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EAST ASIAN PIONEERS: A CONTINUING SERIES

MY WORK WITH JOSEPH NEEDHAM

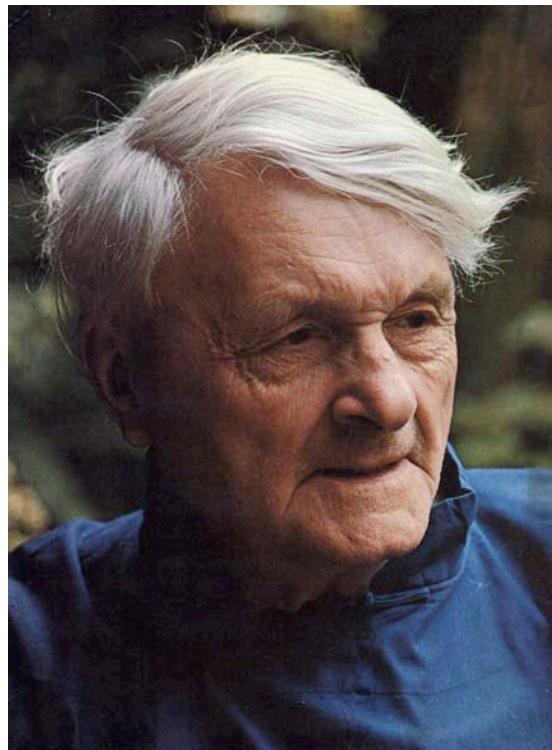
Tsuen-hsuei Tsien

Translated by Diana Chen

Joseph Needham and I first became acquainted in 1964 when he wrote a review of my new book, *Written on Bamboo and Silk: The Beginnings of Chinese Books and Inscriptions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) in the *Journal of Asian Studies* v.23, no.4, 1964. He praised my book as a companion volume to Thomas F. Carter's classic *The Invention of Printing in China and Its Spread Westwards*, saying "we may say at once that it need not fear any comparison with that wonderful book," and "the text is a model of clarity and brevity in good Cartesian style." Because one chapter of my book covered paper and paper scrolls, Needham wrote to me for the first time and invited me to write parts of the fifth volume of his *Science and Civilisation in China*, on the subjects of paper and printing.

He said in his letter, dated 1 October, 1967: "Since I am now approaching 67, I have come to feel very deeply that certain sections must be farmed out to able collaborators. Your special knowledge of paper and its predecessors, as well as of seals, writing and printing in general, makes you one of the most obvious people in the world to be approached in this way, and I do hope that you will consider the matter very seriously."

Although I was very flattered, some colleagues and friends advised me not to accept the offer. The odds against working with him were that he was not a Sinologist by training and was attacked by some British scholars; also he was a person watched by the CIA. If I collaborated with him, I could invite trouble. Even though I had only a limited knowledge of him, I was impressed by his goodwill to China, his sense of justice during the Korean War and his criticism of the Vietnam War. After some thinking, I accepted his invitation to visit Cambridge for a talk before my final decision. With the support of the American Association of Learned Societies, I was also able to visit the European mainland in September 1968.



Joseph Needham

When I arrived at Cambridge, Needham, then Master of Gonville and Caius College, and Lu Gwei-djen, his associate, came to meet me at the bus station; he carried my luggage and walked rapidly in front of me. I was settled in an old building in the college, and every morning, a specially prepared breakfast was sent to my room. The lunches were usually with Needham, his wife Dorothy and Lu Gwei-djen, and we would then have afternoon tea at 4 pm. For dinner, I was sometimes invited to sit with the robed fellows, deans and professors on the upper level of the dining room while the students dined at the tables below.

Needham was a very candid and sincere person, easily approachable, simple, honest and warm. He admired everything about China and was a true "China fan." Tall and casually dressed, Needham often wore a long blue Chinese robe and cotton shoes at home. Scrolls of his own Chinese calligraphy hung on the walls. He would usually write Chinese terms in characters in case he could not orally express them clearly. All research materials he collected, whether quotations or notes, were written on single pages or cards, placed in topical folders, and filed by category in his cabinets for easy access. He lived a simple life and worked with unbelievable efficiency. Such a gigantic research project was assisted by only one secretary and a part-time librarian. He would undertake almost all the clerical work, including typing, correspondence and other miscellaneous work by himself. It gave me a glimpse of the admirably simple style of European scholars.

Modesty and Courtesy

After exhaustively explaining his research plan to me, Needham showed me some materials he had already collected and told me that besides paper and printing, this part of volume five would also include topics in textiles, pottery, and gunpowder. He had tentatively titled this volume "War and Peace." He thought that what I had in *Written on Bamboo and Silk* on paper, plus some narrative on printing would be sufficient for the chapter, which would be around 100 pages. In reality, my research got me more and more deeply into an extensive array of sources, and my chapter just became longer and longer. It took me fifteen years for the completion of the book, and the manuscript changed from the 100 pages as planned to a monograph of 300,000 words, way beyond our initial expectations.

In the process of writing, I would usually draw up an outline for each chapter, including subtopics and descriptions of details for his approval. But he never commented on the outlines and always encouraged me to continue. When I finished drafts for the three chapters on paper-making in 1972, it had already over 200 pages, far exceeding the original plan for 100 pages. I asked him whether he would like me to reduce the content when I sent him the draft, he replied that he believed in Daoism, which abided by nature and does not put limit on things. Therefore, I proceeded with the other chapters as I did with the three on paper-making.

There were few original sources for the part on printing and many problems to be dealt with on that subject. On the other hand, materials on transmission and influence of printing involved the entire world and covered an enormous amount of material. The complexity of research, in addition to the heavy load of my work at the University of Chicago, gave me little time to write. I was fortunate to obtain funding from the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities that partly relieved me from my administrative duties at the university and enabled me to hire graduate research assistants. I also offered a seminar on the History of Chinese Printing three times in the Graduate Library School at the University, using the opportunity to conduct discussions on the subject and also to train a number of young scholars to do research on this specialized field.

Although I did not meet with Dr. Needham often, I corresponded with him and accumulated many letters from him. He would forward to me all inquiries on this subject from persons all over the world and send me materials that he collected from time to time. His letters were often written in a beautiful running hand, and moved me with his warmth. I was not used to addressing him as "Joseph," but called him "Dr. Needham." And he always used his unique Chinese spelling of my name as Chhien Tshun-hsun.

Many times I raised this issue to his attention, arguing that my English publications always used Tsuen-hsui Tsien, and if I published under Chhien Tshun-hsun, it would be hard for readers to identify my other works.

He finally agreed to a compromise: in the Chinese language part of the bibliography, he used his spelling of my name, and in the English language part of the bibliography, he used my spelling. But on other occasions, he still liked to put his spelling in brackets after Tsuen-hsui Tsien. In this way, he maintained his style of romanization and respected my name in English, the way it had been spelled since my college days.

Authorship of the Volume

When the manuscript *Paper and Printing* was completed in mid 1982, I traveled to Cambridge again for discussion of its publication. Following the precedence of the published volumes of *Science and Civilisation in China*, I put Joseph Needham and Tsuen-hsui Tsien as joint authors on the cover page of the manuscript. Although he did not refuse then, in the published volume V, part I of the series, my name was printed as the sole author, and his name was moved to upper side as the editor of the series, which has become the template for later volumes of the series. It was also the first volume in the series to be written by an individual without him as joint author. This made me admire him all the more for his modesty. Showing respect for his many collaborators, he would single out and thank those who did the indexing, typing, proofreading, or writing of Chinese characters. Especially with regard to Chinese scholars, he would always put the Chinese characters after romanization. His respect for others and his modesty contrasted with the style of some earlier Western Sinologists who never mentioned the name of Chinese scholars who had collaborated with them.

Research team of Needham
Institute
(Drawing in Needham
Collection, Chinese ed., 1986)
1st row from left:
Kenneth Robinson,
T. H. Tsien;
2nd row: Dorothy Needham,
Joseph Needham, Lu Gui-
djen;
3rd row: He Ping-yoke,
Nathan Sivin, Wang Ling



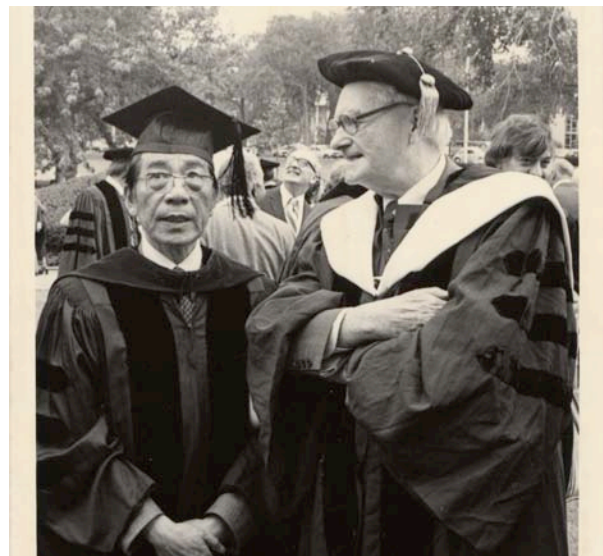
Although my volume on paper and printing was not co-authored with Needham, but included in his series, it was very well received after publication. One book review from the *London Times* commented that my work gave a thorough account of the topic and it would no doubt be well received. As part of the *Science and Civilization in China* series, it was to become a classic and the first edition was already sold out before its publication. According to a report from Cambridge University Press, the first printing of 1500 copies was sold out before its publication in 1985, a second printing came out in 1986, and a third revised edition in 1989. It continues to be reprinted and remains the best selling of all the published parts in the series.

First Honorary Degree from the U.S.

One of the most unforgettable events in the years of our cooperation was his visit again to the United States, what he thought the happiest and most symbolic among the many trips he took in his late age. It was a visit some thirty years after he last saw this land to receive his first honorary degree from an American university. By then he had already received over ten honorary degrees from many other countries throughout the world, but not one from the United States.

The story started in 1976, when the University of Chicago intended to invite Needham for a lecture and confer an honorary Ph.D. degree on him in recognition of his outstanding contributions to international scholarship. There were several problems, however. First, the nominees were usually young scholars to encourage their continued excellence in their fields, but Needham was already over 75 years old. His nomination was further complicated by politics for his charge that the United States used germ warfare during the Korean War. This in addition to his opposition to the Vietnam War caused his name to appear on the black list of the United States government.

After the University of Chicago decided to confer an honorary degree on him, I was asked to write to him to see if he would like to come to the United States for a scholarly talk and to receive this honorary degree. He replied immediately that he would be happy to come but that there might be complications in getting a U.S. visa. He enclosed a letter signed by the American senator William Fulbright inviting him to come to the U.S. as a major speaker at the 30th anniversary celebration of the Fulbright-Hayes Act organized by the U.S. congress, a trip for which he was denied a visa. He said, "If my American friends invite me to the U.S., I hope they would first clear the way with the American State Department." After negotiations between the University of Chicago Board of Trustees, including a senator from Illinois, and the State Department, he was finally able to come with Lu Gwei-djen to the United States that he had not seen for so many years.



Tsien and Needham after he received the first honorary degree in USA in 1976

In mid-June of 1976, the University of Chicago conferred on Joseph Needham an honorary Ph.D. degree in philosophy at its graduation ceremony. In my speech on behalf of the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at the ceremony conferring the honorary degree, I said:

*“Dr. Joseph Needham has made outstanding double contributions to international scholarship. He is a biochemist, and his *Chemical Embryology* paved the ground for this field of study. He is also the founder of the historical study of Chinese science and technology. His thirty plus volume work of *Science and Civilization in China* makes an immortal contribution to 20th century scholarship. His analysis of the convergence of heaven and man in Chinese philosophy helped to explain hitherto little known Chinese science and technology, much of which was borrowed in the West. His research has impacted the world, and he is the greatest scholar who has introduced Chinese culture to the world, a rapidly growing field internationally.”*

His trip to the U.S. was undoubtedly a successful and important one late in his life. He was welcomed not only by the American scholarly community, but also by other cultural and commercial organizations. Because of the mass media coverage, his activities in the U.S. became very widely known. This could be considered a correction to the attacks and prejudices he had suffered in the past. Since then the door of the United States became open to him, and he was invited many more times to visit, give speeches, mobilize funding, so that his research projects and new building in his research institute would receive funding from some American foundations, financial groups and big businesses. No wonder when he walked out of the Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago after the graduation ceremony, holding the certificate he had just received, he said merrily, “This is my first honorary degree from the United States.”

*The above article in Chinese was published in *Lishi yuekan (Historical Monthly; Taipei)* No.89, July, 1995 and included in the *LiuMei Zayi (Memoir of 60 years in USA; Taipei, 2007; Beijing, 2008)*, translated by Diana Lin of Indiana State University, and edited with up-dating by Alexander and Mary Tsien Dunkel of the University of Arizona.*