

## The Aberdeen volume of Yongle Dadian

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*Lecture given to the University of Aberdeen Chinese Studies Group, 16 March 2009.*

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In a roundabout way, the discovery of the Aberdeen volume of Yongle Dadian 永樂大典 is due to the fact that James Legge, the first Professor of Chinese at Oxford University and well-known translator of the Chinese classics, was a native of Huntley, the small town some thirty miles northwest of here on the road to Elgin. To mark the centenary of his death, a conference was held in Aberdeen in April 1997, and I was among the participants.

On the first evening of the event, a soirée was held in Elphinstone Hall at which librarians were present. So I did what I always do when visiting ancient European libraries, and asked if among the rarities there was anything Chinese. Myrtle Anderson-Smith told me that there was little except for a rather large manuscript volume with hard covers bound in yellow silk, and with the text written in black within red frames. My heart leaped at this information, because I knew almost certainly what the volume might be, as indeed would any student of traditional Chinese bibliography, and of the circumstances under which Chinese books reached Europe in former times.

I felt that the importance of this potential discovery would justify my absence from the conference sessions the following morning, and arranged to go and see the volume. As I suspected, it turned out to be a volume of the famous *Yongle dadian* encyclopaedia, a work so unimaginably large that it could never have been printed. Only a small part of a single manuscript copy survives, so that any fragment of it is bound to be unique. The only question was whether the Aberdeen volume had been previously recorded and made known to sinology, and on returning to Oxford I was able to establish that it hadn't.

So Aberdeen has chapter 11,907 of a total 22,877 – a single volume of an original total of 11,095. These figures are hard for us to comprehend. But before I explain what *Yongle Dadian* actually is, I must first explain the difference between what we normally understand by the term encyclopaedia and what the word means when used in a Chinese context. As we shall see, most of the Chinese works that we loosely call encyclopaedias are not really encyclopaedias at all in our sense.

We think of large-scale works like the *Encyclopaedia britannica*, which offer authoritative and often lengthy overviews of all manner of subjects. In such works, the entries are sometimes a digest of existing knowledge, sometimes original contributions. They are often by leading specialists in the field, and whether the ideas they contain are new or old, they are always freshly written for the purpose. Or we may think of smaller works of the type we used to be given as children, containing all sorts of general knowledge that it was thought

useful for us to know. I think of the single-volume *Cambridge encyclopaedia* that I use when I want some quick facts about something that I ought to know but don't, and when I can't be bothered to switch my computer on and use the internet.

In traditional China, these small, handy reference works did indeed exist, but they were low-brow. They were produced for town rather than gown, and contained a popular hodge-podge of practical information and hearsay of little if any interest to scholars. Examples are often found in the larger old-established European collections, as before modern times, most visiting Europeans could only collect what they could buy in the street, and this did not include the publications of scholars. We have a few in Oxford.

By contrast, works like *Yongle dadian* belong to a class of literature which the Chinese call *leishu* 類書, which literally means "classified writings". Both their purpose and method of compilation differ fundamentally from those of western encyclopaedias. We'll take a closer look at what *leishu* are before returning to the special case of *Yongle dadian*.

The prototype is the *Huanglan* 皇覽, which was compiled for emperor Wen 文 of the Wei 魏 dynasty, who reigned from 220-227 AD. This work is no longer extant, but some fragments quoted in other texts were pieced together by Sun Fengyi 孫馮翼 at the end of the 18th century. The title gives a clue as to both the nature and purpose of not only this work, but many later encyclopaedias. It can be translated as "For perusal by the emperor". The *Huanglan* was a collection of excerpts from the national literature, presented to the emperor in a way that was convenient for him to read, and is believed to have contained 120 chapters.

The important feature of this text and all subsequent Chinese encyclopaedias is that it was neither a summary of existing knowledge nor an original contribution. It was simply a list of citations from existing literature – a collection of readings. For the modern scholar, this word for word reproduction of other texts is the most important feature of Chinese encyclopaedias, because so many of these texts are now lost. For example, one of the first well-known encyclopaedias to be preserved in its entirety is the *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚 or "A classified assemblage of literary works" in 100 chapters. This was compiled in the Tang dynasty by Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢 and others, and completed around 620 AD. Nine tenths of the works cited in this encyclopaedia are no longer extant.

As the national literature increased, so did the size of encyclopaedias. They also became more specialised and varied in the way they were organised. Their compilation and printing was now far beyond the capacity of one individual, so they came to be compiled by teams of scholars usually working under imperial auspices. Some famous examples from the early Song dynasty, that is, the end of the first millennium, will illustrate these things.

Two of the best known date from the the reign of the second Song emperor, and bear the name of the Taiping period (976-983) in which they were compiled: the *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (“guangji” meaning “extensive record”) in 500 chapters, and the *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 in 1,000 chapters, making it not only bigger than any previous encyclopaedia, but at the time it was written also the biggest single Chinese work ever to have been compiled and published. At first it had a different name, but it was then passed to the emperor, who examined three chapters a day during the course of almost an entire year, after which the second part of the name was changed to *yulan*, meaning “imperial perused” – reminding us of the *Huanglan* prototype. Both were compiled at imperial behest by the scholar Li Fang 李昉 working with a team of editorial assistants.

The *Taiping guangji*, completed in 981, was compiled from informal, unofficial sources, such as histories written by private scholars and even accounts which we would regard as fairy tales. The compilation is derived from 475 different texts, of which one half are now lost, so that the *Taiping guangji* is now the most important source for early Chinese fiction. The *Taiping yulan* on the other hand was a more general encyclopaedia, and was compiled from what at the time were regarded as more acceptable sources. As a repository for lost texts, it is even more impressive, for of the two thousand or so books and pamphlets from which it was compiled (of which 1,690 are listed in a prefatory chapter), three-quarters are no longer extant.

Let's look at one specific example of how Chinese encyclopaedias preserve important information which would otherwise be lost. It appears in a slightly later Song dynasty encyclopaedia called the *Cefu yuangui* 冊府元龜 which comprises 1,000 chapters and was compiled in 1013 by Wang Qinruo 王欽若 (962-1025). Its compilation began after peace was made with the the Qidan 契丹 tartars in 1004 after a long period of warfare. Against this background, the encyclopaedia aimed to justify the new governmental arrangements of the unified dynasty, which it did by specialising in the biographies of exemplary rulers and officials, to be used models for the present day.

The sections of *Cefu yuangui* which deal with the Tang and Wudai dynasties are of particular interest, as they are based on the *shilu* 實錄 (“veritable records”) of those dynasties – texts which are no longer extant. The “Veritable records” were used to compile the so-called “Dynastic histories”, which are a very much condensed record.

The example I will quote is of something that happened on 29th December 835, and is especially important as it is the first mention of printing in any civilisation. The “Dynastic history” tells us:

“In the twelfth month [of the 9th year of Taihe] [...] on the day *dingchou* (29th December 835), the order was given to the circuits and prefectures to disallow the private printing of calendars.”

Contrast this with what we find in the “Veritable records” of that period, which but for their mention in the *Cefu yuangui* would now be lost:

“On the day *dingchou* of the 12th month of the 9th year [of Taihe] (29th December 835), Feng Su, military commandant of Dongchuan, submitted a memorial to the throne requesting that the printing of calendars from wooden blocks should be prohibited. From the two commanderies of Jiannan (Dongchuan and Xichuan, west of Chengdu) as far as the Huainan circuit (around Yangzhou in the east), block-printed calendars were for sale in the marketplace. Each year, these printed calendars could be found everywhere, before the Board of Astronomy had submitted the new calendar to the Emperor for official distribution, in violation of the correct practice for promulgating the calendar. Consequently the order was given to prohibit it.”

Before turning to *Yongle dadian*, I must mention one final work, as it represents the high point of Chinese encyclopaedia compilation, and along with *Yongle dadian* it is perhaps the only title that a non-Chinese audience might have heard of. This is the great “Imperial encyclopaedia” *Qinding gujin tushu jicheng* 欽定古今圖書集成 which was compiled during the reign of the Kangxi emperor. It was completed in 1725, and printed in the palace from engraved bronze moveable type in 1729. It consists of 10,000 chapters containing 6,109 different classified sections. The texts from which the contents are derived may not actually be lost, but they are derived from sources which would otherwise be accessible only with difficulty, notably *difangzhi* 地方志 or local gazetteers.

No bigger work was ever compiled and printed in pre-modern China, or possibly even in any other pre-modern state. Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* – a very different enterprise, of course – was printed later in the same century, between 1751 and 1780, and when complete totalled 35 folio volumes with a further two index volumes. The first edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, completed in Edinburgh in 1771, had only three volumes. But Kangxi’s encyclopaedia has 5,020 volumes. There is a copy of the original edition in the British Library, and both Oxford and Cambridge have copies of the sumptuous lithographic reprint made by the imperial government in the 1880s. Oxford’s copy occupies some 70 metres of shelving.

Now we will turn to *Yongle Dadian*. The encyclopaedia originated in a decision taken by the third Ming emperor (Zhu Di 朱棣, 1360-1424) in 1402, the first year of his reign, to preserve all known literature. The project was directed by the scholar Xie Jin 解縉 with a team of 147 editorial assistants, and the first manuscript, which had the prosaic title *Wenxian dacheng* 文獻大成 (“Complete collection of writings”) was presented to the throne in December 1404. But the emperor considered it to be inadequate. He therefore appointed a team of two co-directors and a further 2,169 scholars to continue the work, which was completed in 1407. The final version had a total 22,877 chapters. The text was written on heavy white paper ruled in vermilion, and sumptuously bound in 11,095 large volumes, with hard boards covered in

yellow silk. It was finally approved by the emperor in 1408. He wrote a preface for it, and named it after his own reign period, which was Yongle (1402-1424).

*Yongle Dadian* is different from any of the encyclopaedias mentioned thus far in several important ways.

We have already noted its great size – more than double the size of Kangxi's *Imperial encyclopaedia* in the number of both its chapters and volumes, and probably four times bigger in physical bulk as it was written on big sheets of thick paper and bound in hard-backed volumes. Most Chinese books had paper covers, and were protected by a simple, detached, disposable case, but *Yongle dadian*, uses a unique hard-cover version of the so-called “wrapped-back binding” (*baobeizhuang* 包背裝), so that the volumes could be shelved visible, yet fully protected.

And for the obvious reason that it was too large to print, it existed only in the form of a single manuscript copy.

Its purpose was also rather different. It had no theme – its aim was to collect and preserve the entire national literature, to which it became in effect a gigantic concordance. Unlike previous and subsequent encyclopaedias, *Yongle dadian* was not arranged by subject. The excerpts were arranged according to the position of their first character in the rhyming dictionary *Hongwu zhengyun* 洪武正韻, or “Correct rhymings of the Hongwu period”. This dictionary was very well-known at the time, and had been compiled in 1375 during the Hongwu reign period of the first Ming emperor, from which it takes its name. Arranging the *Yongle dadian* in what was the contemporary Chinese equivalent of alphabetical order made its contents readily accessible.

In view of the fame of *Yongle dadian* in both China and beyond, it is odd that the facts of its subsequent history seem to vary considerably from one account to the next.

The encyclopaedia was compiled and produced in Nanking and was first housed in a special library in the imperial palace. Nanking was the site of the Ming dynasty capital under the first two emperors and indeed for most of Yongle's reign. But in 1420 the decision was taken to move the capital to Peking, and in the following year the move took place. In Peking, the encyclopaedia was stored in one of the wooden palace halls, named Wenlou 文樓. But in the mid-16th century, following the burning down of three other wooden palace halls, for reasons of security it was moved to the Imperial Archive (*Huangshicheng* 皇史晟), a stone building which stood outside the palace walls, and which is still there today.

In 1562 the order was given to produce a copy, and this was completed in 1567 by a team of over 100 scholars. The original was then taken back inside the palace and housed in a library hall named Wenyuange 文淵閣, and the copy was placed in the Imperial Archive.

The original then disappears from the historical record, and nobody knows why. Some say that it was burnt at the end of the Ming dynasty in 1644 when the rebel leader Li Zicheng 李自成 sacked Peking. Others say that the eleventh Ming emperor Jiajing 嘉靖 (1522-1567), who had commissioned the copy, was so fond of the encyclopaedia that he took it with him to his grave in the Yongling 永陵 tomb complex which he had spent his whole life building, and that it is still there in an underground chamber awaiting discovery.

This latter explanation has a certain appeal, and would nicely account for the total disappearance of the original. Because when a large library perishes, at least some fragment of it usually survives, and the mid-16th century is not that long ago in either Chinese or indeed European terms. At much the same time, the predecessor of the Bodleian Library, Duke Humfrey's Library, was stripped bare by the commissioners of Edward VI. Although it only contained several hundred volumes, in contrast to *Yongle dadian*'s twenty thousand, more than a dozen are still extant, of which a few have even returned to Oxford. But of the original manuscript of *Yongle dadian*, there is no trace whatsoever.

So the Aberdeen volume, like all the other extant volumes, is from the 1567 copy. It remains to be seen how it got here.

The copy remained in the Imperial Archive until the Yongzheng 雍正 period (1723-1736) of the Qing Dynasty, when it was moved to the Hanlin Academy 翰林院, where it was presumably used for reference by the academicians, who were selected from the very highest graduates in the triennial metropolitan examinations. Their job was to run the examination system, through which the officials who governed China were selected and appointed.

Later in the 18th century it found a new use. In 1771 Zhu Yun 朱筠 submitted a memorial to the Qianlong 乾隆 emperor regarding the collection and preservation of rare books. This resulted in a bibliographical project on an even bigger scale than *Yongle dadian*, the imperial manuscript library known as *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書, literally "The complete library of the four treasuries", the four treasuries being the four divisions into which Chinese literature is traditionally classified: classics, history, philosophy, and *belles-lettres*. When the project was completed in 1782, 3,458 works had been copied on to fine white paper in faultless calligraphy, and sumptuously bound in 36,275 volumes.

*Yongle dadian* was a major source for this project, as from it, the *Siku* commissioners were able to reconstitute 385 works which were otherwise lost for inclusion in the library – more than 10 per cent of the total. In some of the surviving volumes of *Yongle dadian*, the printed form which the editors used to record the progress of their work is still pasted inside the front cover. For example, one of the forms in a Bodleian volume was filled in by an editor called Min, who notes that on the 12th day of the 8th moon of the 38th year of Qianlong (27 September 1773) he copied out twenty passages from that volume, taken from seventeen different texts. As this volume represents only

three chapters of the 20,000 or so that were being searched, and as this operation was itself only a fraction of the work involved in the compilation of *Siku quanshu*, some idea can be gained of the scale of the project.

The form originally in the Aberdeen volume has been torn out, leaving only traces at the points where it was pasted in. In fact in the surviving volumes of *Yongle dadian*, more of these forms have disappeared than remain. There are forms in only three of the Bodleian's 19 volumes, and later I will show you a picture of one of them.

Already in 1693, eighty years before the start of the *Siku quanshu* project, the scholar Xu Qianxue 徐乾學 had noted that volumes of *Yongle dadian* were missing. And when the compilation of *Siku quanshu* had started, the commissioners took stock of *Yongle dadian* in 1773 and found that 2,274 chapters were missing. But after the completion of the project, as the fame of *Siku quanshu* spread, so did that of *Yongle dadian*, and the pace of losses began to increase, so that by the final year of the 19th century, only some 800 volumes remained. It was in this year that what was left of *Yongle dadian* met its dramatic end, the circumstances of which I will now relate. Ironically, this was due to a mere accident of its location.

The Hanlin Academy was located near the southeast corner of the Forbidden City, and shared its southern wall with the British Legation. During the spring of 1900, anti-foreign sentiment in China reached its peak under the "Boxer" (Yihequan 義和拳) movement, and the foreign residents of Peking sought safety in the Legation Quarter, in the defence of which the British took the lead.

Into the British compound were gathered members of the Consular Service, the Imperial Maritime Customs, local missionaries and other workers, together with a limited number of troops that had been brought from British ships anchored at Taku in order to defend them. The period between mid-June, when the foreigners began to retreat into their compound, and 14 August, when allied troops entered Peking and relieved them, is known as the "Siege of the Legations".

In the morning of Saturday 23 June, the Boxers – a rebel force, but one whose assaults on foreign interests had been legitimised by the imperial government – occupied the Hanlin Academy and set fire to some of its buildings in the hope that the wind, which was in the north, would blow the flames into the Legation Quarter and set fire to it. Previously, foreigners had been forbidden to enter the Academy, and they were well aware of the awe in which it was held by the Chinese. But on this occasion, it was thought necessary not only to extinguish the flames that threatened to engulf the Legation, but also to flush out the forces that were endangering it from close quarters.

Accordingly, a party of 10 British marines, 5 American marines, Dr George Ernest Morrison (Peking correspondent of *The Times*), and a few others was

led into the Academy by Captain Francis Poole. They breached the wall, entered, expelled the Chinese forces, and brought the fires under control.

Later, they helped themselves to the remnants of *Yongle dadian*, after many of the volumes, according to one report, had been used by both sides to strengthen their barricades.

A photograph taken in the aftermath of these events shows Poole sitting in the Academy, with what appear to be volumes of the *Yongle dadian* on the floor. He obtained a single volume, which his widow sold to the British Library in 1960. Thomas Biggin (as yet unidentified, but possibly a British marine) “found” a volume in the Hanlin ruins which he gave to the Bodleian Library in 1907. It seems that two of the volumes currently in the School of Oriental and African Studies were taken by Morrison. In his memoirs, Lancelot Giles says:

“The Library was almost entirely destroyed; an attempt was made to save the famous *Yung lu* [sic] *ta tien*, but heaps of volumes had been destroyed, so the attempt was given up. I secured volume 13,345 (!) for myself, merely as a specimen.”

But he also secured others, and presented a different one to Cambridge University Library. And the single volume in Aberdeen was obtained by James Russell Brazier, an alumnus of the University who at the time of the Siege was Chief Secretary of the Inspectorate of the Imperial Maritime Customs. (I’ll say a little more about this volume in a moment).

So far as can be told from inscriptions in the books themselves or from secondary sources, not only these volumes, but all the rest of the 51 volumes in United Kingdom libraries whose provenance can be traced, were all taken by those present in the Legation at the time of the Siege or the period immediately following it.

Far from regarding themselves as thieves, those who took volumes of *Yongle dadian* later congratulated themselves on being the saviours of these precious fragments. One of the first to publish an account of the Siege was the Rev. Roland Allen, who was chaplain to the British Legation and himself obtained a volume:

“It is interesting, almost amusing, to consider the action of the British in regard to the literary treasures of the Hanlin. At that moment of peril the volunteers not only considered their own salvation, they actually took steps to preserve some of the beautiful and priceless manuscripts stored in the halls ...”

And the well-known sinologist Herbert A. Giles (father of Lancelot, quoted above) said in a popular magazine of the time:

“... the only hands stretched forward to save [*Yongle dadian*] from destruction were those of the foreigners from whom it had been so jealously withheld.”

They, and others who recorded their experiences at the time, all either knew – or learned – that with the destruction of the Hanlin library, China had lost one of its most precious literary treasures.



Of this treasure, in round figures, of the 800 remaining volumes in the Hanlin Academy before the siege, 400 were destroyed, 200 are now in China, and a further 200 are in foreign collections, most being in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan. The only other volumes in Europe apart from the 51 in the United Kingdom are four in the Ethnologisches Museum at Dahlem in Berlin, one in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, and three in the Chester Beatty Library in the Republic of Ireland. Volumes in the former Soviet Union and Deutsche Demokratische Republik were returned to China in the 1950s.

I believe we will now have the opportunity to examine the Aberdeen volume, and before we do so, will conclude by saying a few words about it.

It was given to the University by Sir James Russell Brazier in 1922. I have been able to discover little of Brazier's life beyond the information given on the Aberdeen website: that he was the son of Professor Brazier of the University's Chemistry Department, and a student at Aberdeen from 1875 to 1879. He was an orientalist, who spent the greater part of his life in the consular service of the Chinese government, which at the time was being run by the British. Beyond that, there is a suggestion that the date of his death might have been 1924, and the curious but irrelevant fact that his daughter, Helen Hope Brazier Steedman, who had been six months old at the start of the siege, died less than ten years ago on the day of her hundredth birthday, 17 December 1999.

As already noted, it contains chapter 11,907, which is actually one of the more interesting and important ones. It is the last of three chapters that deal with the character *guang* 廣, and contains the section on *guangzhoufu* 廣州府, that is, the city of Canton. This has an interesting twist.

In 1890, Wen Tingshi 文廷式 (1856-1904) was one of the highest graduates in the metropolitan examinations, as a result of which he was given an appointment in the Hanlin Academy. He was a poet, and became a significant political figure in the late Qing 清 dynasty. He was interested in Mongol history, and while in the Academy, used what remained of *Yongle dadian* to reconstitute what he could of a lost work on this subject. He also copied out the three *guang* chapters for his personal library, perhaps because his father and another forbear had been officials in Guangdong 廣東 province. For this he used the very volume that Aberdeen now has, and only a few years before the Siege. His manuscript copy of these three chapters, in two volumes, is now in the National Library of China. I have found a record of only one other section of *Yongle dadian* that has been preserved in this way.

Aberdeen's volume was in a rather bad state of repair, and like many of the other surviving volumes of *Yongle dadian*, bears signs of extensive water damage, the result of Poole's attempts to extinguish the fire in the Hanlin Academy on 23 June 1900. Once its importance had been realised, the University immediately set about repairing it, and it was restored during 2000 and 2001 by Philippa Sterlini and Andrew Megaw, paper conservators in the Library Conservation Unit at Dundee University.

Let us now look at the volume.