

# THE FLYLEAF

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# **THE FLYLEAF**

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the Fondren Library, Rice  
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## JEFFERSON DAVIS LETTER ACQUIRED

*The generosity of the Friends of the Fondren Library has allowed acquisition of a Jefferson Davis letter, which will not only augment Woodson Research Center's Southern historical manuscripts collection but will also occupy a place in one of the volumes of the Papers of Jefferson Davis being edited at Rice University.*

This letter is a very significant and useful document, particularly for historians and Davis biographers. Written to Davis' wife Varina on December 10, 1846, the letter recounts some events of the Mexican War as well as mentioning a number of important personal matters. It is precisely because of its personal nature that the letter is so valuable. Davis letters of this type are extremely rare; when one is discovered, it helps us to understand the man and his age, not necessarily as they have been portrayed but as they actually were. It is most singular that a man of Davis' stature should be so little known, so little understood, and that his character and personal life would have to be reconstructed from a number of different and widely scattered sources. But such is so and therein lies the value of the letter.

Of the circumstances surrounding its writing, it is interesting to note that Davis, who had been in Mississippi on leave, was returning to his regiment in Mexico and owing to a number of unforeseen delays was forced to lay up at the mouth of the Rio Grande to await transportation upriver. While there he wrote his wife that there were a number of rumors current that the Mississippi regiment would accompany General Zachary Taylor to Tampico by way of Victoria. Although the rumor proved untrue, it was partially correct in that Davis did travel with Taylor to Victoria, but instead of marching to Tampico, the two returned to Monterrey.

Not only did Davis mention certain current events, but he also wrote his wife that she must learn to forgive the transgressions of others and rise above the mundane annoyances of the day. In giving such advice, Davis was undoubtedly referring to the family quarrel that had occurred before he returned home on leave. Indeed it was, in part at least, the family quarrel that had led Davis' wife to insist that he return home in the first place. As Varina Davis was later to relate, she was "much stung" when Davis' niece Caroline said that the Davises were utterly dependent upon her father's bounty. Although Caroline's father told Varina to disregard his daughter's "naturally natured and wild" remarks, he did so in such a manner that Varina was deeply offended, and the affection that she had felt for him from childhood was never restored. Hence Davis' admonition to his wife that she "pity and forgive the weakness in others which galls and incommodes us." Perhaps of even greater human interest is Davis' account of having met a "Lady friend" of his while awaiting a ship in New Orleans. One can almost imagine that Davis felt that he must relate the encounter to his wife before she heard about it from others. Thus Davis' assurance that "one of these days" he would tell her about "several" of his female acquaintances of whom he had lost track over the years.

Although the letter includes a number of other interesting points, such as Davis' reference to the dispute that arose between the Mississippi and Tennessee regiments as to which had played the more prominent part in the Battle of Monterrey, perhaps the above will give some indication of the document's importance. Thanks to the generosity of the Friends of Fondren Library, this significant letter has been acquired by the Woodson Research Center.

James T. McIntosh, Editor  
The Papers of Jefferson Davis

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## “The Cultural Significance of the Ch’ing Encyclopedia *Ku-chin t’u-shu chi-ch’eng*”

Rice University's Fondren Library is extremely fortunate to have obtained a Taiwan reprint of the massive 79 volume Chinese encyclopedia *Ku-chin t’u-shu chi-ch’eng* (Complete collection of illustrations and writings, ancient and recent, hereafter *TSCC*), often known simply as the *Imperial Encyclopedia*. Printed in 1725 under imperial auspices, the *TSCC* was intended as nothing less than a comprehensive survey of “all that was best in the literature of the past, dealing with every branch of (human) knowledge.” In the words of the Yung-cheng emperor (r.1723-1736), the encyclopedia succeeded admirably “in linking ancient and modern lore, bringing together classics, history, astronomy and geography, accompanied in every case by illustrations and comments, and including details relating to mountains and rivers, plants and trees, the manifold productions of various arts and industries, and the mysterious inventions of the West.” Two modern scholars, Knight Biggerstaff and Ssu-yu Teng, have written that the *TSCC* is, quite simply, “the largest and most useful (extant) encyclopedia that has ever been compiled in China.”

The *TSCC* is organized into six main categories: (1) Heavenly Phenomena, (2) Geography, (3) Human Relationships, (4) Arts and Sciences, (5) Literature and (6) Political Economy. Under these main categories are thirty-two sub-categories (*tien*).

In all, the *TSCC* consists of over 6,000 section (*pu*) in 10,000 Chinese volumes (*ch’uan*)—a total of nearly 100,000,000 characters. The writings contained in each of these sections are derived from several factual and fictional sources.

Of the *TSCC*'s 10,000 *chuan*, the largest number are devoted to the category entitled Human Relationships (2,604). The next largest category is Geography (2,144 *ch’uan*), followed by Political Economy (1,832), Arts and Sciences (1,656), Literature (1,220), and Heavenly Phenomena (544). Among

the sub-categories, by far the largest is Political Division (1,544 *chüan*) followed by Arts and Occupations (824), Government Service (800), Clans and Family Names (640), Classical and Non-Canonical Writings (500), Women (376), Foods and Commercial Goods (360), Ritual (348), Religion (320), Vegetable Life (320), Mountains and Rivers (320), Confucian Conduct (300), and Military Administration (300). Most of the remaining sub-categories number fewer than 200 *chüan*.

The *TSCC* is an invaluable repository of information on every conceivable aspect of traditional Chinese high culture. Written by the elite for the elite, it is orthodox in outlook, and often conventional and biographical in treatment. Intended as a kind of bureaucratic guide for the emperor and his officials, the *TSCC* also served as a handbook on the political arts and as a manual of instruction in such important matters as the writing of essays and poems, and in preparation for the traditional examination. Since it is based on the elite's self-image, it portrays only a portion of social "reality," but it is an extremely important part.

A full discussion of the value of the *TSCC* would require many pages; only a few or two examples will therefore have to suffice as illustration. Suppose we are interested in the position of women in traditional Chinese Society. At first glance, the large number of *chüan* devoted to women in the *TSCC* would seem to indicate that they played a more prominent role in Chinese society than is generally recognized; and indeed they did. But we know this primarily from sources of information other than the *TSCC*. What the *TSCC* provides us with is the *orthodox* view of women in the Ch'ing period. This is clear from an examination of the individual sections on women. By far the largest section is on "widows who would not remarry" (210 *chüan*), followed by "women who preferred death to dishonor" (70 *chüan*). By contrast, there are only seven *Chüan* devoted to women writers, five on "heroic and devoted women," four on "wise and capable women," and only one on "witty and accomplished women."

Take another example. Suppose we are interested in Chinese amusements. In addition to information on such common elite activities as word puzzles and poetry-writing contained in the sub-category on Branches of Literature, and information on festivals in The Year, and on music in Music, we find in the sub-category entitled Arts and Occupations a wealth of material on a wide range of everyday diversions, including "boxing," chess and checkers (*wei-ch'i* and *hsiang-ch'i*), guessing games, gambling, magic, juggling, archery, acrobatics, ball games of various sorts, kite-flying, swinging on a swing, puppet shows and so forth. There are also sections in this sub-category on activities such as astrology, divination, physiognomy and palmistry. Somewhat surprisingly, given the traditionally low position of doctors in China, a considerable amount of attention is given to the practice of medicine.

These examples could be multiplied many times. The sub-categories on Human Affairs, Social Intercourse, and Confucian Conduct are full of particularly valuable information relating to the basic cultural concerns of

the Chinese elite. Often they are cast in terms of standard polarities: Body and Spirit, Fortune and Misfortune, Grief and Happiness, High and Humble (station), Life and Death, Profit and Harm, Giving and Receiving, Guest and Host, Love and Hate, Praise and Slander, Crookedness and Straightness, Good and Evil, Mind and Body, Motion and Rest, Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy, Public and Private, Name and Reality, Right and Wrong, Words and Deeds, etc. Some discussions in the sub-category on Human Affairs are very mundane, dealing with themes such as Washing and Bathing, Aging, Doubts and Fears; while others address metaphysical questions concerning Fate, Omens, Reincarnation, and Rewards from Heaven.

The sub-categories on Confucian Conduct, Religion, and Ritual are especially useful in highlighting the orthodox values of the traditional Chinese elite, while the sub-categories on The Emperor, The Imperial Household, Government Service, The Examination System, Foods and Commercial Goods, Military Administration, Official Careers, and Law and Punishment, cast much useful light on the complexities of Ch'ing administrative practice. Similarly, the sub-categories on Family Relationships and Clan and Family Names provide valuable clues to understanding the extraordinary cohesiveness and social importance of the Chinese family system, and the sub-categories on the Heavens, Astronomy and Mathematics, Peculiar Phenomena, The Earth, Mountains and Rivers, Animal Life, and Vegetable Life give abundant evidence of the special interest the Chinese had in nature and natural phenomena. Even the sub-category on Industry and Manufactures contains interesting and illuminating materials in sections on such widely diverse subjects as Official Buildings, Cities,anners and Scrolls, Eating Utensils, and Imperial and Official Seals.

In short, the *TSCC* has something for everyone and a great deal for many. At least two Rice professors will be making immediate and extensive use of the *TSCC* in their own research. Professor Richard Cushman of the Anthropology Department will be consulting the *TSCC* regularly in the course of his research on Chinese ethnic minorities, and I will be using the *TSCC* as a "data base" for my book-length study of traditional Chinese elite culture in the Ch'ing dynasty. The *TSCC* should also prove to be invaluable as a source of reference for members of the Rice Chinese Student Association's Cultural Study Group, as well as a welcome intellectual "escape" for all Chinese in the University with a knowledge of the classical language. Like a Sung landscape, the *TSCC* beckons the world-weary to seek cultural refreshment; I suspect that many will answer the call.

Richard J. Smith  
Assistant Professor of History

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