Report submitted to the Durfee Foundation

By Margaret Davis, Durfee fellow from April-October 1996

Dropping out of the night sky into Beijing one April night, I took a quick survey of my situation.

I had six months of Portland Community College Mandarin classes behind me, a brand-new phrasebook and dictionary, only a handful of *guanxi* (contacts) and how did I feel descending into the oldest culture? Excited? A little. Anxious? Of course. Most of all, I was downright scared.

I was afraid no one would understand my nascent *putonghua*. I was afraid I'd never learn my way around. I was scared my *guanxi* weren't reliable—or that they wouldn't remember me from my letters.

In my most panicky moments, I also had to wonder if, in a country where modernization is being pursued at all costs, any old-world publishing existed to study. My contacts had said there was, but maybe they just wanted to please a new American pen pal.

I had come to China to learn printing traditions from the people who'd pioneered the craft hundreds of years before the West caught on. In my proposal, I expressed a desire to learn traditional bookbinding, paper making, and woodblock printing.

In reality I was open to much more; aside from learning five of China's earliest bindings, I worked with handmade "rice" paper, restored damaged books, marbled paper, mounted artwork on scrolls, observed woodblock printing for textual and illustrative purposes, and absorbed the culture that takes books, printing, and writing seriously, as it has for thousands of years.

The National Library of China

For two months, I worked under Zhang Ping, head of the preservation department at the National Library, China's version of the American Library of Congress.

The National Library is the great storehouse of antique books and home to some of the country's most book-knowledgeable minds; a colleague had just returned from Paris, where he'd been teaching preservation techniques. My teacher, Zhang Ping, did the same at the British Museum.

Earlier this century French and English explorers plundered thousands of ancient scrolls from the famous Mogao Grottos in western China; now the masterpieces are rotting away in fancy temperature-controlled museums where the staffs are helpless to reverse the process. Hence, the importing of Chinese professionals.

Working at the National Library, a place so prestigious that Chinese tourists are forever posing for photographs out front, was a thrill. I loved the simple workroom, its huge varnished tables that were perfect for laying out sheets of paper, the drying screens that were paper-covered doors attached to the wall much as book leaves are assigned to a spine, and the desks whose drawers were full of odd brushes, awls, silk thread and needles, and bamboo "knives."

I was familiar with some of the tools, like the awl and the sewing materials. But the brushes, the sheep's hair *pai bi*, the wide *ban shua*, and the bristly *zung shua*, along with the bamboo *qi zi*, were new to me.

As I learned how to use them, I found how perfectly suited each tool was to its job. The *pai bi*, for example, is sensitive enough to "wash" the dirtiest, oldest piece of calligraphy; it can also spread glue on fragile paper without causing a wrinkle or tear. The *qi zi*, which Chinese bookbinders craft themselves out of discarded pieces of bamboo, are used to cut stretched paper and art from the drying screens in one motion.

Before I made any books, Zhang Ping insisted that I get a feel for *xuan zhi*, the famous handmade paper from Anhui that unfortunately was dubbed "rice paper" by a westerner way back when. I started by pasting 1-by-2 meter sheets together. It took many ties just to properly mix the glue.

After I learned how to avoid wrinkles in applying the paste, I encountered the most difficult part: moving the paper off the table and onto one of the vertical drying screens while it twisted and writhed like a fish caught on the line. Usually it takes Chinese apprentices three months to master the pasting technique.

Finally it was time to make books. I made five, starting with the *juanzi*, the first form of book on paper, known in English as the scroll. I also made the accordion- or sutra-style *jingzhe zhuang*, where the paper is bound only to the front and back case boards with just folds of paper in between. Then I learned to make the *hudie zhuang*, the butterfly binding, which originated in the 13th or 14th century; most modern, western books follow this form.

I also made the *baobei zhuang*, the wrapped-back binding, which is a close relation to the *hudie*; the only significant difference is that the pages are double-thickness with folds at the foredge.

Finally, I learned the classic stitched *xian zhuang,* which has been in continuous use for at least 600 years. It is still one of the most popular formats for non-mass-produced Chinese books; conservators favor the binding because it is easy to remove and repair and requires virtually no paste.

After I finished my books, I built boxes to house them. All traditional Chinese bindings are softcover, so they need cases for protection. I built a box for the scroll, a six-sided case, and the popular four-sided case. Building the cases, including cutting the

bookboard, beveling the edges, and pasting brocade, took more time than making the books.

While I made new old books, my colleagues made old books new. At the library I had the opportunity to see, up close, restoration work in progress. Zhang Ping's five employees built multisided cases for fragile books, remounted scrolls from the caves outside Dunhuang, and patched holes in books damaged by insects.

Book conservation is nothing new to the Chinese; one researcher reports, "A document, dated 1002 AD, in the St. Petersburg collection [of Dunhuang manuscripts] tells us that the then ruler of Dunhuang, Cao Zongshou, and his wife Fan, gave financial support to renew damaged or destroyed documents" (Lev N. Menshikov, Dunhuang and Turfan: Contents and Conservation of Ancient Documents from Central Asia [The British Library Studies in Conservation Science]). At the National Library, I also learned some of this craft, including how to patch holes and repair paper that's starting to split along the fold.

Travels

For anyone who loves books and their history, Dunhuang and the nearby caves are mecca. I had to go. In August I visited the Mogao Grottos, which are more famous for the hundreds of caves practically wallpapered in Buddhist murals than they are for having stored tens of thousands of antique manuscripts, including the oldest, dated, printed book in the world—*The Diamond Sutra*.

For hundreds of years the books had been well-protected from the elements in Cave 17. It was astonishingly tiny, with just a single statue and a few small murals; I wondered how the countless stacks of bamboo bundles would have fit inside. Most of my fellow tourists didn't even bother looking; they were distracted by the comparative grandeur and beauty of the art in the bigger, mother cave. But I looked a long time, jostling elbows with no one for once, and I thought about the monk Wang and his discovery, in 1899, of Cave 17 and its dusty but well-preserved treasures.

Dunhuang also has a three-room city museum, which showcases old woodblocks (with current prints showing that they are in fine condition) and some bamboo books. Books written on slats of bamboo that were then strung together preceded books on paper.

Even before bamboo, "books" were written on bones, then bronze and stone. At Beilin, in Xian, I got an idea of how some of those first stone books must have looked: Here was a veritable "forest of steles"—how "Beilin" translates—where 2,300 tablets taller than six feet are lined up in neat rows, the earliest dating from the Han dynasty.

A few weeks later I went to Nanjing, in southern China, to meet with the president of the Jiangsu Ancient Book Publishing House, basically a few cramped offices in a concrete lowrise on one of the city's busiest thoroughfares. Xue Zheng Xing had written me months before about woodblock printers in his area. After talking with him for an hour I

came away with an introduction to Guangling, a famous woodblock printing house in Yangzhou, and directions to Nanjing's Jinling Ke Jing Chu, a publisher of Buddhist texts.

I found my way to Jinling Ke Jing Chu, a modest set of one-story buildings in the southeast part of the city. Before the Revolution there were many such publishing houses dedicated to the works of Buddhism. Now there's just this one, which has been in business for 130 years. It's famous. The place itself is an oasis walled off from the streams of bikes and taxis, and the swarm of people on the road. Here there are small carefully landscaped gardens, rock sculptures, and elegant moon-shaped doorways.

Inside is even better: First I saw where the carving is done (now, instead of drawing the characters directly on the blocks, they're traced from paper). The wood is cured in the old-fashioned way. Late Qing dynasty blocks are still in use; broken, cracked characters are painstakingly repaired with new patches of wood.

We moved on to the printing room. A lone woman worked like mad, inking the block, which was clamped into place, and pulling each sheet of paper down from a pile. Apparently, registration doesn't matter because the pages are trimmed later in the process. Aside from her friendly attitude, she resembled a worker laboring in some Dickensian sweatshop, her hands gnarled into place, her wrist cramped just so to fetch the paper, the mechanical strength of her arm as she rubbed the block to make the actual print. She prints up to 1,000 sheets per day.

In the next room, two workers collate the pages. Then comes the folding room (a line printed vertically down the page serves as a guide); afterward, stacks of sheets are bundled together with twine to press them flat. Then two women work to register the pages; another horizontal, printed line on the pages serves this purpose. I know from my brief experience of straightening pages at the library that this job is a real headache.

The next step is to punch the holes and pound in paper "nails." Then the cover was attached before the sole machine came into the process, which trimmed everything to a neat and tidy block. From there, one woman stitches up the binding and then another stacks the volumes and places them inside premade cases, the only element of the book to come from an outside contractor. As the last step, one man pastes titles on the cases.

We also saw the room where they store about 120,000 woodblocks, a dark room smelling of ink with an atmosphere as studious as a library.

Last stop was the museum room, where they keep the illustrative blocks, wonderfully detailed images out of Buddhist legend. Some are more than a meter high and most are at least a meter wide. They are 300 to 400 years old and remarkably well-preserved. Prints taken from them show the skillfulness of their carvers. Here the lotus flowers bloom, the heavenly air swirls, the bamboo leaves fairly rustle. And then there are the figures: peaceful-looking maidens, busy-looking women with 48 arms, wrinkled men, Buddhist scholars looking enlightened.

Our guide then pointed out a modern-day attempt done by one of Jinling's best woodblock carvers, which had a crudeness of line and lots less life. He explained that already some of the secrets of the technique were lost and no one today could match the detail and perfection of the Qing dynasty carvers. The guide was the only person I met in China who voiced concern for loss of the art, who felt a little sheepish explaining to me that, yes, they did use one machine in their printing.

At Guangling Publishing House in Yangzhou, Mrs. Zhou, the leader, directed one of her higher-ups to take me around. Again, the place itself was one of charm and tranquility: tree-lined pathways, clean concrete tiles, shrubs carefully pruned. First I saw where the woodblocks were carved, at the rate of about 100 characters per day. Two women and one man worked in a naturally lit room that had windows leaning out onto the garden two floors below.

Guangling, however, had recently received a big commissioned project, a work critiqued by Mao, and since it would take too much time to carve the blocks the printing was done by offset. Indeed, machines were very much a part of the operation, from drilling holes in the spines to trimming the books to size. Meanwhile, two workers were busy putting dust jackets on western-style books fresh from the printer, probably another assignment that brings in more money than the traditional labor-heavy work.

Contrary to what I'd heard, Guangling does precious little illustrative printing, usually just a few pages in a textual manuscript, and in these the inking and printing is less than precise. But the publishing house, in business since the Tang dynasty, still seems to have its heart in the right place: It employed a man, working in a small room, to ink and print the old-fashioned way. He's been at it for 20 years and prints 400 pages a day. He gave me a stack of printed illustrations, the best possible memento for my trip there. Still, I wonder, is anyone training under him?

Capital attractions

I visited a scroll-mounting workshop, a bare room nestled in a Beijing *hutong* (alley). Like the library, the proprietor also had an orange varnished table, which on closer examination turned out to be just plywood painted the right shade. He churned out scrolls, 20 per day, gluing up and trimming the edges as he smoked and talked. It was real workaday mounting, with much of the result going to hotel shops or other art outlets. But the drying screens and the rather nicer calligraphy up on the walls makes me think he also does much more.

In lieu of learning how to make paper, which apparently is off-limits to westerners, I had lessons in paper marbling from Xiao Dayuan, an artist whose paintings often feature it. He taught me in his apartment over several evenings. I'll always remember the anticipation of dipping fresh white pieces of paper into the tub of cool water and ink and excitedly looking at the result. Xiao loved the doing as much as the teaching; every time he lifted a newly doused sheet, his eyes glimmered like a young boy's: "*Hao wan'r!*"

he'd say. Good fun!

My teacher Zhang Ping arranged for a tour to Rong Bao Zhai, the studio famous for full-color woodblock prints. Much of the work is done in two long rooms steamed up by a big vaporizer. In each room are about six women working over their blocks first with damp hard-bristled brushes, then adding ink with a smaller brush, then folding the paper down over the block to make a print. They can do 100 to 200 a day, depending on the complexity of the artwork. Often the final result is touched up by hand. In another room down the hall four men busily chipped out designs from blocks of wood. Back on the street level I discovered that Rong Bao Zhai is a huge retail operation as well, with rooms upon rooms of art, books, ink, and so on.

It's very hard to find traditional, handmade books in China, but you can start at Liulichang, the neighborhood of Rong Bao Zhai. Another good hunting ground is the antique stalls across from Beihai Park. Here I met with a bookseller whose father-in-law collected and restored classics. Standout items in their inventory included a book bound in wood case boards and ribbon and other books in which fresh sheets of *xuan zhi* had been tucked between fragile original pages and the binding resewn.

The book culture

I loved my project not only because I was able to pursue a favorite hobby, but also because, in China, I was surrounded by a culture that highly values books and the arts related to them, including calligraphy and printing. These disciplines aren't treated merely as ways to communicate but as professions in themselves.

A Chinese painting is considered woefully incomplete without some lines of handsome calligraphy and at least one artist's seal. Even most contemporary artists follow this formula. Many museums, like the Museum of History in Tiananmen Square for example, feature art collections in which half the works are pieces of calligraphy and the other half are representational paintings.

Just as we westerners honor type designers, the Chinese call certain styles of calligraphy by their inventors' names. Perhaps it's because of the historic impossibility of building a typeface for a language with an infinite number of characters?

Schoolchildren are instructed to write beautifully; artists and great leaders are meant to excel at it. At Sun Yat Sen's library, outside Nanjing, a Chinese friend stopped in his tracks in front of one piece of calligraphy: "This is Mao's handwriting," he said. "Isn't it beautiful?"

Retired people often take up calligraphy as a hobby; I saw them poking around the shops on Liulichang and gawking at the brush displays and debating ink with the clerks.

In China, everyone is also encouraged to do their own printing. Most Chinese people own at least one seal, which is carved by an artist or a professional seal carver. My artist

friends, Xiao Dayuan and Pan Qing, had carved hundreds for themselves and they still bought stones for more. In the antique stores I saw personal, portable printing kits that held a short seal stone and a small inlaid tray for ink.

Even the tackiest souvenir shop or railway station kiosk has carved sandalwood bookmarks for sale, boxed sets featuring Beijing scenes, flowers, Peking Opera, or characters from famous novels like *Journey to the West* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Books are also popular souvenirs, some bound sutra-style with crude paintings on the pleats inside. At Beilin, the museum of steles in Xian, tourists can buy rubbings of their favorite inscription for the folks back home. Then there are the papercuts, a folk art in China where paper was first invented in 105 AD; I found my favorites in Dunhuang, cut in the shape of *feitian*, the flying angels that swoop around the caves of Mogao.

The book community

At the library and in my travels, I forged many instant connections despite language and cultural barriers. For example, during my first week at the library I met a Mrs. Cheng, who came to videotape some restoration work.

She later invited me for lunch at her place. No wonder she was eager to show it: Her family had one of the better apartments in Beijing, a leather couch, even an entertainment center. She dropped in my lap a paper she'd written on different methods of book conservation, or how to turn "stones" into actual books. She then showed me some photographs, and I realized what she meant by stones. These were centuries-old books that had melded into unreadable blocks. There are two traditional methods ("wet" and "dry") of separating the pages and now a modern one that uses biochemistry.

It was the start of a friendship. We met sometimes to go shopping, to stroll in a nearby park, or eat hearty lunches. I helped her prepare speeches on book conservation; she introduced me to her fiends. Mr. Cao Jinglou, for instance. He's the director of preservation at the Forbidden City. Just getting in to see him was fun:

We brought our bikes through a gate and then pedaled through the maze of gravel alleys and the unpreserved parts of the palace not open to the camera-toting hordes. Here I could see the grass popping up in the cracked foundations and envision the eunuchs hustling along the corridors, the swish of water in buckets to support the palace thousands. First we chatted in Mr. Cao's office and then looked at two workshops, one where they were mounting paintings and restoring a painting on silk that was beginning to crack. Still, every detail, though faint, remained. In the second room women worked on precise reproductions of palace paintings while carefully shrouding the originals in a sheet to protect them from the sun and dust.

Preservation and conservation

Despite primitive working and storage conditions, Chinese books hold up remarkably well. The Chinese have historically used archival materials and little glue in making books, so much of the threat comes from the outside. In August I attended the first-ever U.S.-China Library Conference, which was sponsored by the National Library. Over a two-day period I heard papers on the deacidification efforts of the Library of Congress, the problem of ink feathering in older Chinese books, digital preservation, preservation of books at the Nanjing Library, and pest control at Jiangsu Provincial Library. Many participants expressed a desire to work closely with one another, share information, and network for solutions.

Living and researching in China isn't easy, but the culture is more fascinating than it is frustrating. Some of the lowlights of my experience included having to fly to Hong Kong to renew my visa, tangling with the bureaucracy in getting official recognition of my project, food poisoning, and falling into a manhole. Also, one of my objectives got nixed right away when I found that the Ministry of Culture forbade foreigners from visiting the *xuan zhi* factories in Anhui. There's an apocryphal story about how some Japanese visitors took a tour of one, pried the secrets from the foreman, and started making the prized paper for themselves.

China is developing at a frenetic pace; Beijingers now joke that the national bird is a construction crane. However, I feel that as a society becomes more high-tech, a higher value is attached to fine, handmade things. The average Chinese person was at first mystified by my project, but as soon as I showed some pictures of ancient books and explained my work at the library, they were intrigued.

Above all, the best part of my experience was the chance to meet the Chinese. My friends ranged in occupation from artist and banker to musician and book conservator. Zhang Ping, my teacher at the library, invited me to his house and again played the teacher, this time instructing me in the fine art of making *jaozi*, dumplings stuffed with egg and chives. A the publishing houses I visited in southern China, the managers at first seemed wary of the first visit by a foreigner. By the end of an hour, they warmed to me because they realized we were all interested in carrying on an important tradition. Soon, we were huddling over pots of tea, trading business cards, posing for pictures, and laughing at my shaky Mandarin.

Then there's the place itself, where computer monitors still get delivered by bicycle cart and cyclists navigate traffic while negotiating on cell phones. I spent some of my favorite moments pedaling the wide boulevards lined with trees that shuddered beautifully in the wind. At night, I'd spin home on my Golden Lion bicycle past streets empty of traffic, Mao's looming portrait from the Forbidden City's gate, and clumps of people drinking beer at makeshift sidewalk restaurants. I'm not sure how I imagined China before I went, but I never thought it'd be beautiful. It is.

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