies among liberal arts settings. After carefully considering several potential recipients, the family finally decided to donate the collection to the Asian Library at the Claremont Colleges, a consortium of five independent liberal arts colleges and two graduate universities.

The collection mainly consists of the following category of materials:

- School textbooks (~40%) of a variety of subjects, from humanities to social sciences, to STEM
- Primers for literacy and “new learning” drives
- Chinese classics with annotations for popular reading
- Early Chinese translations of Western works of history, literature, philosophy, science, and medicine
- Early dictionaries for learning English and Japanese, bi-lingual works of Chinese literature and Chinese classics

In terms of rarity, sample searching against WorldCat of all titles indicates the following:

- Nearly 70% of them first editions
- Over 50 publishers, major ones as well as smaller and non-mainstream ones, reflecting the textbook publishing field in Republican-era Shanghai
- 40% not in WorldCat (indicating possibly not in any library yet)
- Over 40% not in any library in the United States. One or two holdings in Taiwan or Mainland China
- Less than 2% held by Claremont

The collection, when processed, will provide a significant teaching collection of primary sources for curriculums on Republic-era Chinese/East Asian history, education, publishing,
material cultures, social customs, Sino-West interactions and impact on China’s modernization. It will also complement and add significant strength to Claremont Colleges’ current collection of around 300 primer and school textbooks from the late 19th to early 20th century.