A Book Conservation Treatment: Preserving the "Mao Books"

By Paula Leon
Conservator (Paper)
Heritage Conservation Centre

Fig. 1: *Poetry of Chairman Mao*, and *Quotations from Chairman Mao*

About the Books

The Asian Civilisations Museum put together artifacts of the 10 revolution years in China in the exhibition ***Seeing Red: Propaganda and Material Culture in China (1966-1976)***.

As usual, many of the artifacts which go to exhibition needed conservation treatment. I had the chance to treat two colorful artifacts, which are part of the eight volumes currently on exhibition; one of them is *Poetry of Chairman Mao*, printed in China on December 1967. The second and smaller book is the famous "Little Red Book", which is actually titled *Quotations from Chairman Mao*. This particular copy is "before" printed in China on December 1968. The Little Red Book was first published in 1964, containing quotations from Mao's speeches and writings (Fig. 1).

"Objects like these were used as propaganda in the campaign between 1966 and 1976 in China, keeping the revolutionary spirit alive. There were more than a billion copies of books containing Mao's essays, poems and speeches. These books were available for sale in bookstores and also distributed by local committees to their members. They even became so popular that they were presented as wedding gifts.

Lin Biao, Minister of Defense and head of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was responsible for spearheading this compilation of Mao's quotations. Originally, the "Little Red Book" was intended to be an ideological guide for PLA officers, but from 1966 they

were reprinted for a wider circulation and became the gospel of truth for the whole Chinese population. It was read religiously and discussed at group study sessions. People internalized the contents so deep that they even conversed in Mao's quotation."[1]

About the Materials

The volumes have a simple cover made of plastic, of course in red color, with blind tooling[2] at the edges, a Chinese golden inscription, or sometimes an image of Chairman-Mao at the front (Fig. 2). The cover has two inner pockets.

The paper used for the text block[3] is a modern machine-made paper; the ink is printed black ink. There are also color prints with images of Chairman-Mao within the text block (Fig. 3). Pages were sewn together by section with unsupported link stitch[4]. The first and last pages of the text block were then slide through the inner pockets of the plastic case. In some cases a thicker paper cover was glued to the spine and slide through instead of the pages.

Fig. 2: blind tooling at the edges of the cover

Fig. 3: color images included in the text block

About the Condition

One of the damages is caused by the presence of mold on the red plastic cover. Mold can expand and migrate easily to other materials if the conditions of both high humidity and temperature continue for a long period of time.

---

[1] Extracted from the exhibition's display texts.

[2] Blind Tooling: "A method of decorating a book in which impressions are made in the covering material, usually leather or tawed skin, by means of heated tools, pallets, rolls, fillets, or combinations of one or more of these… ". Matt T. Roberts & Don Etherington. *Bookbinding and the Conservation of Books - A Dictionary of Descriptive Terminology.* Electronic edition, 1994.

[3] Text block: "The body of a book, consisting of the leaves, or sections, making up the unit to be bound, rebound, or restored. It excludes all papers added by the bookbinder, including board papers, endpapers, doublures, etc." ". Matt T. Roberts & Don Etherington. *Bookbinding and the Conservation of Books - A Dictionary of Descriptive Terminology.* Electronic edition, 1994.

[4] Link Stitch or Catch Stitch: "1. Any type of locking stitch, such as kettle stitch. 2. A stitch used to gather or "catch up" the sewing threads which pass around the tapes of a book. The purpose of this stitch is to prevent undue looseness of the sewing thread. Also called "link sewing." ". Matt T. Roberts & Don Etherington. *Bookbinding and the Conservation of Books - A Dictionary of Descriptive Terminology.* Electronic edition, 1994.

Fortunately, in one of the volumes mold only attacked the paper cover made with non-archival materials, which means, it was not a big loss. In fact, this paper cover has acted as a barrier in protecting the text block from the mold attack (Fig. 4).

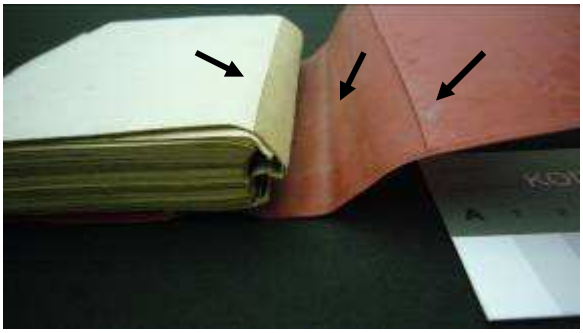

Fig. 4: mold on the plastic cover and paper cover

The second damage affects the spine of the book. All pages are connected, or bind together through the sewing at the spine area. When the spine is damaged, the book cannot be open, pages will start to detach, and every thing just falls apart.

In this case, the two volumes had damages at the spine. The plastic case was pulling the pages to the spine direction, bending the pages in a concave shape (Fig. 5- 6).

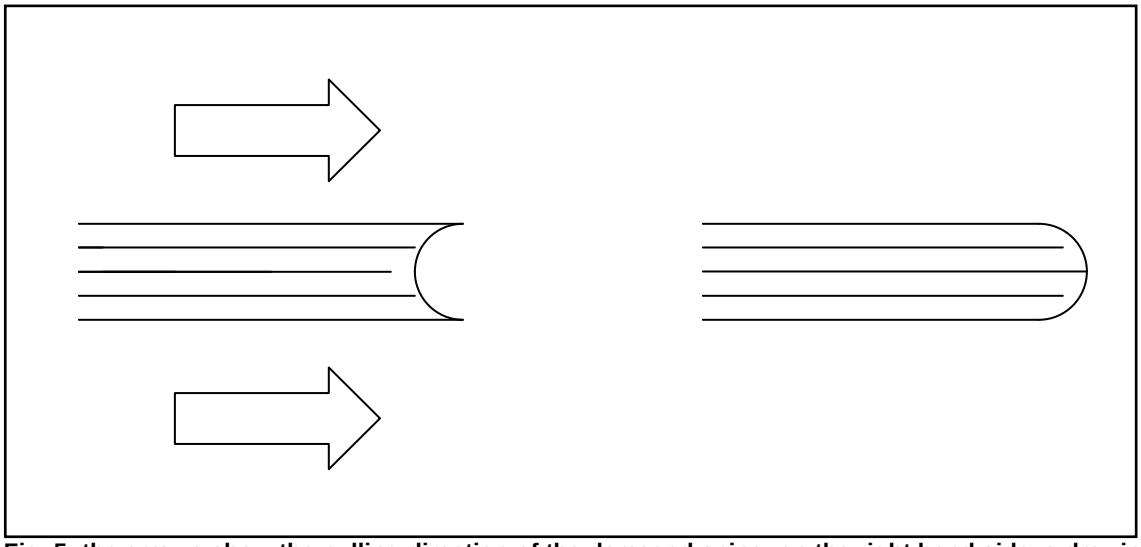

Fig. 5: the arrows show the pulling direction of the damaged spine; on the right hand side, a drawing of a "normal" spine shape.

One of the two volumes had decorative headbands[5], at head and tail. These headbands, like the spine were also deforming, and the thread was frayed-out and dirty (Fig. 7).

Fig. 6: plastic pulling the pages to concave shape

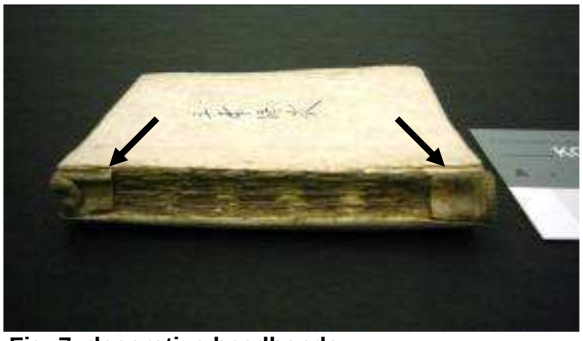

Fig. 7: decorative headbands

In general, the pages of the books had only minor deterioration, such as small tears and losses, a few water stains, paper delamination at the spine, folds and creases, specially the first and last pages, and superficial dirt. The inks, both printed and manuscript were stable (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8: tears and delamination at pages

The Conservation Treatment

In order to start the conservation treatment, the parts of the book were separated in two:

1) Case; and
2) Text block

The case was cleaned and the mold was removed with a solvent treatment[6]. Cotton swabs dipped in the solution were rubbed on the surface of the case until the cotton did not pick up anymore visible dirt. It was then air dried (Fig. 9).

[5] Headbands: "A functional and/or ornamental band at the head and tail of a book between the sections and the spine covering, which projects slightly beyond the head and tail… ". Matt T. Roberts & Don Etherington. *Bookbinding and the Conservation of Books - A Dictionary of Descriptive Terminology.* Electronic edition, 1994.

[6] The solvent solution used was water / ethanol (1:1)

Fig. 9: case after cleaning

Pages from the text block were also cleaned on the surface with crumbs eraser, taking care of the folds and the manuscript ink while cleaning.

The pages that had tears were repaired with paper and adhesive. The paper selected was a very thin and strong Japanese paper made of Kozo-fiber, an Asiatic tree used for paper-making. The paper was toned with acrylics to match the original paper color. The adhesive used was wheat starch paste, cocked and strained, in order to obtain a very soft and sticky adhesive-paste[7].

The last pages which had fold lines and creases were locally humidified with a damp blotting paper. As papers are made in water, it is easier to relax the fibers in a damp blotting paper. After a few minutes when the fibers are relaxed, a light weight was added onto the page to flatten it without any stress. All inks were very stable so they did not react to the moisture during the humidification process (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10: pages before treatment at the left hand side; pages after humidification and flattening at the right hand side

The spine of the text block was then cleaned and the old adhesive was removed with a water-based poultice[8]. New wheat starch paste was used to consolidate the text block and re-shape it into a flat spine.

[7] Japanese materials have a long tradition in conservation; they are very stable and have the best archival quality for conservation purposes.

[8] The poultice used was 5% Methyl Cellulose in Water.

The decorative headbands were removed and cleaned with the same poultice, which resulted in the visible reduction of dirt and grime.

Once the spine was consolidated and totally dried, paper linings were adhered to reinforce the spine and keep it as one solid block (Fig. 11-16). During the cleaning and lining processes, the text block was kept between boards in a wooden book press.

Fig. 11: before cleaning

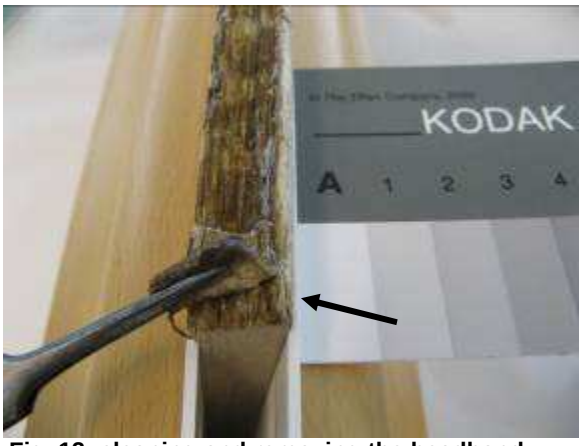

Fig. 12: cleaning and removing the headband

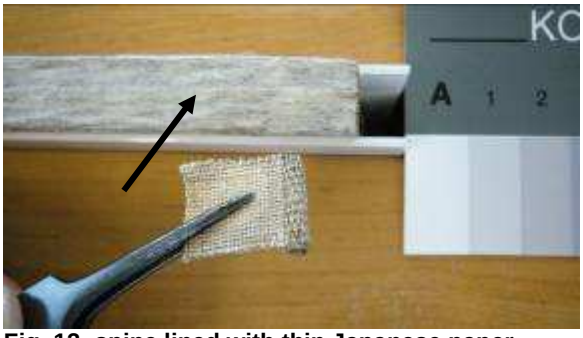

Fig. 13: spine lined with thin Japanese paper; headband cleaned

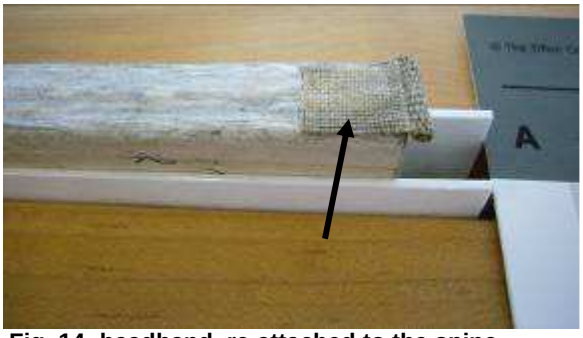

Fig. 14: headband re-attached to the spine

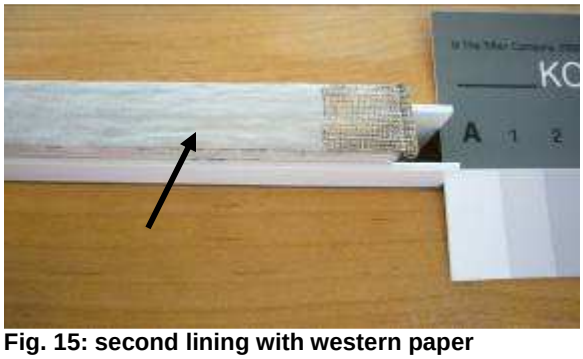

Fig. 15: second lining with western paper to compensate the level

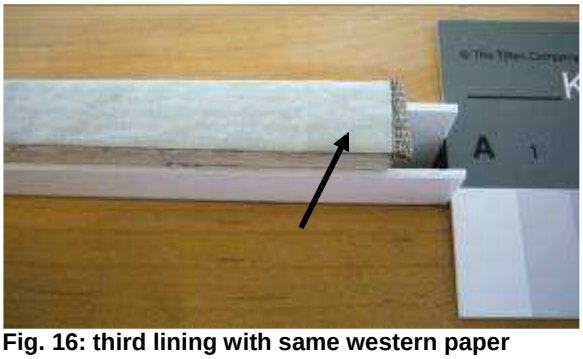

Fig. 16: third lining with same western paper over the headband

The number and the material used for spine lining are related to the opening of the book. The more linings on the spine, the closer the book gets, that means it will be very hard to open without harming the book. In bigger old bindings, other materials like leather or parchment were commonly used as lining to prevent too much opening. For this case, the volume needed a thin Japanese paper, 2-western hand-made paper and for the last lining, a linen cloth with an extra material along the sides as extension (Fig. 17).

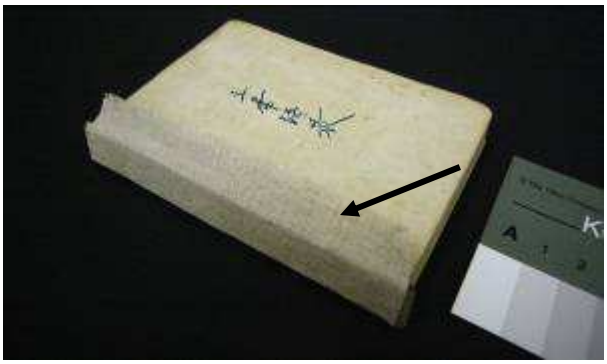

Fig. 17: linen cloth with extension

Before treatment, the first and last pages of this volume were slide through the case causing wrinkles and fold lines. In order to re-attach the text block to the plastic red cover without damaging the pages, new materials had to be incorporated. Custom acid-free boards were cut to fit inside the plastic case. The size of the boards have been cut intentionally to a slightly smaller size than the case to avoid pulling the pages too much as it did before (Fig. 18).

The boards were adhered to the linen piece at front and back, leaving room for the hinge to open; 2mm was enough to achieve an easier and very flexible opening (Fig. 19).

Fig. 18: text block, cover, custom acid-free boards

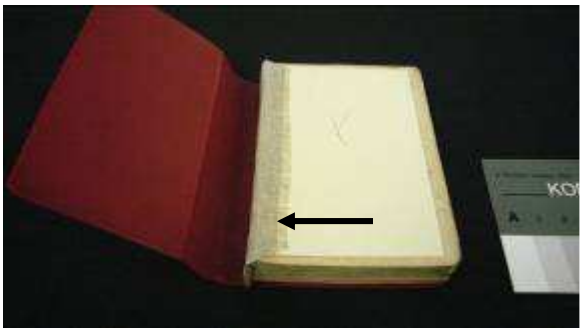

Fig. 19: boards attached to linen piece

The Result

Before the conservation treatment, the book could hardly be opened, the spine was very stiff, it was concave, and pages from the text block were deteriorated (Fig. 20-21). In this scenario, the volume would not be presentable for the exhibition.

After the conservation treatment, the book is more stable, the opening has improved, with both the cover and text block mended using archival and reversible materials (Fig. 22-25). The general appearances of the books were also improved markedly in time for the exhibition.

Please join us *Seeing Red* at the Asian Civilisations Museum. The exhibition is on until January 17th, 2009.

Fig. 20: before treatment, front pages

Fig. 21: before treatment, back pages slide in the case pocket

Fig. 22: after treatment, cover

Fig. 23: after treatment, flat spine

Fig. 24: after treatment, front pages

Fig. 25: after treatment, back pages

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ms Shuyi Kan, Curator from the Asian Civilisation Museum for her valuable contribution on the writing of this article.