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DR. TSEUN-HSUIN TSIEN HONORED BY THE
NATIONAL LIBRARY OF CHINA

A delegation from the National Library of China in Beijing recently visited the University of Chicago Library to present a Distinguished Service Award to Dr. Tsuen-hsuin Tsien, the renowned Curator Emeritus of the University of Chicago East Asian Collection, and Professor Emeritus of the University of Chicago Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations. The award was presented in honor of Dr. Tsien’s outstanding contributions to the National Library of China (the former Beijing Library), particularly for his great service to the Library during the World War II, when he secretly shipped 30,000 volumes of invaluable rare books from Shanghai to the U. S. Library of Congress to escape destruction during the war.

The award ceremony was held on December 17, 1999 on the fifth floor of the Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago. Mrs. Tsien and more than fifty invited guests, faculty members, and Dr. Tsien’s colleagues, friends and students attended the ceremony. Martin Runkle, the Director of the University Library, addressed the audience with opening remarks. Three officials from the National Library of China—Mrs. Beixin Sun, the deputy director, Mr. Zhizhong Li, the Director of the Committee on Development and Research, and Mrs. Liping Sun, the Director of the International Cooperation Department—flew to Chicago for the ceremony. Mrs. Beixin Sun, representing the National Library, presented the award certificate to Dr. Tsien with an ebullient speech praising his outstanding contributions. Other speakers on the ceremony program included Mr. Ruixing Wei, the Consul General of the People’s Republic of China in Chicago, Professor Anthony C. Yu, representing faculty members, and Dr. Theodore N. Foss, the Associate Director of the Center for East Asian Studies at the University. Extracts of congratulating messages from James Cheng, Librarian of the Harvard-Yenching Library and Wei-ying Wan, Head of Asian Library at University of Michigan, were also read and presented to Dr. Tsien by Mr. Runkle in his opening remarks.

Dr. T. H. Tsien was a librarian of the National Library of China (then Pei-ping Library) from 1937 to 1947. In 1937, as Japanese occupation of North China became imminent, he was assigned to head the Nanjing branch, and shortly after, the Shanghai branch of the Pei-ping Library. Among other responsibilities, he was in charge of safekeeping the rare books and special collections of the Library which were transferred from Pei-ping to South China. Some of the transferred collections were secretly stored in several locations in the international settlement and French concession in Shanghai. In 1941, the Chinese government made an agreement with the U. S. government to ship the Pei-ping Library’s rare books in Shanghai to the Library of Congress for safety. The assignment of getting the books transferred was given to Dr. Tsien. Because at the time both Shanghai harbor and customs were already under Japanese control, shipment of rarities to the U. S. was all but impossible. Dr. T. H. Tsien risked his life to arrange successfully the secret shipment—in a number of attempts—of 102 wooden crates containing 30,000 volumes of rare books across the Pacific. The last batch was sent out on December 5, 1941, just before the attack on Pearl Harbor.1 All these books reached the Library of Congress safely and were soon microfilmed in 1,070 rolls for preservation and wide distribution.

In 1947, Dr. Tsien was commissioned by the Chinese government to bring these books back from Washington D.C. to Pei-ping, but the outbreak of the civil war in China prevented their return. Instead, Dr. Tsien went to the University of Chicago Library as an exchange librarian. Two years later, he became the first curator of the Far Eastern Library (now East Asian Collection) there, with a teaching position in the Department of Oriental Languages (now Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations). In subsequent years, Dr. Tsien developed at the University of Chicago one of the best East Asian collections in the country and held professorships both in the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations and the Graduate Library School. He retired in 1979, but has actively continued his research, writing, and promotion of cultural exchange and understanding between the United States and China. In 1965, upon the request of the National Central Library in Taiwan, the Library of Congress sent the rare books back to Taiwan, and they are now deposited in the National Palace Museum in Taiwan.

Speakers at the ceremony praised Dr. Tsien’s heroic actions in protecting China’s cultural treasures from possible war damage and also commended his achievements in teaching, research, and in providing library resources and services in the field of East Asian studies and East Asian librarianship, as well as his untiring efforts to foster cultural links and understanding between the United States and China. In accepting the award, Dr. Tsien expressed his gratitude to the National Library of China and to all the people who came to join the celebration. He also expressed his wish for further cooperation and closer relationships between the U. S. and China, and his hope that someday those rare books will return to their original home in Beijing.

The National Library of China celebrated its 90th anniversary this year and selected this memorable occasion to recognize Dr. Tsien for his distinguished contributions.

(Yuan Zhou, The University of Chicago)