

Xiang Da in England

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Xiang Da arrived in London on 29 November, 1935, at the invitation of the Librarian of the University of Oxford ("Bodley's Librarian"). He left in December 1936, having spent most of his time cataloguing the Chinese books in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. There is a volume of letters in the archive of the Bodleian Library, which contains almost everything we can find out about Xiang Da's work.¹ In the letters, he is referred to as Dr Hsiang, in the old Wade-Giles romanisation.

It would appear that Xiang Da's visit was part of a project presumably initiated by Dr. T.L.Yuan (袁同礼), Deputy Director of the National Library of China. A letter from E.R.Hughes (Ernest Richard Hughes 1883-1956, formerly with the London Missionary Society in China, subsequently Reader in Chinese Philosophy and Religion at Oxford University) to Dr Craster, Bodley's Librarian dated 25 August, 1934, proposes a meeting to "discuss the engagement of a Chinese pupil of Dr. Yuan's who will be carrying out cataloguing in the libraries of Berlin, Paris and Stockholm" and who might be appointed for "about three months" at a cost between £50 to £100 "fee and cost of living". A later letter from Hughes to Craster (27 March, 1935) discusses the visa application and says "I doubt if one ought to say formally that Mr. Hsiang will be 'carrying out cataloguing of the Chinese books in the libraries at Berlin, Paris and Stockholm' if only for the reason that the cataloguing in these libraries has already been done. The situation is that Dr. Yuan from time to time sends over a picked man, on the one hand to study the notable libraries in Europe, and on the other hand to be there to give such advice and help on Chinese books and their cataloguing as may be wanted." I assume that T.L.Yuan's main interest was to identify and assess the rare Chinese books in European collections but sending out his best "picked" men or pupils to catalogue and advise was a clever move since the host institutions, anxious to get their Chinese collections catalogued, were compelled to find the money for their support in Europe. The arrangements were not one-sided for it appears

¹ Library Records 551/60: *The Chinese Collection 1934*.

(E.R.Hughes to Craster, 31 October, 1934) that "the National Library are paying the cost of his passage to Europe".

The usefulness of T.L.Yuan's pupils is apparent from descriptions of the current state of cataloguing in Oxford which are included in this archival volume. On 31 December, the Professor of Chinese at Oxford, W. Soothill (1861-1935) a former Methodist missionary in China, wrote to the Librarian stating the position. "I have card-indexed perhaps one-third of the Backhouse Collection, and my work was checked over by Dr Hu Shih (胡适). It is a catalogue *raisonne* but without cross-references. I presume that Dr Hsiang of the National Library would provide a catalogue with cross-references. This would be very valuable, done subjectively... My work is to be found in a cardboard box at the southwest corner of the room. But I have done nothing with it since 1926 when I had the misfortune to injure my hand badly when the ladder slipped ...". Thus the Chinese collections of the Bodleian were apparently barely catalogued with only a box of cards relating to one-third of one, admittedly large, collection, in existence. It is interesting to note that Soothill, whilst agreeing that £150 seemed a reasonable fee for the four months' work it was proposed that Xiang Da should undertake, added "Dr Hu Shih expressed the opinion that he could do what was necessary on the basis of my catalogue ... in a few days." Hu Shih, with characteristic bravado, rather underestimated both the size of the task in hand which was to include "the whole Chinese library including the older accessions (which date back to the early years of the 17th century), Dr Legge's library and the Indian Institute section", and his own ability to carry it out.

Bodley's Librarian had some difficulty in finding the £150 stipend. He applied to the University Chest in 1935 but was informed on 26 April that further information was needed before the application was accepted on 13 May, 1935. Conscious that he should appear conscientious, he had letters sent out to major Sinological libraries in America to enquire about their Chinese cataloguing methods. The replies included one from S.G.Wright of Stanford University Libraries whose first recommendation was that the awful and irrelevant "Dewey Decimal Classification is to be used ...". Blake of Harvard wrote equally unhelpfully on 21 August, 1935, "I have had sundry experiences with the cataloguing of Chinese books but these experiences are all vicarious, as I do not myself know the characters." Fortunately, even in those early days, it was recognized in Oxford that the most important principle when cataloguing Chinese books was to use Chinese and follow Chinese systems and Xiang Da was able to report on the end of his task that the author catalogue was arranged "according to the number of strokes in the surname" and subjects "according to the Imperial Library system plus Social Studies and Religion". E.R.Hughes was able to report proudly on 12 May, 1938 that "Derk Bodde ... had not come across any catalogue which was anything like as good as Bodley's except in the National Library, Peiping." Another prominent European sinologist J.J.L.Duyvendak, recorded a visit to Oxford in the summer of 1936 when he met Xiang Da and "had occasion to appreciate how much more

accessible the books have been made by this catalogue (by authors and by subjects) ... This new recension has shown that, while the Bodleian possesses no Sung editions, as had been believed, there are over 200 Ming editions, among them being imperial editions ... Mr Hsiang Ta draws attention to a beautiful edition of the *T'ung chih* (通志) which I have examined ... (*T'oung Pao*, second series, vol. 34, vol. 3 (1938), 228-9).

Xiang Da fulfilled another of T.L.Yuan's aims of "advice and help" in providing lists of books to make up deficiencies in the Bodleian's historic collections, noting, for example that literature was not well represented. "This section of the collection is not in a very good state e.g. the collected works of Li Tai-po (李白) are not there, which makes one feel rather as if English literature was being made without Shakespeare" (typescript memo on the cataloguing of the Chinese collection January, 1936, E.R.Hughes' translation, p. 13). "As for the really rare Yunglo ta-tien (永乐大典) ... the 12 volumes in the collection constitute the largest fragment in Europe (p. 3) and on the Taiping material, "This collection is not equal to that in the British Museum" (p. 8). E.R.Hughes took up the task of finding the editions recommended. He secured the services of the Ocean Steamship Company to transport the purchases and worried about suppliers. He wrote to the Librarian on 8 March, 1938, "I would rather deprecate using the services of the French Bookshop [in Beijing]. The proprietor is efficient but is rather well-known for being what shall I say- a bit of a screw in money matters." In a letter of 5 May, 1938, whilst praising the efforts of the Hsiu Keng Tang (Xiugengtang 修绶堂) in Beijing, he made a surprising suggestion, "I should like to propose that we ask Mr. Rewi Alley of the Shanghai Municipal Council to get these [otherwise unobtainable books] for us. Mr. Alley has himself a very great interest in Chinese studies, knows the Shanghai bookshops intimately, and has a number of literary friends he could consult if he were at a loss. His duties are arduous in the Council but I am sure he would regard a service of this kind as a pleasure." There is no evidence that the services of this left-leaning, not tremendously well-educated factory inspector were ever called upon but it is interesting that Hughes knew him. Left-wing activists and missionaries were not obvious acquaintances but it seems that Hughes had been himself supportive of student activism in Fujian when acting as headmaster there.

Xiang Da is now known as one of China's foremost Dunhuang scholars and it is probable that, for him, the chance to visit London and examine Aurel Stein's finds from Dunhuang was potentially the personal highlight of his visit to England, although it is clear that he had taken his responsibilities in Oxford very seriously. As is well known, Lionel Giles, then assistant keeper in charge of the Chinese collections, only granted him access to 500 of the more than 7000 complete scrolls (*Dunhuang xue da cidian* 敦煌学大辞典, p. 899). Giles was equally parsimonious with Wang Chongmin. Unfortunately, there are no surviving documents in the British Library archive referring to Xiang Da's visit and the only possibly relevant folder, Dr Giles' correspondence 1932-8, has not survived. I am at a loss to explain Giles' hostility to Chinese

scholars and can only assume that he was jealously guarding the collection for his own catalogue which did not appear until 1959.

An interesting footnote to Xiang Da's visit to England can be found in the archives of the Needham Institute in Cambridge. Joseph Needham had spent several unplanned weeks at Dunhuang in 1943 when the lorry he was travelling in broke down and he was forced to wait for a replacement engine. The long stay at the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas seems to have had a profound effect on Needham who was not otherwise known to have been interested in painting. His lengthy notes and drawings made at the caves provoked a desire to initiate a conservation project of which Xiang Da was informed. His name comes up in a letter sent to Needham (who was in Chongqing) by Fu Sinian from Lizhuang, dated 24 February, 1944. Fu Sinian mentions a Southern Song work on gunpowder and reports his failure to find any ancient Chinese references to "the artificial incubation of hen's eggs." He writes, "I showed your notes on Tun-huang to Mr. Xiang Ta, who will be at Chungking next week on the way to Tun-huang. As soon as I come to Chungking, we may discuss the matter with Mr. Xiang. I agree with you wholeheartedly on the method and scope of preservation. Perhaps the best way is to talk with the Education Minister first. If it could not produce results, it would be advisable to send a petition to President Chiang."² Unfortunately, it would appear that Joseph Needham and Xiang Da never managed to discuss conservation at Dunhuang, for Needham noted on a reference card he made during the Second World War for Xiang Da, "never met".

² Papers of Joseph Needham as a historian of Chinese science, technology and medicine, SCC2/57/7, 6.