



# A Review of the Documents of the American Branch of the Science Society of China in the Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard University, the United States

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## Abstract

The Science Society of China, one of the longest-existing, largest, and most influential scientific associations in modern China, plays a crucial role in China's history of science. For a long time, academic circles have had a limited understanding of the American Branch of the Science Society of China, and the historical facts are ambiguous. In recent years, the newly discovered documents of the American Branch have unveiled this organization to the academic community. The emergence of new historical materials tells a compelling story about the history of academic exchanges between China and the United States during the Republic of China period. It enriches the academic community's understanding of individuals who fought in the United States and aspired to save their country and people. The main founders and participants of the China Science Society were a group of natural science intellectuals. They have far-reaching intentions and share a common understanding of saving the country through science. They have promoted the institutionalization of scientific and technological development both ideologically and practically. They have played a pioneering or foundational role in the development of various disciplines of modern science, higher education, and scientific and cultural undertakings in China.

## Keywords

New historical materials, scientists, history of science, the American Branch of the Science Society of China

In the process of exploring historical truths and restoring historical facts, the traces left behind are important content on which historians rely when writing history. Among the various forms of traces, the value of textual historical materials has been recognized by historians from all over the world throughout history. Among textual materials, archives play a unique role. They are relatively authentic and reliable, and their content-rich nature attracts numerous scholars to interpret and deconstruct them. The expansion of new historical materials is an important way to innovate historiography. Therefore, it is the responsibility of historians to explore and collate archival materials. The Documents of the American Branch of the Science Society of China in the Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard University have been dormant for many years, and now they can finally be reproduced and published for the benefit of the academic community (Cheng Huanwen, 2014). To help readers have a more in-depth understanding of these documents, this paper presents a brief introduction to the people and events in the American Branch of the Science Society of China and the content and historical value of these documents.

## 1. The Rise and Fall of the American Branch of the Science Society of China (1922-1936)

The Science Society of China was one of the most influential scientific organizations in modern China, and its development is an integral part of the history of science in the same period. The American Branch of the Science Society of China (hereinafter referred to as the American Branch) was the only overseas branch of the Society during the Republican era (David Reynolds, 1986).

On October 25, 1915, the General Regulations of the Science Society of China, drafted by Hu Mingfu, Zou Bingwen, and Ren Hongjun, was approved by the members, marking the establishment of the Society. After that, the organization expanded and received support from influential figures such as Cai Yuanpei, Huang Yanpei, and Zhang Jian. Meetings were held for three consecutive years, and the Society officially applied for registration with the Ministry of Education of the Republic of China in Beijing in 1917, becoming a legitimate social organization. Due to the migration of members, the affairs of the Society were transferred to China in 1918. In May 1922, members of the United States wrote to the board of directors requesting the establishment of a branch; in August, the Society decided to reorganize itself, and the establishment of branches was officially proposed (Lin Licheng, 2015).

According to the plan, "If there are more than thirty members of the Society and well-developed affairs in a major foreign city, and if the council or half of the local members deem it necessary to establish a branch, a proposal can be made by the council and must be approved by a majority vote at the annual meeting to establish a branch called the XX Branch of The Science Society of China, which takes charge of the affairs in that area and its surrounding areas". After discussions by the board of directors, an organizational structure with a president, secretary, treasurer, and editor was established, and the American Branch was founded. According to available information, as of 1924, three branches, namely the American Branch, the European Branch, and the Japanese Branch, of the Science Society of China had been established. However, the author has found that only the American Branch developed. In the early stages, the American Branch had seven council members, including President Gu Guchen, Secretary Qian Changzuo, Treasurer Ding Xubao, Chairman of the Divisions Cheng Yaochun, and three editors stationed in the United States. It was reported that the American Branch had 39 members in 1923. These dedicated members actively contributed articles to the journal *Science*. In the summer of that year, Ye Qisun, the chairman of the Temporary Executive Committee stationed in the United States, reported to the headquarters, expressing his hope that the American Branch could be responsible for editing three issues of *Science* each year and establish a Divisions Committee in the branch. At the end of the year, the American Branch also formulated the Regulations of the American Branch of the Science Society of China, consisting of ten chapters and twenty-six articles. However, perhaps due to poor organization and coordination, these regulations were not implemented (Mao Rong, 2002).

After a group of core members returned to China from the United States, the development of the American Branch in the late 1920s was not satisfactory. In 1929, General Secretary Yang Xiaoshu summarized the situation of the branch as follows: "The American Branch has long been left unattended. This year, several members were designated by the council to organize the branch, but there has been no news (Wang Zuoyue, 2016). It is difficult for us to contact the members who stayed in the United States." The American Branch went down because the focus of the Society's development was in China. Additionally, its development faced formidable challenges, leaving little time for dealing with the affairs of the American Branch and inadequate support for the branch. Furthermore, it is difficult for the scattered members in the United States to effectively communicate with each other, and there was a lack of an esteemed and influential organizer (Ye Minghan, 2012).

In 1926, the China Foundation for the Promotion of Education and Culture began providing subsidies to the Biological Research Institute of the Science Society of China on a regular basis. The following year, the Ministry of Finance of the Nanking National Government allocated 400,000 Silver Dollars in treasury bonds as a fund, and the monthly interest payments were used as the regular expenses of the Science Society of China. Thus, the Society had sufficient funding and ushered in its golden period. At the same time, reorganizing the American Branch was an urgent matter. After all, the Society was founded in the United States and spent its initial years there. Moreover, the United States was a developed country with rapid advancements in science and technology and an important gathering place for Chinese overseas students (Zhang Jian, 2018). It was also a significant source for the Society to acquire cutting-edge scientific information. Due to the chronic disarray at the American Branch, previous attempts at rectification had proven ineffective. Yang Xiaoshu, the newly appointed general secretary, decided to entrust Mei Yiqi with the task of leading the reorganization. Mei was a highly prestigious and influential figure in the field of education at that time (Zhang Jian, 2008). He was one of the first group of Chinese students who received funding

from the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program and graduated from Worcester Polytechnic Institute in the United States. After returning to China, he served as the academic dean at Tsinghua University. In 1919, he joined the Science Society of China, working as an editor for the journal *Science* and actively participating in the Society's affairs and activities. In November 1928, he resigned as the academic dean and went to the United States to lead the Office for Supervising Tsinghua Students in the United States. The office was responsible for managing scattered Tsinghua students studying across the country, particularly their financial matters. At that time, the American Branch amid stagnation and organizational disarray needed a prominent figure who could establish broad connections with Chinese students studying in the United States and rally them together. Mei Yiqi was undoubtedly the best choice.

On January 30, 1930, Mei Yiqi wrote an open letter to about 40 Chinese students studying in the United States, calling for active publicity to reorganize the American Branch. Soon, feedback from the students poured in. A student called Zhou Tian replied to the letter stating that he had received two membership applications and expressed his desire to join the Society. Two months later, Mei sent another open letter, stating that they had received 31 membership applications. He suggested organizing everyone and electing a council (president, secretary, and treasurer) to work for the members. Mei included a list of candidates for the council and election ballots in the letter, and the statistics would be based on the members' replies. In July 1930, Mei reported to the general secretary Yang Xiaoshu that Mei was elected as the president Wu Luqiang as the secretary, and Huang Yuxian as the treasurer by 33 members in the preliminary election. This interim election marked a significant event in the reorganization of the American Branch.

The newly reorganized American Branch sought to hold a joint annual meeting with the American Branch of the Chinese Engineering Society to further expand its influence. Mei wrote to Zhang Yizhi, the chairman of the annual meeting of the American Branch of the Chinese Engineering Society, expressing their hope, which was agreed upon. Subsequently, the two exchanged opinions through letters, discussing the agenda of the meeting, and agreed to hold it from August 30 to September 1. Wang Dezhi and Hu Jingming from the American Branch and two representatives from the other organization formed the executive committee of the annual meeting. On August 9, the executive committee issued a notification letter to all members of the American Branch, informing them of the agenda of the annual meeting. The purpose of the meeting was listed in the letter as follows: to promote communication among members, exchange academic knowledge, and discuss the Society's affairs. The American Branch developed rapidly, with over 40 members by then. Yang Xiaoshu also sent a letter to Mei Yiqi congratulating the reorganization of the branch. On August 26, after the 15th annual meeting of the Science Society of China, Yang informed Mei in a letter that their colleagues in China were delighted and applauded upon hearing the news of the American Branch's reorganization. Yang hoped that Mei would arrange American editors and correspondents as soon as possible to send back several scientific articles to facilitate the publication of the journal *Science*. At the end of August, the first annual meeting after the reorganization was held successfully, marking the formal completion of the reorganization of the American Branch.

In October 1930 (Jia Sheng, 2021), the reorganized American Branch conducted a formal election for the council. Mei Yiqi, Zhang Hongyuan, and Wang Dezhi formed the selection committee and issued a notification to all members. Three candidates were proposed for each position, namely the president, secretary, and treasurer. 40 valid votes were received, and the newly elected council members were Mei Yiqi (president, 39 votes), Zhang Hongyuan (secretary, 26 votes), and Wang Dezhi (treasurer, 18 votes). The results showed that Mei was highly recognized and firmly supported by the colleagues of the American Branch. 1930 was a crucial turning point for the branch. In May of that year, an interim election was held; at the end of August, a joint annual meeting was held with the American Branch of the Chinese Engineering Society to expand its business; at the end of November, a formal election was completed, marking the beginning of a new era.

The American Branch was reorganized in 1930 and entered a phase of normalized and orderly development in 1931, with all matters proceeding in an organized manner and an increasingly close connection with the headquarters in China. Given the unique advantages of the American Branch, the Editorial Committee of the journal *Science* requested that the branch regularly send the latest scientific information to China to enrich the journal's news section. 1935 marked the 20th anniversary of the Science Society of China. The joint annual meeting of that year, themed "Industrialization: The Role of the Application of Science in China's Economic Development and National Reconstruction", was held in New York on September 12. Qiu Kaiming, on behalf of the American Branch, delivered a report titled "The 20th Anniversary of the Science Society of China and Future Plans". Unfortunately, an

esteemed guest Alfred Sao-ke Sze, the Chinese Ambassador to the United States was unable to attend. Presided over by Qiu, a special symposium titled “The Significance of Industrialization in China” was held during the meeting. After the conclusion of the annual meeting, with the coordination of Qiu, then president of the American Branch, Meng Zhi, the president of the China Institute agreed to designate their headquarters as the permanent office for the American Branch, a place to receive letters and mails and store documents. As a result, the working conditions of the American Branch significantly improved.

The development model established in 1930 and 1931 was followed from 1932 to 1936. Each year, the American Branch held the joint annual meeting with the American Branch of the Chinese Engineering Society, collected annual fees from members, received issues of *Science* from the headquarters, distributed them to members in a timely manner, and regularly reported the latest scientific information to China. According to the literature I have read so far, this orderly development model of the American Branch continued until 1936. Further investigation is required to determine the situation after that.

## 2. The Main Content of the Documents of the American Branch of the Science Society of China

The Documents of the American Branch of the Science Society of China, housed in the Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard University, have been meticulously sorted into over ten large boxes selected into three volumes, covering correspondences, reports, directories, and a considerable number of issues of the journal *Science* (incomplete). Among the selected 130 letters or so, dozens of individuals from various fields are involved, including Hu Mingfu, Zou Bingwen, Ren Hongjun, Ye Qisun, Yang Xiaoshu, Mei Yiqi, Wu Luqiang, Huang Yuxian, Tang Peisong, Wang Dezhi, Wu Dayou, Xiong Xueqian, Alfred Kaiming Chiu, Chen Shichang, Gao Shangyin, Wan Shengwu, Feng Hanji, and Zhao Bufan. Some of them, such as Ren Hongjun and Mei Yiqi, have been extensively studied in academic circles, while others are relatively unknown, with fewer relevant writings.

Specifically, the first volume mainly includes correspondences between individuals related to the American Branch and documents recording the branch’s affairs and activities. The approximately 130 letters primarily consist of content-rich communications between the branch’s president, secretary, treasurer, other members, and the headquarters in China from 1930 to 1936. Additionally, the documents recording the branch’s affairs and activities are also highly valuable. These documents include the handbook of annual meetings jointly held by the American Branch and the American Branch of the Chinese Engineering Society, some of the papers presented at the meetings, and detailed lists of members. These materials reveal the changes before and after the reorganization of the branch, even down to the details of elections of new officers (Wang Zuoyue, 2022).

The second volume includes documents from the headquarters. Due to the design of the system, the headquarters have some business relations with the branches, which allowed the American Branch to irregularly receive documents mailed from China. These documents directly record the activities of the Science Society of China, an active organization in China at the time, reflecting the good interaction between the headquarters and the branch. Representative documents in this volume include the General Regulations of the Science Society of China, the Overview of the Science Society of China, and the Proceedings of the Annual Meetings of the Science Society of China. The Proceedings are especially valuable as they record detailed information about the meetings, including reports by the general secretary, treasurer, Biological Research Institute, library, and the editorial office of *Science* (Higgitt, R. & Withers, C. W. J., 2021).

The third volume includes issues of *Science* from 1915 to 1950. This journal was started in 1915 as a monthly publication and had a total of 32 volumes with a circulation of over 760,000 copies. The publication persisted in using rough-edged writing paper made from bamboo even during the difficult years of the War of Resistance against Japan. In 1951, the journal merged with *Natural Science* and was discontinued shortly after, only to be temporarily revived between 1957 and 1960. Since 1985, *Science* has been published by the Shanghai Scientific and Technical Publishers, which is a journal combining academic and popular science.

## 3. The Historical Value of the Documents of the American Branch of the Science Society of China

Since modern times, the achievements made by capitalism and the changes it has brought to human society have largely benefited from the revolution in natural sciences since the 17th century. Generally speaking, science refers to the division of subjects and later to the study of various kinds of knowledge in refined categories such as mathe-

matics, physics, chemistry, etc., gradually forming a complete knowledge system. It is the discipline of exploring the laws of nature and the general term for the knowledge system that humanity uses to explore, study, and comprehend the laws of the universe and all its changes. Science is a system based on testable explanations and ordered knowledge that predicts the form, organization, etc. of objective things. The well-known “Needham’s Grand Question” reflects that China had long had technology but not science. It was not until the second half of the 19th century, amid domestic turmoil and foreign aggression, that the Chinese people began to realize the importance of modern science. The May 4th Movement in 1919 saw intellectuals clamoring for democracy and science. Today, the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation cannot be realized without science (Peter Buck, 2020).

How did modern science come to China and what was its subsequent development? For a long time, research on the history of science and technology in modern China has not received much attention. As the birthplace of science societies in the Republic of China, the Science Society of China has experienced the ups and downs of the Beijing government, the Nationalist government, and the People’s Republic of China, making it an important window for observing the development of science and technology in modern China. Ren Hongjun wrote *A Brief History of the Science Society of China* in 1960, leaving valuable first-hand information for later generations. Subsequently, Taiwanese scholar Guo Zhengzhao and American scholar David Reynolds both studied the Science Society of China. Since the 1980s, research on the Society has gained increasing attention and yielded fruitful results both in China and other countries. The book titled *The Disseminator of Science: A Review of the Chinese Scientific Society* authored by Mao Rong in the 21st century is the first monograph in China on the history of the Society. In 2005, Fan Tiejuan published *The Modern Transformation of Systems and Ideas: The Science Society of China and China’s Scientific Culture* (People’s Publishing House), and Zhang Jian published *The Science Association and the Change of Society in Modern China: A Study on the Science Society of China* (Shandong Education Press). Despite the same subject, the two studies have different focuses. The former focuses on the organizational evolution and specific activities of the Society, while the latter pays more attention to how the Society promoted the development of scientific ideas and endeavors in modern China. In recent years, under the guidance of Zhang Jian, the series *Document Organization for the Science Society of China* has been published, with three volumes currently available. The project primarily relies on the archives of the Society housed in the Shanghai Archives, the importance of which is self-evident. On that basis, Zhang Jian published the monograph *Science in China: A Study of the Science Society of China*. With almost 900 pages, this comprehensive and detailed work thoroughly investigates the rise and fall of the Society, making it a magnum opus in this field.

The American Branch is a pivotal part of the history of the Science Society of China and the study of the Society. Unfortunately, up to now, no one, except for the American scholar Wang Zuoyue, has explored this issue. However, Wang’s research has only unveiled a tiny bit of the American Branch, which is far from enough. The effort of Zhang Jian’s team mentioned above failed to address the issue. In 2017, Zhang wrote: “We need another good opportunity to collate and study the historical materials housed in the Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard University, and the Wason Collection on East Asia at Cornell University Library.” Now, this regret can be partially remedied.

Based on the summary of the development of relevant academic studies, the value of *The Documents of the American Branch of the Science Society of China* in the Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard University is self-evident. The publication of the photocopies of the documents has enriched the writing of the history of the Society and revealed more historical details, which also facilitates the study of the history of science and technology in modern China. In addition, the study of people involved, such as Mei Yiqi, can also be supplemented, such as the study of Mei Yiqi. Furthermore, topics such as the history of studying abroad and the history of the development of associations in modern China may also benefit. Today, there are tens of thousands of Chinese students and scholars in the United States. What kind of energy should they bring into play while pursuing their studies and knowledge? The actions of the American Branch more than 80 years ago can serve as a reference.

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