

TREASURE HUNT: THE QUEST FOR THE YONGLE DADIAN

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Introduction

'The world's affairs and things of both the past and present are recorded separately in various books but they are so many and so scattered all over the country that it is difficult to locate and read them at one's fingertips. I want to gather all of the books together, copy them according to both topical and phonetic order and make research and study as easy as picking up things from a purse ... You Hanlin scholars will put my idea to work and begin gathering classics, histories, philosophical studies and miscellaneous literary works [the so-called *Four Treasuries*], and all other books written by the masters. As to the books on astronomy, geography, yin-yang theory, medicine, religion, technology, and art you should not be deterred by their vast number or the tedium of the task but should also classify them accordingly.'

Thus the Ming Dynasty Emperor Yongle (Perpetual Happiness) decreed in the first year of his reign (1403 A.D.), the compilation of an encyclopaedia that would be the largest encyclopaedia in the world of the time. The emperor commissioned his grand secretary Xie Jin to realize his vision for the encyclopaedia which he saw as encompassing comprehensive subject coverage and monographs throughout the Chinese empire as well as the preservation of rare and fragile books that were in danger of being lost to posterity. It was a mammoth undertaking, the most ambitious of numerous bold literary projects envisaged and sponsored by Yongle in his desire to emulate the sage-kings of Chinese antiquity.

History of the Yongle Dadian

147 scholars recruited by Xie Jin took sixteen months to complete the massive undertaking. In spite of a banquet hosted by Yongle at the Ministry of Rites to celebrate its completion, two months later the emperor thought the compilation inadequate and ordered its revision. The monk Dao Yan, his long time advisor and Liu Jichi, the Deputy Minister of Punishment joined Xie Jin as co-directors and other scholars Wang Jing, Wang Da, Hu Yan and Chen Ji as editors with Chen Ji assuming the role of editor-in-chief. For three years more than two thousand scholars students and scribes were involved in the work of editing and copying in the Literary Erudition Pavilion and by 1408, the compilation was deemed complete in 22,877 chapters (juan) in 11,095 manuscript volumes. For Yongle, completion of the encyclopaedia marked the realization of a lifelong dream to preserve the greatness of Chinese culture, and to express his pleasure with this great achievement, the Emperor accorded the encyclopaedia the name of his own reign, giving it the title *The Grand Encyclopaedia of Yongle*.

It is both a tragedy and a mystery therefore that, rather than having the manuscript printed, he decided just to have one duplicate transcribed. In the winter of 1409, when the duplicate was completed the emperor ordered that both copies should be kept in palace storage. Although they were transferred to the 'literary pavilion' in the Forbidden City when he moved his capital to Beijing in 1421, with the exception of the Emperor Jiajing, (1522-1566), his successors took little interest in the encyclopaedia with the result that it lay neglected and unused, gathering dust. It was due to Jiajing that the encyclopaedia was saved from a fire which ravaged three palace buildings in 1562. He subsequently ordered that two more copies be made and hired 180 scribes who took five years to complete the task. Although one of the new copies was placed on display in the Literary Erudition Pavilion and the other in the Imperial Library, the original manuscript which was returned to Nanjing did not survive the collapse of the Ming dynasty in 1644 and was burned to ashes.

The rest of its history is in part anecdotal and clouded in confusion and conflicting opinion. Nevertheless, it seems clear that much of it was either scattered or lost during the Siege of the Legations in Peking a century ago. Suffice it to say that very little of the original compilation remains. Apart from about 4 percent of the original, or an estimated 400 physical volumes, the remainder has been lost to the vicissitudes of war, invasion and other catastrophes. In some cases volumes have been purloined and in other cases rescued. The result is that the volumes that do remain are scattered in libraries across the world. Some volumes are even perhaps in private hands, their existence unknown either to China or to the library world.

International Symposium on the 600th Anniversary of the Compilation of the Yongle Dadian

In April 2002, to mark the 600th anniversary of the compilation of the encyclopaedia, the National Library of China hosted an international symposium on the *Yongle Dadian* in Beijing. Since there is much conflicting information about the encyclopaedia, the major aim of the symposium was the pooling of knowledge about it. Other aims of the symposium included an appeal to the international scholarly community to make available to China in some form for reprinting, volumes of the encyclopaedia held in overseas libraries as well as consideration of issues associated with its continuing preservation. With the yellow winds still blowing in from the Gobi Desert, mainland librarians and scholars were joined by compatriots from Hong Kong and Taiwan as well as colleagues and scholars from other parts of the world to consider the future of the world's earliest encyclopaedia. Approximately ninety delegates from China and other parts of Asia, Europe and the US attended the symposium which was held from 17-19 April and which focussed on issues relating to the study, preservation, restoration, digitalization and use of the encyclopaedia.

The symposium, which was conducted largely in Chinese, was well organized. It was held in the Beijing Hubei Hotel and since delegates were also staying in the same hotel, it was also very convenient. As always, the hospitality was generous and delegates were treated as honoured guests.

Delegates were privileged, on the first morning, following the opening ceremony to have the opportunity to visit the rare book repository at the National Library of China and to view an exhibition on the *Yongle Dadian* mounted in conjunction with the Symposium. The exhibition included original manuscript volumes as well as facsimile volumes and a world map of the known locations of manuscript volumes. One manuscript volume exhibited was discovered by the National Library of China in a peasant's home in the countryside of Shandong? Province. Volumes that have been returned to China at various times, for example by the former Soviet Union and the former Democratic Republic of Germany, were also included in the exhibition.

A Rare Find

There was much informal discussion during the symposium around the possibility of the existence of other volumes of the *Yongle Dadian* in private hands or in libraries which do not normally hold Chinese materials which may still be awaiting discovery. This was the case as recently as 1997 with the serendipitous discovery of a volume in Scotland by David Helliwell from the Department of Oriental Books in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. He told the fascinating story of his find while attending a conference held at Aberdeen University. The conference was held to mark the centenary of the death of James Legge, a missionary to China who later became one of the most famous sinologists and Professor of Chinese at Oxford University and who lived in the town of Huntley near Aberdeen. In conversation with a librarian present at a soiree which was held in conjunction with the conference, he asked casually whether there were any Chinese books in the University Library. She remembered a large volume covered in gold silk with the text in black and red! One can imagine David Helliwell's excitement at hearing this. Confirmation that this was indeed a volume of the world's earliest encyclopaedia the next day led to the restoration of the volume which had suffered from damp in the past. The volume was digitized and a CD-ROM version was presented to the National Library of China by David Helliwell at the opening ceremony of the Symposium.

The plans of the Beijing Library plans to publish photocopies initially of 163 books of the encyclopaedia held by mainland libraries and subsequently additional volumes held overseas were also discussed, given the fact that photo-offset copies have been published previously, for example the edition published in 730 volumes by the Zhonghua Book Company in 1960 and an enlarged edition reprinted in 797 volumes in 1984. It was felt that the value of such a publication lay in its contribution to scholarship and in making more people aware of an important part of China's cultural heritage. Nevertheless it was also decided that a web-site should be established which it was hoped would provide a valuable focal point for the gathering and exchange of information regarding the *Yongle dadian*. It was thought that such a web-site might result in the discovery of further volumes as yet unknown to China in particular and the library world in general.

I acknowledge the use of *Perpetual Happiness: The Ming Emperor Yongle* by Shih-shan Henry Tsai, published by Washington University Press in 2001 and held by the Australian National University Library, as a very useful source of background information.

The exhibition featured several volumes as well as fascicle volumes and a wide range of the latest research on manuscript volumes. One manuscript volume exhibited was discovered by the National Library of China in a private's study in the mountains of Shandong Province. Volumes that have been returned to China in various ways, for example by the former Soviet Union and the former German Democratic Republic, were also included in the exhibition.

A Rare Find

There was much informal discussion during the symposium around the possibility of the volume of other volumes of the *Yongle* which is private hands or in libraries which do not currently hold it. It was a pleasure to meet and discuss with the curators of the exhibition. This was the only time as I was with the searchers of a volume in Scotland by David H. Bell from the Department of Oriental Books in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. He told me an interesting story of his first while working a conference held at Aberdeen University. The conference was held in the company of the death of James Legge, a missionary to China who was one of the most famous sinologists and Professor of Chinese at Oxford University and who lived in the town of Hanyuan near Aberdeen. The volume was a private present at a conference which was held in Aberdeen. He asked me to check whether there were any other volumes in the University Library. He remembered a large volume covered in gold with the text in black and red. One can imagine David well as well as the Conference that this was indeed a volume of the *Yongle*. The volume was indeed a volume of the *Yongle* and was presented to the National Library of China by David H. Bell at the opening ceremony of the symposium.



The plan of the being in the plan published originally in 1933 books of the encyclopedia to be published in 1933 and subsequently additional volumes held over as well as the edition published other copies have been published over the years. The edition published in 1933 volume by the Xinhua Book Company in 1933 and an enlarged edition appeared in 1937 volume in 1937. It was the first time a publication in its contribution to scholarship and in making more people aware of an important part of China's cultural heritage. Nevertheless it was also decided that a web-site should be established which it was hoped would provide a valuable focal point for the gathering and exchange of information regarding the Yongle edition. It was thought that such a website might result in the discovery of further volumes as yet unknown in China or elsewhere and the share would be general.