
The Tianyige Library: A Symbol of the Continuity of Chinese Culture

PING SITU

ABSTRACT

The Tianyige (TYG) Library is the most ancient private library still in existence in China. It is also the oldest private library in Asia and one of the three earliest private libraries in the world. It was built between 1561 and 1566 by the Defense Minister Fan Qin during the Ming Dynasty. TYG witnessed the glories and the turmoil of the Ming and Qing dynasties, war, revolution, and numerous social changes and its own triumphs and downfalls. After 400 years of preservation and management by thirteen generations of the Fan family, in 1949 it was donated to the government at the time of the establishment of the People's Republic of China. The collection is strongest in local histories and imperial examination records during the Ming period. It is a remarkable representation of the Chinese private book-collecting tradition as well as a symbol of the continuity of Chinese culture and civilization.

THE TIANYIGE LIBRARY AND CHINESE BOOK-COLLECTING TRADITION

The book-collecting tradition of China can be dated back to the Zhou Dynasty (1100 BC–770 BC), more than 3,000 years ago, but substantial private libraries only began to develop later during what was called the “Spring and Autumn” and the “Warring States” periods (770 BC–221 BC). Confucius, Laozi, and many other distinguished intellectuals were among the earliest private book collectors (Ren, 2001, pp. 12–13). Private book collecting grew rapidly during the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties (618–1368). In the Ming period (1368–1644), it reached its greatest prosperity in the south of

China because this was the richest region of the country. The tradition of private book collecting had always had the aim of creating a cultural legacy for families as well as for society. Most book collectors were great scholars, researchers, and edition appraisers.

Sixteenth-century political stability, economic prosperity, and cultural dynamism resulted in the birth of the Tianyige (TYG) Library and many other private libraries around Ningbo, a tranquil coastal city near the Yangtze river, in the northeastern part of Zhejiang Province. Ningbo is one of the country's oldest cities with a history dating back to 4800 BC. It was already a booming business and trade center during the Tang Dynasty (618–907). While thousands of private libraries/book depositories were created during Chinese history, TYG is the only one that still remains today as an independent entity with its original architectural structure and collections. The others have been destroyed by warfare, fire, or poor management. While some continue to have a form of existence as a collection of books, no others remain as a self-governing unit (Huang, Li, & Xu, 2002).

FAN QIN: A VISIONARY BOOK COLLECTOR

Fan Qin was the founder of the TYG Library. He was a successful and visionary book-collector who lived in the reign of the Ming Emperor Jiajing (1522–1566). Fan became an official at the age of twenty-six when he passed the highest imperial civil service examination (Yu, 2003b, p. 138). As a high-ranking administrator, he was assigned to official positions in many different regions. Unlike other book-collectors, who all favored collecting books on ancient classic studies, Fan had a keen interest in contemporary local histories and regional historic documents related to political affairs and examination records.¹ He was able to acquire many valuable and sometimes unique copies of local records from places that were often remote and isolated. These regions had their own distinctive histories, records of which often could not be found elsewhere. Thus TYG's collection is particularly valuable since Fan was one of the few people who collected these kinds of contemporary works of the Ming Dynasty. The TYG Library holds 370 Ming imperial examination record titles. This is 80 percent of all the Ming imperial examination publications in the country. Many of them are the only copies in existence (Xu, 2003, pp. 302–3). They constitute a vital resource for research on the Ming Dynasty (Ren, 2001, pp. 12–13). TYG held over 70,000 volumes by the end of the first generation of the Fan family; most of them were block-printed or hand-copied editions from the Ming period.

STRICT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

That the TYG Library is still standing after more than 400 years is the result of rigorous rules that were laid down by its founder, Fan Qin, and the strict observation of these rules by his descendants. Before Fan Qin died,

he divided his property into two shares for his two sons, one share consisting of money, the other the library. His eldest son, Fan Dachong, chose the library as his share of the inheritance and promised his father that he would use part of his family income to take care of it. Dachong established additional rules for his children to follow in order to preserve and keep the collection together. He decreed that the library would not be divided like other family property after his death and that it was the responsibility of the entire Fan family to protect, preserve, and maintain the collection (Luo, 1993, p. 51). One rule stated that the library's door could only be unlocked when all branches of the family members were present. Another rule prohibited smoking and drinking alcohol inside the library. Family members would not be allowed to attend the ancestor worship ceremonies for a year if they brought an outsider to the library. A punishment of no worship for three years would be invoked if books were taken out of the library for a loan. Anyone who dared to sell a single book would be disowned by the family. None of the Fan descendants violated those rules since exclusion from worshipping their ancestors was considered the most severe punishment possible (Yu, 2004b, p. 9).

This approach of mutual supervision and restraint prevented possession of the library becoming personal, prevented unrestricted visits to the library, and minimized the possibility of loss and dispersal of the collection. Most of the Fan male offspring were serious scholars. They were proud of having the TYG collection as their family heritage and respected the family regulations for the library. It is obvious that these rules made it difficult to use the collection even for members of the family, and they suggest that their main focus was preservation rather than usage. Over four centuries, generation after generation, the family repaired the building and managed and preserved the collection, until the library was handed over to the government in 1949 (Yu, 2003a, p. 271).

WATER MOTIF AND THOUGHTFUL PRESERVATION STRATEGIES

In designing the library, Fan Qin gave considerable thought to strategies that would ensure its physical safety and the preservation of its collections. Besides warfare, fire was one of the biggest dangers for book collectors, and most of the other private libraries or collections were destroyed by fire. Fan Qin devised numerous ways, both symbolic and practical, to minimize this hazard. There were many water components in the library. A pond was built in front of the building to provide water to fight fires. The pond was also connected to a large lake in the city. The library was built of brick to prevent fire. There was a five-foot wide lane with a tall brick wall to separate the library from other residential dwellings in case of fire. All the ceilings in the building were painted with different water related designs—water plants, waves, water animals, and water gods. The library's name was even derived from an allusion to water. *Tianyi* means “sky one,” which was taken

from a phrase of *Yi Jing* (*Book of Changes*)—"one room in the sky produces water and six rooms on the ground bring peace," meaning a spring that produced water could prevent fires. The two-story library building was constructed with one big room upstairs representing the sky and six rooms downstairs representing the earth (Yu, 2001, p. 37).

Ningbo is a port city and the humidity is very high in certain months of the year. Fan Qin had the library built with windows on the north and south sides. He also had the book cases built with two openings, one in the front and another in the back with plenty of free space among books in the cases to allow air to circulate to avoid mold growth. The windows and the bookcases were opened frequently to decrease the humidity and bring fresh air into the facility. The books were taken out of the bookcases and completely aired twice a year. A special type of herb called Yun Xiang Cao was used to drive away moths. A particular kind of rock was put under the bookcases as a dehydrator to minimize the humidity problem (Xu, 2003, p. 87).

PROSPERITY, SETBACKS, AND REVITALIZATION

Between Ming Emperor Jiajing (1521–1567) and the early years of Qing Emperor Qianlong (1736–1795), Tianyige enjoyed its most prosperous period. Before Fan Qin died, the collection had reached 5,000 titles and 70,000 volumes (Yuan, 2002b). During the stewardship of his son Fan Dachong, his grandson Fan Runan, and his great-grandson Fan Guangwen, TYG's collections continued to grow, though slowly given the family's decreased income and their financial commitment to maintaining and preserving the collection. Over 400 titles had been added to the collection between 1644 and 1773. In 1665 Fan Guangwen, Fan Qin's great-grandson, hired architects and skilled workers to build rockeries and expand the pond outside the library building, turning the facility into a graceful garden, which was designed to promote happiness, richness, and longevity (Yu, 2001, p. 83).

In 1673 Huang Zongxi (1610–1695) was the first outsider scholar allowed in the library. This was the first opening of the library to the outside academic world and suggests changing attitudes in the family to the use of the library. Huang was a nationally known political theorist, philosopher, and scholar of the Ming-Qing dynasties. He was also an important book-collector. His collection exceeded 10,000 volumes, but flood and fire destroyed four-fifths of his books (Yan, 1990, p. 1216–21). His visit to the library was approved by all branches of the Fan family, and it became quite a news story for the literary society of the time. He is said to have read every title in the library, and he compiled a bibliography of the rare materials, which made the collections more widely known. Huang also wrote an article, "Tianyige Cang Shu Ji" (an essay about TYG's book-collecting), which is

well-known among Chinese scholars and book collectors: “Finding books to read is difficult; collecting books is more difficult. However collecting books and keeping them together generation after generation is the most difficult” (Yu, 2001, pp. 9–10). From 1673 to the end of the nineteenth century, TYG was opened to perhaps only a dozen nationally renowned scholars (Yu, 2003b, pp. 71–72).

In the mid-eighteenth century the TYG library began to experience hardships and setbacks. The first major setback was related to the compilation of *Sì Ku Quan Shu* (*SKQS*), known in English as *The Great Encyclopedia of the Four Treasures*, which was compiled from 1772 to 1782 for Emperor Qianling (reigned 1736–1795). It was an attempt to gather all known classical works before the Qianlong era into one colossal work, including philosophy, history, literature, art, political systems, social studies, economics, astronomy, geography, mathematics, medical studies, etc. (Langer & Stearns, 2001). The first set of the encyclopedia was completed in ten years, and another eight years were spent making six copies in the original style. The copying, editing, and correcting by hand required over 4,000 scholars, officials, copyists, and clerks. *SKQS* is the largest systematically compiled encyclopedic collection of Chinese classical works and is an invaluable scholarly tool (Qi, 1994, pp. 127–37).

In 1773 Fan Maozhu, the eighth generation descendant of Fan Qin, had to lend 638 titles (one title could contain multiple volumes) to the imperial court for this compilation, of which the text of 96 titles was included in the *SKQS*. Over 350 rare titles (some the only copies in existence) were also included in *The General Catalog of SKQS* (Yu, 2004b, p. 78). Although the emperor promised to return all the books after their use, very few of the volumes actually made their way back to the library. This was the first major loss for TYG since its foundation. However, Emperor Qianlong was amazed by the age and quality of the TYG collection, the library’s unique architectural design, and its imaginative and effective management and preservation strategies. He described TYG as the number one private library of the country (Yuan, 2003, p. 220–21). In 1774, as a reward for sharing so many valuable titles for the compilation of *SKQS*, the Emperor gave TYG a set of *Gu Jin Tu Shu Ji Cheng* (*Complete Classics Collection of Ancient China*), consisting of 10,000 volumes printed with bronze moveable blocks, and two sets of imperial paintings by the Jesuit missionary and artist Castiglione (1688–1766), *Ping Ding Jin Chuan Tu* and *Ping Ding Hui Bu De Sheng Tu*. The latter contained the poems of the emperor himself and his imperial seals. TYG also became the model for the seven imperial libraries that were to house the seven copies of the *SKQS* that the emperor had ordered to be constructed in different parts of the country. The seven libraries imitate the architectural design and the organizational structure of the bookcases of TYG, and all seven of them have water references in their names to lessen

the likelihood of fire (Yu, 2004b, p. 88). The preservation and protection strategies of the TYG Library were also adopted in many other private libraries across the nation.

The library faced other problems in the course of its history. During the Opium War (1840–42), British invaders broke into the library and took away dozens of titles. In 1861, when Taiping rebels were marching into Ningbo, a burglar took advantage of the havoc, broke through the back brick wall, and stole many books. Some were sold by the pound to a paper recycling factory, with many invaluable works became the raw material for making paper. Another highly organized robbery, however, created the most disastrous misadventure for the library. In 1914 a notorious robber named Xue Jiwei was sent by an unscrupulous Shanghai book vendor to sneak into the library (Huang & Hu, 2003, p. 285). He had a list of rare titles in hand and stole them title by title. He slept by day and worked by night for over ten days without detection (an unforeseen consequence of the family rules restricting entrance to the library). A boat was waiting for him in the lake outside the library. Another bigger boat was standing by a little closer to the seacoast to transport the stolen books to Shanghai. The library lost almost half of its most valuable titles as a result of this incident. The thief was eventually caught and put in prison (Yu, 2001, p. 133). Many of the books were purchased by Zhang Yuanji, who was in charge of Shang Wu Yin Shu Guan (the Commercial Press), to prevent them from being sold to foreigners.² However, Zhang did not return the stolen TYG books; he kept them in the East Library, which was a public library under the administration of the Commercial Press. The number of visitors to this library increased significantly with the arrival of the TYG books. Unfortunately, this library was destroyed by Japanese bombs during the World War II (Yu, 2003b, pp. 73–74).

FROM AN ANCIENT FAMILY BOOK DEPOSITORY TO A COMPREHENSIVE CULTURE MUSEUM

At the beginning of the twentieth century, with the abolition of the imperial examinations and the building of a new public school system, the concepts of the modern Western public library began to spread in China. From 1905 to 1911 over twenty public libraries appeared in different places in the country. All private libraries or book depositories including TYG came under pressure to open to the public (Yu, 2003a, pp. 268–70). This was extremely challenging for the Fan family after their 400 years of hardship and sacrifice to keep the library in the family. In 1933, however, a powerful typhoon hit Ningbo and had the unexpected result of pushing TYG toward becoming a modern library. The library building and collections were damaged by the typhoon's strong winds and rain. The Fan family could no longer afford to fix the building and the local county had to find the funds for the repairs. From this time on, the library became

jointly managed by a group called the Tianyige Management Committee, consisting of the Fan family and representatives of the county (Yu, 2003a, pp. 270–71). In 1935 the committee received their first donation, a collection of 1,000 bricks made from the Chinese dynasties from Han to Qing (50–1840). Each set of the bricks had its own unique designs, images, or characters and the reign titles of the emperors of the particular dynasties represented; they constitute an important research resource.

Because of its national recognition, the library did not suffer during the civil war. In 1949 the leaders of the Communist Party and the Nationalist Party visited the library and expressed their willingness to protect, renovate, and preserve the collections as well as the facility (Yu, 2004b, pp. 65, 118). This was one of the few agreements that these opposing political parties made. Because of the attention given to the library by leaders of the Communist Party, including Zhou Enlai, the premier of the state council, and the hard work of the TYG staff, the library escaped the destruction that occurred so widely during the frenzy of the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76. At that time, many families and cultural institutions gave rare books or precious items to the TYG Library to prevent them from being obliterated by the Red Guards. Ironically, by the time the Cultural Revolution ended the collection of the library had actually increased, which was something of a miracle (Yuan, 2002a).

The library and the collection were donated to the local government in 1949 at the time of the foundation of the new China. However, the Fan descendants now became government employees and continued to tend and manage the collection. By 1949, because of all the losses it had sustained, the collection consisted only of about 13,000 items. In 1959 it was listed as one of the most important cultural centers of the city. Two years later, Zhejiang Province declared it to be one of the most important cultural heritage centers for the province (Luo, 2002). The construction of a new three-story building of reinforced concrete was begun in 1976 and completed in 1981 to accommodate the increasing collections and usage of the library. The new building now houses 300,000 volumes of rare books and texts (Huang, Li, & Xu, 2002). In 1982 the TYG Library was included in the national register of cultural heritage sites by the State Council, and it was expanded into a comprehensive museum in 1994 for which the original building is used as an exhibit hall (*Tianyige Museum*, 2004, p. 12). With the acquisition of more land around the TYG Library, the local government has added buildings and gardens, transforming the once privately owned family library into a public cultural and historical museum. It is now called the Tianyige Museum and consists of a combination of specialized collections of rare classic texts, charming gardens, and cultural relics (Xu, 2003, pp. 270–71).³

Given TYG's unique collection of Ming local histories, a Depository Library of Local Histories was established inside the Tianyige Museum.

It is one of the three national depository libraries for contemporary local histories in China. The museum now has over forty staff members. More than half of them have a graduate degree or higher in the fields of library sciences, humanities, or history. Many are actively engaged in scholarly activities and have published numerous monographic works and research articles on the TYG Library, the Chinese book-collecting tradition, and other related topics (*Tianyige Museum*, 2004, pp. 3–4).

In order to promote and advance research on Chinese rare books and manuscripts, the museum launched a monographic series, *Tianyige Wen Cong* (Tianyige Literary Series) in 2004. It is the first specialized book series in China to focus on acquisition, collation, management, and preservation of ancient classic Chinese texts. Most of the editorial board members of the series are eminent scholars, many from the Tianyige Museum itself. It is hoped that this publication series will help the museum become a national research center for the study of the Chinese book-collecting tradition and of ancient Chinese rare books and manuscripts (Yu, 2004a).

SUMMARY

By the 1940s, after 400 hundred years of vicissitudes, there were only 13,000 volumes left in the TYG Library. It is only since the founding of the new China in 1949, especially after the 1980s, with substantial renovation and allocation of resources provided by local and central government, that the library has been able to revive and thrive. In a period of 400 years TYG has been transformed from a privately owned library with highly restricted access to one of the most frequently visited cultural and historic heritage sites in China. As a result of donations, its holdings now exceed 300,000 volumes, 80,000 of which are rare books; many of them are the only copies in existence (Huang & Hu, 2003, pp. 287–89). And it is well on the way to becoming a national center for research on ancient Chinese book culture.

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NOTES

1. Local histories, also referred as local encyclopedias, have been crucial resources for Chinese studies for the past 1,000 years as they cover information that is not usually available in other sources. These documents were often compiled by locally renowned scholars and were produced under the sponsorship of the local officials before 1949 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China.
2. Shang Wu Yin Shu Guan, the Commercial Press, was established in 1897 in Shanghai and moved to Beijing in 1954. It was the first modern publishing house in China; its main focus was publishing foreign academic works on philosophy and social science, Chinese language dictionaries and bilingual dictionaries, research works, and school textbooks. Dong Fang Tu Shu Guan, the East Library, housed a total of over 510,000 volumes including rare books, foreign language materials, periodicals, journals, and photographs. It was the largest library in China and possibly in Asia at that time. (Yu, 2003b, pp. 73–74).
3. I visited the Tianyige Museum two times during a China trip in October 2004. The museum is divided into three functional parts, the library, botanical gardens, and exhibits—a harmonious combination of an ancient classic taste and modern artistic elegance. As described in this article, it includes books with some editions more than 1,000 years old. It houses hundreds of wood printing blocks of the Ming Dynasty editions, as well as the bricks, with designs, characters, and imperial reign titles, from the Han to the Qing dynasties. It also has stone stelae carved with information on local histories and imperial examinations of the Ming period. Those stone tablets used to be mounted on the ancient city walls of Ningbo, which were taken down when the city was developed and expanded.

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Ping Situ is a librarian with subject specialities in Chinese studies and Spanish and Portuguese language and literature at the University of Arizona Library. Her job responsibilities include collection development and management of the information resources in Chinese studies and Spanish and Portuguese language and literature, in-depth reference consultation, library instruction, liaison activities with the East Asian Studies Department and Spanish and Portuguese Department, and other library-wide endeavors. In 1985 Ping earned a B.A. in Spanish language and literature at Beijing Foreign Studies University. She continued her studies at the Beijing Foreign Studies University earning an M.A. degree in multi-culture and language exchange in 1987. Upon graduation she was awarded with a tenured faculty position at the same institution. Ping moved to Tucson in 1990 and in 1997 she began her studies again in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese of the University of Arizona, earning her second M.A. in the Spanish linguistics program and graduating in 2000. In 2001 Ping earned her third M.A. degree in information resources and library science at the University of Arizona and in the same year she joined the University of Arizona Library.