

Prized mushroom collection returns to China

November 7 2009, By DAVID WIVELL , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- A Chinese scholar persecuted during the Cultural Revolution for smuggling a rare collection of mushrooms out of China before World War II was honored Saturday when the collection was returned more than 70 years later.

At a ceremony at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Cornell University President David Skorton handed over the collection that had been meticulously gathered by scholar Shu Chun Teng.

Teng studied mycology at Cornell University in the 1920s, then spent the next decade traveling on horseback gathering molds, lichens, yeasts, rusts and morels in the forests, fields and marshes of his homeland.

"I think the most important part about what we're doing here today is really returning a hand to the Chinese people that was outstretched three quarters of a century ago," Skorton said.

During the Japanese invasion in 1937, Teng arranged for his best specimens to be removed from a national botany institute he directed to save them from destruction. During [World War II](#), they were smuggled by ox cart to Indochina and then by sea to the United States, and 2,278 of the specimen packets ended up at Teng's alma mater.

But that action meant Teng became a target during the devastating 1966-76 Cultural Revolution. Discharged from his lab, he was subjected to daily beatings and mental prosecution that ruined his health and career. He died in 1970 at age 67.

Teng's daughter, Deng Yi, said she felt many emotions at the ceremony.

"During that time my father was classified as a counterrevolutionary and labeled with many different crimes. The main crime he was blamed for was maintaining illicit relations with foreign countries - selling out our heritage. The reason was this collection," she said.

"So now that these specimens have returned to their home country, my father up in heaven would feel a great happiness in his heart," Deng said.

At Cornell's initiative, the university divided up and is sharing its Fungi of China Collection with the academy's Institute of Microbiology.

Zhuang Wenying, a mycologist at the Institute of Microbiology, praised Teng's action.

"I think that his motivation and his actions were great things, because he saved this treasure so that we can still see and research with them today. Some of these samples do not exist anywhere else," she said.

During his travels to all corners of [China](#), Teng made meticulous notes and drawings of the fungi he found - and frequently mailed duplicates to Cornell. He returned to teaching after the war, restored a national mycology laboratory and published a 1963 book that remains an indispensable source of information on his country's [fungi](#) in the first half of the 20th century.

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Citation: Prized mushroom collection returns to China (2009, November 7) retrieved 28 July

2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-11-prized-mushroom-china.html>

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