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The International Union Catalogue of Chinese Rare Books: A New Phase Begins

JOHN WINTHROP HAEGER

After nearly a decade of planning and three years of active preparatory work, an international project to create the first-ever machine-readable union catalogue of Chinese rare books began production operations in September 1991 at Princeton University. The RLG International Union Catalogue of Chinese Rare Books is a multiphase, multinational enterprise initiated and managed by the Research Libraries Group, a not-for-profit corporation owned by major research institutions throughout North America, which earlier established the first network-based bibliographic system capable of handling East Asian materials in their original scripts. The ultimate objective of the project is to create computerized bibliographic records for all Chinese book materials printed before 1796 held in RLG member collections, or in the collections of collaborating institutions overseas; to ensure that these records are complete, consistent, and as accurate as current scholarship permits; and to make the resulting data available online throughout the world.

China's premodern printed heritage is now scattered widely in libraries around the world. The corpus is of great importance to scholarship in all subfields of Chinese studies. The number of printings, the care with which they were produced, the extent to which the book market stimulated fakery, the commentaries and marginalia, and the physical characteristics of the book-as-object, combine to illuminate literary, social, and political his-

tory, as well as the history of tastes, trends, art, and material culture. Students of premodern China recognize that access to this corpus is limited to a few printed catalogues for individual repositories, a union catalogue for mainland Chinese libraries still in the process of publication, and a machine-readable file produced by the National Central Library (NCL) in Taipei. Not only does each of these tools have internal deficiencies; their utility is further compromised because consistent principles of description or edition discrimination have not been applied across and between individual catalogues.

In 1988–1989, with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), RLG convened an international advisory committee of scholars and librarians from China, Taiwan, and the United States to draft guidelines and standards for a comprehensive, international project. A subset of the machine-readable records produced by the National Central Library was also acquired, converted, and loaded into the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN). Then, in the spring and summer of 1989, a pilot project was undertaken at Columbia and Princeton, in which librarians from Peking University and the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Peking applied the draft guidelines to a sample of rare materials in the Gest and C. V. Starr collections. Four hundred and fifteen rare books were recatalogued over a five-month period. In September 1989, the participating librarians met with representatives of the Library of Congress, scholars, and RLG staff to document work flows and procedures, evaluate the converted NCL records, and revise the cataloguing guidelines that had been drafted by the International Advisory Committee. The revised guidelines represent a landmark fusion of traditional Chinese bibliographic practice with Anglo-American cataloguing rules and Library of Congress rules for the description of rare books.

Now, with additional funds from the NEH, plus grants from the Henry Luce Foundation and the C. V. Starr Foundation, a central editorial office has been established at Princeton to manage the first post-pilot phase of work. This is expected to take two years, and will involve the rare book collections at Princeton, Chicago, Berkeley, Columbia, Yale, and the University of British Columbia. Each participating collection will submit “dossiers” or worksheets to the central editorial office, from which editorial staff will construct consistent and conforming records for each title. These will be entered directly into the RLIN database using conventions that will

allow them to be retrieved separately by interested parties, or in the natural course of searches, whenever the information in these records matches relevant search criteria. Participating libraries will meet periodically with editorial staff, and specialist consultants from China will be employed to address especially difficult problems. Approximately six thousand titles will be recatalogued over the two-year period. At the same time, Peking University and the Chinese Academy of Sciences will be recataloguing their rare books following the same guidelines and procedures, entering records into RLIN directly from Peking, and these records will also be monitored by editorial staff for consistency and conformity. If all goes well, RLG will seek continuation funding until all the rare Chinese materials in its member collections have been recatalogued.

RLG has named James Sören Edgren as editorial director for the project. Edgren, who holds a doctorate in sinology from the University of Stockholm, has devoted two decades to East Asian bibliography and rare book cataloguing. He is widely published in the fields of rare books and printing, and has recently completed a catalogue of the Chinese books and manuscripts acquired in the early years of the century by Berthold Laufer for the American Museum of Natural History.