

Ancient Archival Depository in Peking¹

By ARTHUR W. HUMMEL

Silver Spring, Maryland

THIS structure, built in 1534 and known to the Chinese as Huang Shih Ch'eng (Repository for Imperial Archives), stands in a large courtyard, southeast of the Forbidden City, Peking. It is a long rectangular building of brick and stone with a tile roof. Like all important Chinese edifices, it faces south and is encircled by a marble balustrade. Near the center on the south side are three stately arched doorways approached by separate marble stairways. Near the east and west ends, also facing south, are two similar doorways. The three in the center were for the Emperor and high officials, the two on the sides for officials of lower rank. Under the eaves on the north side are 21 large square vents for the free flow of air. Over the central doorway is a massive horizontal tablet with large characters penned by Emperor Chia-ching, who reigned in the years 1522-67. It reads: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DEPOSITARY.

The building was purposely designed to house two types of historical archives: the official chronicles or "veritable records" (*shih-lu*) of each emperor's reign and edicts — literally "precious instructions" (*pao-hsün*) issued by the emperors on special occasions. The former were compiled by the Historiographical Board during each emperor's reign and were later used as sources for the official dynastic histories. In 1562 there was placed in the building the duplicate set of the monumental 11,095-volume encyclopedia, *Yung-lo ta tien*, which was compiled by order of Emperor Yung-lo in the years 1403-7. Too vast to print, it remained in manuscript. In the period 1723-36 it was transferred to the Hanlin Academy, where later, during the Boxer uprising of 1900, many of the volumes were burned.

After 1644, when the Manchus began their rule, this building

¹ This is a translation, with minor omissions, of an article written in the Chinese language by T. L. Yuan, formerly director of the National Library of Peiping, and published in *T'u-shu-kuan hsüeh chi-k'an* [Library Science Quarterly], vol. 2, no. 3, Sept. 1928. Dr. Hummel was formerly Chief of the Division of Orientalia, Library of Congress.

continued to house archives, including the Imperial Family's genealogical records, and edicts. Eight elderly Manchu officials were made responsible for the care and preservation of the building and its contents.

Inside the building one sees rows of brick-and-stone platforms about 5 feet high ranged along the north, east, and west walls, with steps leading up to them. On the platforms are 161 large chests, their sides deeply carved with the imperial dragon design and their covers made of copper. The chests are arranged in 23 rows, with 7 chests to a row. In the northeast and northwest corners of the hall Dr. Yuan noticed inscribed stone monuments, but because of the darkness of the interior he was unable to read the inscriptions. In the chests were deposited Chinese, Manchu, and Mongol versions of the aforementioned archives — all carefully wrapped in red damask. Though they had been in the chests for many years, Dr. Yuan could detect no signs of moisture or of insects. In the northeast corner of the grounds is an open pavilion sheltering a stone monument in which is a poem, written by Emperor Ch'ien-lung when he visited the site in 1750. It reads as follows:

Sacred documents handed down from antiquity
Are safely locked in this venerated place,
In accordance with time-honored plans.
The long line of historians who penned them
Have no occasion to regret their work.
The officials who now take care of them
Have each their appointed tasks.
By attending to the admonitions contained here
Our descendants will flourish for ten thousand years.
It was customary for the ancients to wrap their archives,
Fasten them reverently with clasps of jade,
And then deposit them in metal chests.
Let us ponder diligently those that are preserved here,
And use them as mirrors to examine ourselves.

The building is probably still standing, although when Dr. Yuan was writing, in 1928, weeds grew profusely in its courtyard.