

Communication of Librarianship between China and the United States in the R.O.C. Period: A Preliminary Report

by Peng Xiao

Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China



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As a part of my Ph.D. dissertation, “From Professional Activity to Cultural Diplomacy: Communication of Librarianship between China and the United States in the R.O.C Period” (a period also known as 民国, from 1912 to 1949), I sought to understand the position philanthropic foundations played in library communication during this period. This paper is only a preliminary report of my findings related to my visit to the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) in 2016. While there, my work focused on evaluating the Rockefeller Foundation’s role and impact on the course of Sino-American library and book exchanges. From my experience, I recognize the extensive value of the RAC archives on this topic.

An Outline of the History of Library Communication between China and the United States from 1912 to 1949

Library and book-collecting hold a long history in China, yet until the first twenty years of the 20th century, China only had a few professional librarians. Many contemporary scholars have debated questions surrounding the emergence of modern libraries on the mainland, and whether or not Americans had built the first modern library in China. But due to many different definitions of “modern library,” it is hard to provide a satisfactory response. No matter what the precise nature of the answer, there is no doubt that the establishment of modern librarianship had a significant connection with the United States.

The Republic of China period, the first golden age of library relationship between China and the United States, is one of the primary eras for research on China’s modern library history. Many researchers have focused on how American

librarianship impacted China, or on how pioneer librarians introduced the advanced ideas and techniques of librarianship from the West to China. However, only a few point out that the communication of librarianship between these two countries was, in fact, a two-way avenue. Even fewer have drawn a full picture of this history and have developed a theoretical framework for this type of communication. These aspects are the blind spots of current research, which I wish to address. In the following paragraphs, I try to sketch out the preliminary ideas of my dissertation:

Communications between China and the United States regarding librarianship refers to the communication activities of library, library science and other related issues. From 1912 to 1949, also known as the R.O.C. period in China, American librarianship reached its high point in history. The so-called “American library model” influenced the whole world, and as such, impacted China, as well. This type of communication was, to some extent, the continuation of the influence of western librarianship in the earlier Qing Dynasty. Library communication in the R.O.C period had a strong relationship with the expansion of the Western book communication circuit, the transformation of Chinese knowledge systems, and the United States’ diplomatic strategies in this period.

According to my current research, the history of library communications between China and the United States is comprised of two phases: (1) from the late Qing Dynasty to 1937, the year that the Anti-Japanese War broke out, a phase when communication activities were dominated by professional power of trained librarians; (2) from 1937 to 1949, another phase when communication activities operated in the shadow of the cultural diplomatic strategies of the American government. The first phase focused on constructing a modern library system in China. Chinese learned many aspects of American librarianship during this period. After the first group of overseas students who received their library education in America had returned to China, they became the first professional librarians of the country, along with some early students from the Boone Library School. In 1925, the Library Association of China (CLA) was established under American’s influence. With a professional association of librarians, the communication with American librarians came to a climax. Before 1937, librarians of these two countries communicated, exchanged ideas and co-

operated in many ways and through multiple channels, including international conferences, personnel exchanges, translations, exchanges of books and periodicals, and others. The achievement of the first phase was the setting up of Chinese librarianship, one which held many American characteristics, from equipment foundation to information techniques, and even the service model. After the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War, the government gradually took control of Sino-American library communication, and that marked the rise of the second phase. The transition from professional activities to cultural diplomacy gradually happened, especially after 1941, when the Division of Cultural Relations (DCR) of the United States State Department started to focus on Asia. The memo, “Sino-American Intellectual Relations,” drafted by Yuan Tung-li and John K. Fairbank at the end of 1942, offered a model of cultural and library activities for later period. Following the memo and guidance of the DCR, the American Library Association (ALA) developed its China Projects. However, under the shadow of war and the ever-changing nature of Sino-American relations, the China Project’s success was only limited, and included organizing book exchanges and soliciting donations. In 1949, the library communication activities between mainland China and the United States comes to an end, and were not revived until the 1970s.

The Rockefeller Foundation and Library Communications between China and the United States

In the general relationship between China and the United States in the R.O.C. period, no doubt, the Rockefeller Foundation held an irreplaceable position, but to what extent was this the case for the field of librarianship? For me, personally, a related question should be posed: what role did the Rockefeller Foundation play in the historical framework I discussed above?

The Rockefeller Foundation became involved with this type of library communication during phase one. However, only after the outbreak of World War

II, did it get deeply involved in this area, along with its long-term partners, the American Library Association, the Library of Congress and the State Department. The Rockefeller Foundation's work and programs related to libraries can be divided into three areas:

(1) Libraries were an affiliated aspect of Rockefeller Foundation's main programs. Before 1949, the Rockefeller Foundation's most important programs in China involved medical studies, rural reconstruction, public health and others. Libraries were not its central focus in China. However, as infrastructure, libraries often constituted components of other programs. For example, along with the construction of the Peking Union Medical College, came an impressive library of advanced facilities and massive collections.¹ Without any intention of developing American-style libraries in China, the Rockefeller Foundation funded a wide array of libraries in this way.

(2) As early as the 1920s, the Rockefeller Foundation had already funded various American or Western university libraries and large public libraries (especially the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library system), many of which incorporated an impressive set of Chinese materials.

One of many good examples was the Rockefeller Foundation's support for the Conference of Far Eastern Librarians held at the end of 1935, the purpose of which was to help libraries and librarians throughout the United States "in beginning classification practice of Oriental books", mainly Chinese and Japanese ones.² This conference gathered together representatives from institutions holding large collections of East Asian materials, including Columbia University, Harvard University, the University of California, the University of Michigan, Yale University and the Library of Congress. It developed initial ideas and standards of cataloging and indexing for East Asian books and journals in North America.

One of the most important designers of these ideas and standards was Mr. Kaiming Ch'iu, the first director of Harvard Yenching Libraries. Kaiming Ch'iu was a significant figure in the history of library communication. Ch'iu was a graduate of Boone Library School, the only library school in China at that time, built by an American missionary, and later became a foreign student at an

American library school, and then a Ph.D. student at Harvard. Ch'iu invented his classification scheme and cataloguing system at Harvard, based on the knowledge of Chinese traditional bibliographies, as well as on the “theory and practice of American pioneers like Cutter and Melvil Dewey (the originator of the Dewey Decimal System).”³ So, it is safe to say, the ideas and standards shared at the Far Eastern librarians conference were actually the outcome of Sino-American library knowledge communication. In this case, the Rockefeller Foundation was the catalyst for it.

(3) The Rockefeller Foundation also played a part when Americans attempted to offer their help to wartime China after late 1930s. This included economic, technical, and cultural assistance. From the last few years of 1930s to the 1940s, cultural diplomacy systematically became an important policy in the State Department's Asia strategy. In so doing, the non-profit sector, such as the American Library Association and the Rockefeller Foundation, proved their invaluable position in cultural affairs. Gary E. Kraske⁴ and Beverly J. Brewster⁵ have shed light on this topic in different ways. Gary E. Kraske indicated that he did not find much useful material at the Rockefeller Archive Center when he was writing his doctoral dissertation, and later a published book *Missionaries of the Book: The American Library Profession and the Origins of United States Cultural Diplomacy*. However, I had more success, finding several interesting folders, which includes application files and letters from the American Library Association and Division of Cultural Relations in the State Department around 1944 to 1945⁶ (Some of these files and letters have duplicates in the American Library Association Archive and at other institutions. I have not yet completed comparative work at the time that I am writing this report). These archives reveal the Rockefeller Foundation's increasing interest in library communications affairs within the framework of cultural diplomacy as well as its cooperation with different organizations and renowned experts of the time, such as Mr. and Mrs. Fairbank. But sadly, many allied projects fell into the dustbin of history due to the shifting Sino-American relationship after WWII.

The Rockefeller Foundation and the Boone Library School

As discussed above, the Rockefeller Foundation was a somewhat important participant in library communication between China and America, although not a leader in these affairs. In the first half of the 20th century, few Rockefeller Foundation's systematic programs and projects paid special attention to this area, although there was a chance to change the situation after the Pearl Harbor attack. Nevertheless, one could not ignore the Rockefeller Foundation's contribution to the friendship of librarianship between the two countries, even though most of which were not a part of its long-term planning. The foundation not only funded a series of Chinese foreign students to study library science in the United States, but it also was an intermittent donor to the Boone Library School (文华图书馆学专科学校, or 文华图专).

The Boone Library School was founded in 1920 by Miss Mary Elizabeth Wood (韦棣华), a missionary of the Episcopal Church. It was the earliest library educational institution in China, as well as the only one that kept training professional librarians and archivists until today. (In 1953, it merged into Wuhan University and was renamed the School of Information Management at Wuhan University). Many Chinese students of library science who had received Rockefeller Foundation funding were graduates of the Boone Library School. The Rockefeller Foundation had awarded a fellowship to Samuel Tsu-Yung Seng (沈祖荣), director of the school, for further studies in library technology and a visit to the United States. With previous cooperation in 1941, Seng wrote to Dr. M.C. Balfour, asking for the foundation's help. At that time, the school was moved to Chungking because of the war and due to local government's restrictions on currency exchange. Seng wanted to have a grant from the foundation to train personnel and purchase teaching equipment. The application was declined by the foundation at first. Dr. M.C. Balfour wrote back, as follows, "...this office of the Foundation is not able to consider new projects within our existing China Program, which concerns primarily Rural Reconstruction, except new

developments with the Public Health Field. Your application there is a matter of new business which is being referred to our Division of Humanities....” But the Division of Humanities suggested a declination, as well. A favorable turn occurred after M.C. Balfour’s visit to Chungking in the spring of 1941. He had two meetings with Director Seng and was impressed by Seng’s persistence and the school’s necessity in such tough conditions of wartime. Through a letter, Balfour persuaded D.H. Stevens, director of the Division of Humanities, to offer the school a grant totaling 5,000 dollars over three years (\$2,000 for 1941, \$2,000 for 1942, \$1,000 for 1943). It was crucial funding, both for Seng and for the Boone Library School. The situation improved in the following few years, but even in the last year of this temporary grant, it still contributed about one-ninth of all revenues of the school.⁷

The Extensive Value of Rockefeller Foundation’s Archives for the Topic

Based on my research, it is fair to say that the Rockefeller Foundation had a special influence on library communication during the period, but not in a prominent position. Nevertheless, if we take a step back and focus on a bigger picture, the archives document a broader effort of the foundation’s impact on libraries. For example, the Rockefeller Foundation took part in library construction in the Philippines, Japan and other Asian countries.^{8 9} For future research, these materials could offer a comparative view for library communication around the world and help to understand how the United States dealt with various countries in the field of librarianship.

In this respect, the central research object of this topic, library or librarianship, is a complex theme, even more complicated if we integrate fresh perspectives after the 1970s, such as new theories from the field of book history and information history. From the view of library and information science, a library is an information management institution with continuous change; from the view of diplomacy, a library could be an information organization or simply a friendly

gesture from an ally; from the view of a university, a library is the fundamental base for scholarship; and from the view of society or public, it could be a place of keeping social memory. Therefore, “library communication” could also have so many different interpretations, which could be as simple as the exchange of books and libraries, or as obscure as a game of politics and economics. In this report, my only purpose is to offer some basic information that I found from my visit to the Rockefeller Archive Center. At the same time, it is important to know that future study could lead to exploration of macro problems of our world. In this regard, it is necessary to reveal the value of library history in a time when this field is facing a fundamental crisis about its future.

1 Peking Union Medical College 3b - Interiors – Libraries. China Medical Board, Inc., Series 1048, Box 30, Folder 327, Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC).

2 Conference of Far Eastern Librarians. Rockefeller Foundation (RF), RG 1.1, Series 100, Box 88, Folder 814, RAC.

3 A. K'aiming Ch'iu. “Reminiscences of a Librarian.” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 25 (1964-1965), 7-15.

4 American Library Association - Chinese Library Aid. RF, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 203, Folder 2425, RAC.

5 Beverly J. Brewster. *American Overseas Library Technical Assistance, 1940-1970*. Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1976, p. 2.

6 Chinese Library Aid. RF, RG1.1, Series 200, Box 203, Folder 2425, RAC.

7 Boone Library School. RF, RG1.1, Series 601R, Box 45, Folder 375, RAC.

8 Philippines Libraries Reports. RF, RG2, Series 1947/242, Box 377, Folder 2544, RAC.

9 Keio University Review of Library School. Dorothy I. Parker papers: Series 1, Box 14, Folder 76-80, RAC.