

I see life and progress everywhere and trust in the future of China. I believe that her literature will bring forth new facts and new thoughts, and that the time will come when it will arrest the attention of the world at large. It is to be hoped that the near future may see many American scholars taking a real interest in this literature, and when the time comes they will have at hand here in Chicago ample foundation material for their studies and investigations" — Berthold Laufer of the Field Museum, 1913

## Chinese Studies at Chicago

### A Brief History of the Origin of Chinese Studies at the University of Chicago

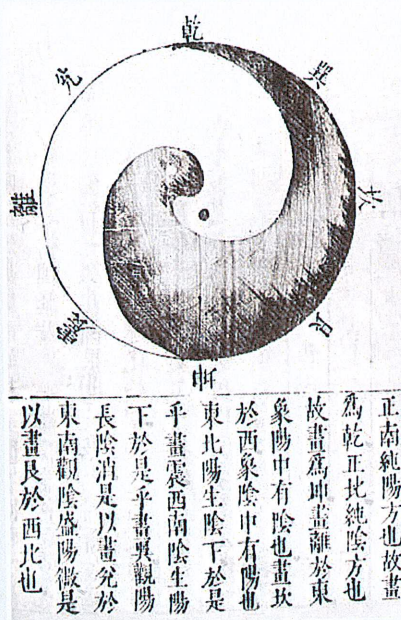
By Theodore N. Foss, PhD 1979, Associate Director of the Center for East Asian Studies

**T**he evolution of Chinese studies at the University of Chicago, as old as the University itself, has seen the emergence of an interdisciplinary field with a strong future.

The University presently has twenty-one faculty China specialists in various departments and Chinese language classes bursting at the seams with five language instructors working diligently. The library's Chinese collection now numbers 410,131 volumes. In the last two years alone the Division of the Humanities has welcomed four new faculty members: Yuming He, specializing in Chinese literature, and Paul Copp in Buddhist literature and medieval Chinese literature (East Asian Languages and Civilizations); Ping Foong, whose current research is on spatial strategies in Chinese visual culture (Art History); and Tamara Chin, doing comparative work on classical Chinese and Greek literature (Comparative Literature).

In the 1890s a Chinese language professorship was proposed to President William Rainey Harper. The impetus for this early discussion was probably fired by missionary zeal for China and contrasted with Berthold Laufer's vision of Chicago as a true center for Sinology. Then, in 1908 and 1909, Professor Ernest DeWitt Burton traveled to Asia under the auspices of the Rockefeller Foundation's "Commission on Oriental Education" to investigate educational, social, and religious conditions there. The proposal to hire a China specialist finally came to fruition in 1928 when Harley Farnsworth MacNair, a pioneer in studying China's relations with the West, joined History. Soon after, Ernest B. Price, the author of studies on secret treaty relations of the Manchu and a former consul in Shanghai, began teaching in Political Science.

Even before 1928, students had begun investigating China. Curiously, the first dissertation with a China theme was presented in 1918 in Chemistry, Chi-che Wang's "The chemistry of Chinese preserved duck eggs and Chinese edible birds' nests"! Shou-yi Chen, who had been Burton's Cantonese translator, received his PhD in 1928 with a dissertation on



China in eighteenth-century English literature. A faculty advisor, John Manly, wrote of Chen that his "soul was saved in China and lost again at the University of Chicago." Chen is an unsung hero of the University. While a student, he taught the now better-known Herrlee Glessner Creel enough Chinese to use original sources for his dissertation. Upon completing his degree, Chen returned to China and, in 1930, wrote back to his alma mater with a vision for Chinese studies at Chicago and an offer to facilitate the purchase of a Chinese research library. He was politely rebuffed.

Creel earned his PhD in Chinese philosophy in 1929, and, after five years in Beijing, the University asked him to build a program in Far Eastern studies within the Department of Oriental Languages and Literatures. One of the major tasks undertaken by Creel was to build a Chinese research collection for the library. Creel estimated that the Chinese books

then numbered about 800. He would add another 2,100 volumes from his personal collection and a collection of some 20,000 volumes originally from the Newberry Library in Chicago. Soon after Creel's arrival, President Hutchins could write to Hu Shih, Chinese ambassador to the United States, that the University was building a Chinese library "which will be of such size and completeness as to provide facilities for serious research" and that Chicago was devoted "to the study and teaching of Chinese culture, history, art, and languages." The University granted an honorary degree to Hu, the father of the Chinese literary renaissance, in 1939.

From the beginning, the Chinese scholarly program was fully integrated into Chicago's intellectual life. Anthropology Professor Robert Redfield, PhD 1920, JD '21, PhD '28, stressed in 1957 that the University should not "ghettoize" non-Western civilizations. He pointed to Chinese civilization as an exemplary manifestation of the highest achievement of humanity, not as "exotica," but rather, vital in itself and central to our academic work. He saw Chicago faculty who studied Asia as both outstanding practitioners of their discipline as well as specialists in the culture of an area or group of people.

With the rise of Area Studies during and after World War II, Chicago joined other universities in designing accelerated language programs in non-Western languages. An interdisciplinary Committee on Far East Studies was organized in 1951, the Center for East Asian Studies was established in 1959 with the assistance of the U.S. Department of Education, and the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations was established in 1963.

Two recently created centers represent the continuity and advancement of Chinese studies at Chicago. Harkening back to its origins, the Creel Center for Chinese Paleography, directed by Professor Edward Shaughnessy, studies recently excavated manuscripts. The Center for the Art of East Asia directed by Professor Wu Hung looks to encourage new perspectives on East Asian visual culture as the societies of Korea, Japan, and China interact to an ever-greater extent with other nations and play greater roles in contemporary culture and international affairs. ■

Above: Zhang Huang (1527–1608), *Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate*, from the *Compendium of Diagrams* (dated 1623). Ming Dynasty, Tiangu reign. Courtesy of the East Asian Collection, University of Chicago Library.