



LONG BEFORE GUTENBERG

the Oldest Book in the Library

Andrew Gosling writes about Chaoying Fang and his Chinese treasures

In 1162, a set of Buddhist scriptures was published in China, titled *Da ban ruo bo luo mi duo jing* ('Greater sutra of the perfection of transcendent wisdom'). Eight centuries later, the National Library of Australia acquired a single volume from this edition. It had belonged to the distinguished historian and bibliographer, Chaoying Fang (1908–1985). After recent expert examination, it has been confirmed as the oldest printed book in the Library. A digitised version is now available at nla.gov.au/nla:gen-vn934588.

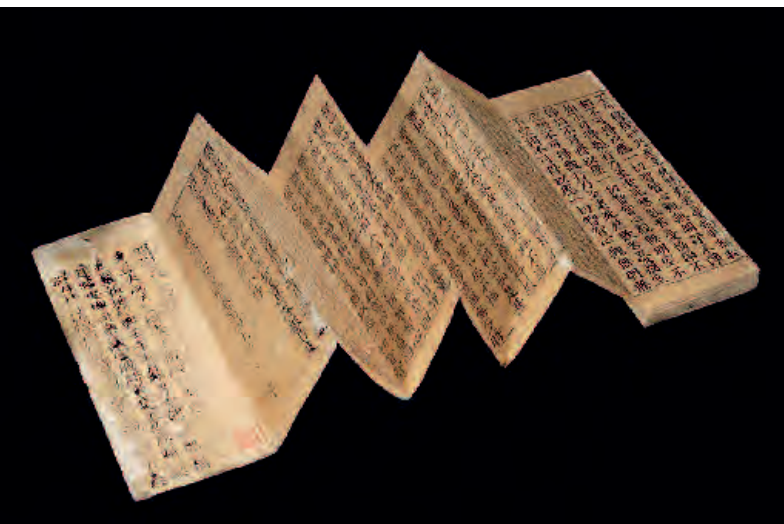
At the time of the work's publication, China was divided. A generation earlier the Song (Sung) dynasty, which had ruled since 960, lost its northern lands to Jurchen invaders from Manchuria. The

Song continued to govern central and southern China. This period, known as the Southern Song, lasted from 1127 to 1279, when the Mongols overran the whole country.

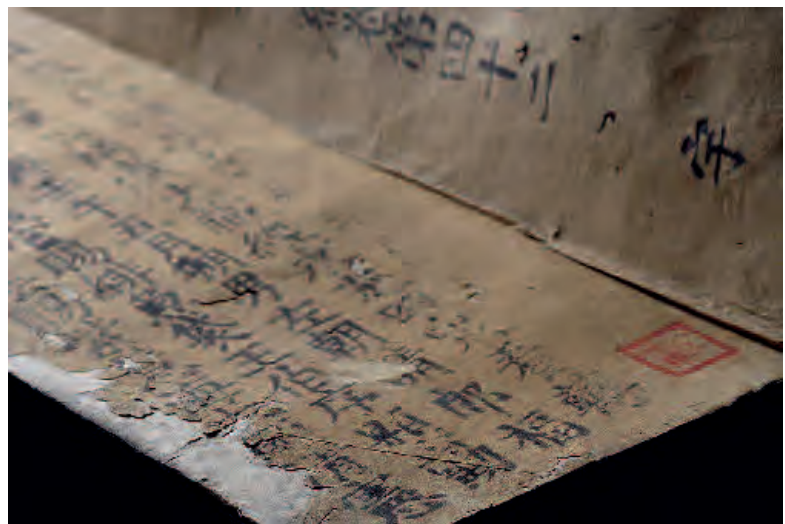
Despite political and military weakness, the Southern Song was in many ways a great age. Agriculture and commerce flourished, as did literature and the arts such as landscape painting and fine porcelain. The most influential of all Neo-Confucian philosophers, Zhu Xi, lived during this era.

The Song was also a golden age for Chinese publishing, and was especially productive in printing Buddhist texts. It is not known when and where Fang acquired the Buddhist volume dated 1162. *Da ban ruo bo luo mi duo jing* is a major exposition of Mahayana Buddhist doctrine. The famous pilgrim monk, Xuanzang, translated it from Sanskrit into Chinese between 660 and 663. Xuanzang had travelled through Central Asia to India, bringing back many Buddhist texts,

Da ban ruo bo luo mi duo jing,
vol. 42
(China: 1162)
Asian Collections



above left:
The 1162 Chinese Buddhist volume with its sutra binding—a scroll folded like a concertina for easy access to the text
Asian Collections



above right:
Chaoying Fang's red seal on a page from *Da ban ruo bo luo mi duo jing*, vol. 42
(China: 1162)
Asian Collections

below:
This page from *Da ban ruo bo luo mi duo jing*, vol. 42, bears the date of 1162 and Chaoying Fang's red seal
(China: 1162)
Asian Collections

devoting the rest of his life to translating them. His travels also formed the basis for the well-known Chinese novel known in English as *Monkey* or *Journey to the West*.

While the complete sutra consists of 600 volumes, the Library holds only volume 42. It contains Fang's Chinese seal in red ink. The book has been repaired and is generally in fair condition, although some text is missing. It is part of an edition of the Chinese Buddhist Canon produced in Fuzhou, on the south-east coast. This edition was the first to adopt the sutra binding, a scroll folded like a concertina for easy access to the text, which later was employed widely for Buddhist scriptures. On its final page, the Library's copy contains the Chinese date

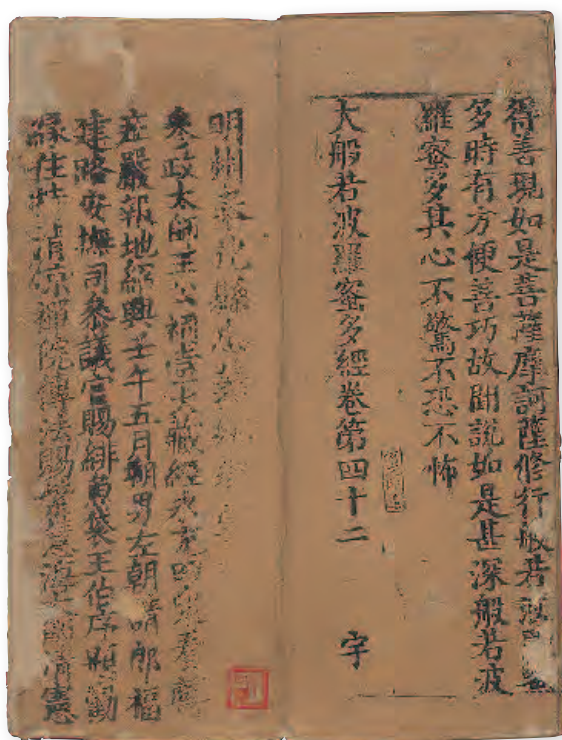
'Shaoxing ren wu' meaning the 'ren wu' year of the Shaoxing reign period during the Southern Song dynasty. This equates to 1162. (From about 2000 years ago, two series of ancient Chinese characters were combined to create a 60-year cycle of dates. 'Ren wu' is one of these combinations. They were often used in conjunction with the period of the Chinese emperor's

reign to provide an exact date, as in this case—1162.) One other surviving volume from this 1162 edition is held at the East Asian library of the University of California, Los Angeles.

Although the National Library had long known that this work was rare, there were doubts about its real age. As part of my current project on the Library's Asian treasures, the book was inspected by experts and, in early 2008, Emeritus Professor Liu Ts'un-yan, an internationally renowned scholar on Chinese rare texts at the Australian National University, stated that it was indeed from 1162. This was later confirmed by another specialist, Professor Lee Cheuk Yin, from the National University of Singapore, and by the Rare Books Department at the National Library of China.

Fang was born in China a century ago, on 18 April 1908. This was in the dying days of the Qing (Ch'ing) or Manchu dynasty (1644–1911). He attended the prestigious Yanjing (Yenching) University, under the distinguished historian and writer, William Hung (Hong Ye). Later the two men collaborated on major Chinese bibliographic projects.

In 1933, Fang moved to the United States, where he was to remain for most of his life. He studied at the Library School of Columbia University, and married fellow student Lienche Tu (Du Lianzhe). From 1934, the couple worked together at the Library of Congress with Arthur Hummel on the groundbreaking biographical publication, *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period*. Fang produced more entries for this compilation than any other contributor. After the war, Fang was employed at Columbia University,



and then at the University of California, Berkeley.

The Australian National University appointed him Associate Librarian and Curator of the Oriental Collection in 1961. According to his colleague and successor, Enid Gibson:

In the short time (less than two years) that he was at the ANU, Mr Fang was responsible for the addition of over 11 000 volumes to the Oriental Collection, an increase of 25 per cent from the time when he arrived in Canberra. He put the Asian collection and services on a sound footing ... and generally gave his staff a sense of direction and purpose.

He also suggested important purchases for the National Library, such as the valuable Kegan Paul Collection of Chinese and Japanese books.

Fang returned to Columbia University in 1963 to become co-editor of another major work, the *Dictionary of Ming Biography, 1364–1644*. His wife was the senior research associate for the project. Together they were responsible for over half its entries. In the words of the respected China scholar, Jonathan Spence, she was 'always his scholarly other half'. According to William Theodore de Bary of Columbia University:

It is not too much to say that his name thereby became immortalised in the annals of Western sinology as the co-compiler of the two most monumental works of sinological scholarship that have been produced in this country [the United States].

Late in his life, Fang also collaborated on another biographical collection, *The Records of Ming Scholars*, a selected translation edited by Julia Ching.

His love of books began early, as he recalled to Jonathan Spence:

[During] my childhood in Tang-ku, about ten miles from the mouth of Pei-ho [on the coast of north China] ... most of the time I was alone with my parents ... I had books for company. My father was busy during the day but sometimes he taught me to learn the characters with cards having illustrations on the back—very modern for those days. At six I could read Chinese translations of a world history.

Enid Gibson describes him as 'a real book man', who had a nose for finding treasures in second-hand stores. When Columbia

University conferred the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters on Fang and his wife for their contribution to scholarship, they were interviewed by the *New York Times*. On 29 February 1976, the newspaper reported that:

Their home is on a quiet dead end, and upstairs and down the rooms are crowded with books. 'We live just like students,' said Mr Fang ... 'Living among books spoiled us forever, and we feel uneasy if we are not surrounded by books.'

Chaoying Fang died on 26 April 1985, while back in China lecturing. At his memorial service, Jonathan Spence, who had travelled to Australia in 1962 to study under him, praised Fang for 'a kind of scholarly standard the existence of which I had only guessed at'. Spence recalled how, in Canberra, 'both Mr and Mrs Fang put their enormous learning at my disposal and treated me and my wife, Helen, with unfailing kindness'.

The National Library purchased about 6000 books from Fang in 1961. It should be noted that Fang's books were integrated into the Library's Chinese and Western holdings many years ago and are not shelved together as a formed collection. Around half are in Chinese and the rest is in English or in other Western languages. The range of subjects is broad. His primary interests were Chinese history and biography, especially of the Qing dynasty and the twentieth century. Other topics include Chinese art, archaeology, literature and philosophy. There are also works about

Edward Hausner
Chaoying Fang and his wife,
Lienche Tu Fang, at their home in
Englewood, New Jersey, c.1976
Courtesy *New York Times*/Redux





above:
Open pages of *Sinarum philosophus ...*, a Latin translation of Confucian texts, with an illustration of Confucius (Parisiis: Horthemels, 1687)
Rare Books Collection

below:
L'Empereur recoit les Hommages des Peuples ... reproduced from *Conquêtes de l'empereur de la Chine* by Isidore-Stanislas Helman, c.1785
Rare Books Collection

neighbouring parts of East Asia, particularly Japan and Korea.

Before their acquisition, the books were inspected by Elizabeth Huff, Head of the East Asiatic Library at the University of California, Berkeley. On 28 June 1961, she wrote to Harold White, the National Librarian:

The whole library is a solid collection of fundamental Chinese works with many ornaments of scarce items in several languages ... It seems to me that a new Oriental collection could not err in acquiring it.

Fang's Western language books include rare and important seventeenth- and eighteenth-century titles about China. For example, *Sinarum philosophus*, the original 1687 Latin translation of Confucian texts, influenced European Enlightenment thinkers. *A New History of China* by Gabriel de Maghalaes (1688) has been described as the most comprehensive description of China published during the second half of the seventeenth century. Martini's *Bellum tartaricum*, which appeared in English in

1654, was the first detailed description of China's conquest by the Manchus in the middle of that century. There is also a rare edition of engravings by Isidore Helman, depicting conquests by the Qianlong emperor in far north-west China during the 1750s. The engravings were produced in France and were based on paintings by Jesuit artists at the Manchu court.

Fang was interested in Chinese language translations of Western literature. For example, he acquired a number of editions by the influential Lin Shu (1852–1924), who was famous for his elegant classical Chinese versions of European works. They range from Shakespeare and Tolstoy to H. Rider Haggard.

There are substantial runs of early twentieth-century Chinese serials, such as a complete set of the National Palace Museum's illustrated weekly on its art collections, and the scholarly journal on Chinese history and civilisation, *Fu ren xue zhi* (*Series Sinologica*).

Although he lived in Australia only briefly, Fang left a lasting legacy in Canberra, namely his major collection of Chinese and Western publications and, most notably, the oldest printed book at the National Library.

ANDREW GOSLING is former Chief Librarian, Asian Collections, at the National Library. He is currently preparing a guide to the Library's Asian treasures. He would like to thank Enid Gibson, Emeritus Professor Liu Ts'un-yan, Maggie Shapley (The Australian National University Archives), Professor Jonathan Spence, Jocelyn K. Wilk (Columbia University Archives) and the staff of Asian Collections at the Library for their assistance with this article

