

Alice Elliott Dark

When I transferred to the University of Pennsylvania as a sophomore majoring in Chinese, the last thing that made me nervous was the thought of using the library. Yet when I did as told and went to do my homework in East Asian Studies room on the fifth floor of the Van Pelt library, I was suddenly terrified.

I'd expected the usual catalog and stacks, where the most disconcerting thing I might encounter was a kissing couple. The East Asian Studies room, however, really was a room, with glass doors that had to be opened to enter, and tables already taken by upper classmen and grad students who knew each other and how to use this particular collection.

The great Chinese encyclopedias sat on the shelves, large volumes that held dictionaries, important writings, and literature, assembled over hundreds of years. There were massive volumes on science and philosophy. The encyclopedias weren't organized alphabetically, of course, and I realized how much I had to learn to even be able to approach them — years and years of work ahead. To qualify for their master's degree, students took a days-long test (apparently modeled on a rigorous examination taken by scholars in pre-Revolutionary China) that required they find a list of items in the encyclopedias. To be educated was to know these books and what they contained. There were rumors of nervous breakdowns during the exam. This wasn't me going to find books I need for a paper. This was serious.

Opening the glass doors and entering that special space — only allowed to majors and others with a specific reason to be there — was to brush up against scholarship. Some of my professors had books in that room that were the first translations of seminal Chinese texts. The work of these scholars had brought knowledge of China to the West, and cost many professors around the country their jobs during the McCarthy era of anti-Communist paranoia.

I couldn't enter that room as blithely as some of my fellow majors seemed to, though they too may have been feigning a college coolness. The collection was one of the best in this country at the time, and it contained knowledge of another civilization, ancient and complex, I really knew nothing about. I thought of myself as educated because I had the luck of going to good schools. I wasn't. The room humbled me completely.

One of the first things I was told as a Chinese language major was that the study of the language can never be completed. The greatest scholars in China had only known in part. I could see why. The realization that I'd never come anywhere near knowing what was in all those books was part of the function of the collection. That was humbling, and character building, as my grandfather said of hard lessons.

Yet, as much as the room meant to me, and for all the hours I spent there, it existed for another purpose than anyone's education. In that room, I came to understand that libraries served books themselves, and papers, letters, maps; journals, dictionaries, diaries; all forms of written knowledge and communication. Libraries were safe havens for the written work, and sanctuaries for the work of people who may have paid a high price for their writing. A library at night, when the building is closed, is as vital as when it is filled with curious people.

The passing of years hasn't convinced me that I was shy to go in there out of youthful self-consciousness. On the contrary, my nerves seem an appropriate response to a room full of

monumental knowledge and books hundreds of years old. I was allowed to work there, and I wasn't even 20.

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