

**EAST ASIAN LIBRARY RESOURCES GROUP OF
AUSTRALIA**

Newsletter No. 56 (July 2010)

Chinese art, archaeology and rare books : the Yetts Collection

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The National Library of Australia purchased the Yetts Collection in 1957 [1]. It was one of the first scholarly collections in Asian languages obtained during the Library's golden age of acquisition. Lasting from the 1950s to the 1970s, this was an era when the Library was starting to develop its Asian research resources, funds were quite readily available and the holdings still limited enough for large personal libraries to be bought without extensive duplication.

The British scholar, Walter Perceval Yetts (1878-1957), combined interests in medicine, art and China [2]. He only became an academic in middle age. Educated at the University of London and Lausanne University he entered the Royal Navy Medical Service in 1903, retiring from the service in 1912 with the rank of staff surgeon. He then acted briefly as medical officer at the British Legation in the Chinese capital. This time spent in China seems to have had a strong influence on his later career. During the First World War he served in the Royal Army Medical Corps, and was a medical officer in the Ministry of Health from 1920 to 1927. In 1930 he was appointed as the first lecturer in Chinese art and archaeology at the School of Oriental Studies, University of London. Two years later he became Professor of Chinese Art and Archaeology at the same institution, where he remained until retirement in 1946. He was also a water-colour artist.

Yetts's main scholarly interests were Chinese bronzes and jades of the prehistoric period. As well as many articles he wrote several books, including Chinese bronzes (1925), The Cull Chinese bronzes (1939) and Ritual bronzes of ancient China (1942).

His friend and former student Professor S. Howard Hansford of the University of London wrote of Yetts that "as teacher, research worker and author his most conspicuous qualities were an extraordinary sense of duty, devotion to accuracy, and steadfastness in pursuit of the long-term project to the perfect conclusion" [3].

Yetts's own handwritten list of his collection includes 715 Chinese and Japanese titles [4]. There are approximately 4000 volumes. Most of the Chinese books date from the period 1911-1938, but there are 5 books which were published during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and 150 titles from the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). The much smaller collection in Japanese mainly dates from 1920 to 1940. Yetts had already sold his Western language books about China to Durham University in 1952.

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Dr Wu Shih-ch'ang of Oxford University, who independently assessed the Yetts Collection for the Library prior to its move to Australia, provided a summary of its main contents. He described it as "a fairly comprehensive range of books on Chinese art and archaeology, especially on ancient bronzes, bronze inscriptions, oracle-bone inscriptions, stone, brick and tile inscriptions, mirrors, coins, seals, jade, porcelain, architecture and Chinese etymology related to the inscriptions." [5]. In fact Yetts collected on a wider range of subjects. Other topics include dictionaries and encyclopedias, authors' collected works, classical writings and commentaries, Daoism, Buddhism, painting, calligraphy, geography and local history. There are also several substantial sets of periodicals, such as Yanjing xue bao (Yenching journal of Chinese studies, 1927-51) and Quarterly bulletin of Chinese bibliography, 1934-47.

Readers may wonder how the National Library was able to obtain the Yetts Collection. In a letter to Professor Otto van der Sprenkel of the Australian National University, Yetts indicated that he wanted his Chinese and Japanese volumes to remain in a Commonwealth country such as Australia, where Chinese studies were starting to flourish [6]. He thought his books would be largely duplicated in Britain. Other libraries in Europe and North America were also interested in acquiring this valuable collection. Through its liaison librarian based in London the National Library negotiated with Yetts, and after his death on 14 May 1957, completed the arrangements with his widow.

As was the practice at the time, Yetts's books were not kept together as a formed collection, but were integrated into the Library's Chinese and Japanese holdings. However, as mentioned above, Yetts had compiled his own handwritten list in Chinese [4]. In his letter to Otto van der Sprenkel he described this as "a title list (with dates of publication), done hurriedly in 1953 to enable Lloyds Underwriters to make a detailed valuation for insurance" [6]. Despite some limitations, including incompleteness, lack of volume and publisher details and occasional incorrect dates, it remains a useful guide. The Library has catalogued the books, but the records in the online catalogue do not indicate that they are from the Yetts Collection. It is also possible to identify individual works as originally from Yetts by the Y number pencilled inside them. For example, the rare 4 volume manuscript of Da Qing hui dian is annotated Y351.

Major rare titles

The following 7 Chinese titles from the Ming and Qing periods and 1 Japanese work from the 19th century are among the most precious items in the Yetts Collection.

Da Qing hui dian [manuscript]. 大清會典. [China : s.n., between 1750 and 1850?]. v. : ill. ; 30 cm. OCLC 4687 2172A f. These 4 rare volumes are from the Da Qing hui dian [Qing dynasty (1644-1911) administrative code]. They are manuscripts and contain black-and-white illustrations of weapons such as bows and arrows; official costumes and 2 volumes of maps.

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They probably date from the late 18th or early 19th century and are part of the Yetts Collection as indicated by the annotation Y351.

He, Xiu, 129-182. 何休.Gongyang zhu shu / [He Xiu zhu ; Xu Yan shu ; Lu Deming yin yi]. 公羊註疏 / [何休註 ; 徐彥疏]. [China : s.n., 1400-1600 ?]. 5 v. ; 27 cm. OCRB 742 2289 1400. Generally known as Gongyang zhuan (or Tradition of Gongyang) this is one of the so-called commentaries on the Chun qiu (or Spring and Autumn Annals). The Spring and Autumn Annals is one of the Confucian Five Classics and by tradition was written by Confucius himself. It is a brief chronological record of events at the court of Lu between 722 and 481 BC. The handwritten list of the Yetts Collection gives the date for this book as 1005, from the Song dynasty, 960-1279. However two experts on Chinese rare books examined this work in early 2008 and while unable to give a precise date believe it is from the Ming dynasty and that it was published between 1400 and 1600. It was printed from the original woodblocks engraved in the Song dynasty.

Hu, Zhengyan, ca. 1582 – ca. 1672. Shi zhu zhai shu hua pu / Hu Yuecong mu gu ; Zhang Xuegeng chong jiao. 十竹齋書畫譜 / 胡曰從摹古 ; 張學畊重校. [Shanghai?] : Jiao jing shan fang, Guangxu jima [1879]. 8 v. (double leaves) : ill. (some col.) ; 26 cm. OC 6178 4262. Hu Zhengyan was a scholar and physician but became a painter, calligrapher and printer. His Shi zhu zhai shu hua pu [Manual of calligraphy and painting from the Ten Bamboo Studio] consisted of about 180 pictorial prints and 140 poems in calligraphy, grouped under 8 categories. These were birds, fruits, orchids, bamboo, plum blossoms, rocks, paintings in circular fan shape, and miscellaneous paintings and calligraphy. The categorization in this work has been called the first systematic approach to the study of Chinese painting and calligraphy. The complete edition appeared in 1633, after several advance editions. This 1879 edition is part of the Yetts Collection.

Luo, Guangzhong, ca.1340 – ca.1400. 羅貫中. Xiu xiang di yi cai zi shu / [Luo Guanzhong zhu ; Mao Zonggang ping]. 繡像第一才子書 / [羅貫中著 ; 毛宗崗評]. [China] : Wen de tang, Shunzhi jia shen [1644]. 16 v. : ill. ; 21 cm. Uniform title : San guo zhi yan yi. 三國志演義. OCRB 5754 6175 1644. This 17th century edition is the earliest held by the Library of one of the earliest and most popular Chinese novels, the San guo zhi yan yi (Romance of the Three Kingdoms). The novel is a mixture of historical fact and fiction based on the turbulent period in the 3rd century AD when China was divided into three states, Wei, Wu and Shu. The story went through many changes and editions. The reputed author Luo Guanggzhong was a prolific writer, who lived at the end of the Yuan dynasty (1260-1368) and beginning of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). The Library's copy is included in the written list of the Yetts Collection. It is the famous version edited and substantially revised by Mao Zonggang, and known as Di yi cai zi shu (The first book of genius). The work is in good condition and consists of 16 volumes between wooden boards.

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Nie, Chongyi, 10th cent. 聶崇義. San li tu / Nie shi ji zhu. 三禮圖 / [聶氏集注]. [China] : Tong zhi tang, Kangxi bing chen [1676]. 2 v. : ill. ; 30 cm. OCRB 640 1428. This book on ancient Chinese rites contains illustrations of altars, insignia, costumes and other ceremonial items. It is a major illustrated Confucian book originally from the 12th century during the Song dynasty. The edition in the Yetts Collection from the Kangxi period of the Qing dynasty is dated 1676.

Wang, Fu, 1079-1126. 王黼. Xuanhe bo gu tu / [Wang Fu zhuan]. 宣和博古圖 / [王黼撰]. [China : s.n.], Jiaping 7 [1528]. 15 v. : ill. ; 39 cm. OCRB 2105.7 1032 1528f. This woodblock-illustrated guide to ancient bronzes was originally compiled by Wang Fu during the Xuanhe period (1119-1125). This was at the close of the Northern Song dynasty (960-1126) in the reign of the emperor Huizong, who was a great patron of the arts. At that time there was a revival of interest in the bronze vessels dating from early Chinese civilization. This Ming dynasty edition from 1528 is the earliest version of the work held by the National Library and was acquired as part of the Yetts Collection, which includes several editions of this work, including another Ming edition from 1588 in 30 volumes at OCRB 2105.7 1032. The 1528 edition is in good condition and has been repaired.

Xi Qing gu jian / [Liang Shizheng deng bian zuan]. 西清古鑑 / [梁詩正等編纂]. [China : s.n.], Qianlong 14 [1749]. 32 v. : ill. ; 45 cm. OCRB 2105.7 3001 f. This rare edition of illustrated Chinese bronzes in the palace of the Qing dynasty, 1644-1911, compiled by Liang Shizheng (1697-1763) and others is one of the highlights of the Yetts Collection. The large volumes are in good condition and contain many black and white illustrations of bronzes in the imperial collection of Qianlong, Emperor of China, 1711-1799.

Katsushika, Hokusai, 1760-1849. 葛飾北齋. Denshin kaishu Hokusai manga. 傳神開手・北齋漫. Edo : Hanabusaya Heikichi ... [and 2 others] ; Bishū Nagoya : Eirakuya Tōshirō, [18--?]. v. <1-5, 7, 9-10 > : all col. ill. ; 23 cm. OJRB 71. This is a 3 volume collection of coloured manga (comic pictures) by the great Japanese artist Hokusai, who is most famous for his ukiyo-e, particularly his Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji. In 1811 the artist stopped in Nagoya, met the artist Bokusen (1775-1824) and began the lifelong friendship that resulted in the publication of Hokusai manga (Sketches by Hokusai), a series of picture books that were published in Nagoya between 1814 and 1834. The pictures of human and animal figures are highly striking and colourful. This copy is part of the Yetts Collection, and bears the Yetts number Y633.

References

1. Powell, Graeme. Yetts Collection [unpublished draft description, July 2007].
2. "Dr Perceval Yetts : noted authority on Chinese art"[obituary], The Times, 15 May 1957, p. 13.
3. Hansford, S. Howard. "Dr W.P. Yetts," The Times, 16 May 1957, p.16.

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4. "W. Perceval Yetts" [handwritten list of Chinese and Japanese collection] in National Library of Australia. [Yetts Collection file].
5. Undated letter, probably late February 1957 from Wu Shih-ch'ang to L.C. Key in National Library of Australia. [Yetts Collection file].
6. Letter dated 29 November 1956 from W.Perceval Yetts to Otto van der Sprenkel in National Library of Australia. [Yetts Collection file].

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