

# The International Scene: News and Abstracts

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## An American Archivist's First View of the Chinese Archives

MARILYN GHAUSI

FOR THE PAST QUARTER-CENTURY, since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), an ancient and populous culture has been virtually inaccessible to tourists and to most Western scholars. The process of normalizing diplomatic relations between the USA and the PRC, begun with President Nixon's historic visit in February 1972, made possible the resumption of contacts on many levels. First to benefit from China's need and desire for technological development were professionals in technical and scientific fields. Historians and social scientists have had more frequent contacts as the atmosphere of mutual interest and cooperation has improved.

American archivists have waited eagerly for an opportunity to begin a dialogue with their Chinese colleagues. Since 1977, the Society of American Archivists has sought to arrange a study tour to mainland China for archivists and manuscript librarians. Individuals have repeatedly, without success, sought permission from Chinese authorities to visit archives. Even the most rudimentary communication was frustrated by an almost complete lack of information within the American archival community regarding the organization, location, or personnel of Chinese archives. Within the past year these conditions have changed dramatically.

During July and August of 1979, a delegation of the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE), an international, professional organization of engineers and scientists, toured principal university centers in China as guests of the Chinese Institute of Electronics (CIE). The participation of Americans in the first CIE national conference since the Cultural Revolution was an historic event covered by Chinese press and television. As a delegation member's wife, I had the unique opportunity to meet with Chinese archivists in their professional surroundings—despite bureaucratic and logistical hurdles.

Before leaving the United States, I was designated a special representative of the SAA to explore the possibilities of a study tour by Society members. At the first group meeting with our CIE hosts in Peking (Beijing), I furnished them biographical data, an SAA letter outlining my responsibilities, and a written request to visit archives in the cities on our itinerary. After several days, during which it seemed unlikely that permission would be granted, a trip to Peking's Palace Museum (Ming-Ch'ing) Archives was suddenly scheduled. The Chinese Institute placed a minibus at my disposal and provided a charming translator, Ho Ching-hwa.

A welcoming party, consisting of Vice-Director Li Peng-nien and his staff, greeted me on the steps of the Archives. We gathered for a somewhat formal meeting in the reception room and, over hot tea, the vice-director gave, in Chinese, a brief introduction to the Archives. Ho Ching-hwa translated commendably despite her unfamiliarity with the subject matter.

Established in 1925, the repository became known as the First Historical Archives; but it is more commonly referred to as the Palace Museum (Ming-Ch'ing) Archives. The present buildings, three multi-storied units constructed in 1974, are the repository for more than nine million documents, the records of the central governments of the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties. Emperors of these dynasties ruled China from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries from the Forbidden City, a fabulous walled complex of palaces, treasuries, halls, apartments, and gardens located in the center of Peking. Once forbidden to ordinary Chinese subjects, these structures are maintained today as the Palace Museum.

Most of the records have been inventoried, and registers are available, in Chinese, in the catalog room. The records are arranged by subject, with some in chronological series. Broad subject areas include politics, economics, diplomacy, art, education, meteorology, religion, minorities, foreign invasions, and revolutionary uprisings. Various guides to the holdings have been published since 1955: *Historical Records of Earthquakes during the Ch'ing Dynasties* (1959); *Westernization Movements* (1961); *Historical Records of the Ch'ing Dynasties*, volumes 1 and 2 (revised, 1978); *Second Opium War* (1978). For at least ten years, the Cultural Revolution disrupted publishing and other archival activities.

Archival activities currently include preservation, arrangement, publication, research, and Manchurian translation. A microfilming project, begun in 1974, has resulted in the filming of seventy to eighty thousand documents. Many of the approximately ninety staff members received their training at the People's University in Peking, possibly the only university archives department in China. Archives technicians are trained at regional archives.

As a fellow-archivist, I had the rare privilege of touring the stacks and workrooms. The storage areas are air conditioned and humidity controlled, amenities rare in China. The oldest documents, dating from the Ming dynasty, ca. 1402, are in scroll form. Several scrolls, hundreds of years old, were opened so that I might see the fine calligraphy and excellent condition of the paper. One Ch'ing dynasty document dating from the reign of Emperor Kang-Hsi (1662–1722) measured approximately two feet by twenty feet. In it the emperor appealed to the populace for loyalty on his ascension to the throne. The scroll is kept rolled in a beautifully made, silk-lined box containing a small amount of camphor-like powder. The aroma of camphor, widely used in the Orient as an insecticide, permeated the stack areas. My hosts pointed out that the inks used on these scrolls contain naturally acidic ingredients and an organic scent which repels insects. Although the Ming

and Ch'ing dynasty records are of great historical value, few Western scholars have received permission to use them. Chinese historians may use the Archives, but it is closed to the general public.

During the course of our discussion, many questions arose about the relationship of the SAA to the National Archives, and the composition of our membership. Museums, universities, and other institutions in China maintain archives (which are often extensive) for purposes of exhibition and research. They are not, however, considered official state archives. Two levels of official archives exist. On the national level, the State Archives Bureau, headed by Director-General Zhang Zhong, oversees archives in each department of the central government, in the central office of each military branch, and in every provincial office including those in major cities and self-governing districts. On the second tier, an office of archival activities oversees the First Historical Archives (Palace Museum Archives); the Second Historical Archives, located in Nanking; and regional archives in the provinces and self-governing districts. Although Chinese archivists had not formed a professional association at the time of my visit, plans are underway for the establishment of the China Archives Society, under the auspices of the State Archives Bureau.

A number of unofficial archives of somewhat private character still exist in China, awaiting discovery by the curious visitor. For example, the Temple of the Jade Buddha, also known as the Yu Fo Si Monastery, is a popular Shanghai tourist attraction visited daily by hundreds of people. Surrounded by famed yellow walls, the monastery is a complex of temples, shrines, pavilions, and living quarters for about twenty monks. A dark second-floor sanctuary contains the fabulous Buddha, carved from a single piece of white jade brought from Burma by a monk in 1881. In the company of an elderly monk, we removed our shoes and entered a richly paneled room. I asked our translator to inquire about the intricately carved paneling. Much to my amazement, the monk opened sections of the wall, revealing interior compartments filled with historical records—a religious archives documenting the history of the temple and the monks and their writings.



*Palace Museum (Ming-Ch'ing) Archives, Peking.*

Interesting archives and archival collections I learned about, but I could not visit other archives. The Archives of the Confucian Estate (Chu-fu), in Shantung province (birthplace of Confucius), described as a family archives, includes genealogical records, data on land holding, taxes, and rents. The Second Historical Archives, in Nanking, contains a large amount of documentary material relating to the Republican era, 1911-49. The Kiangsu Provincial Museum in Shanghai has an excellent collection of pre-1911 documents, particularly private material from the Ming dynasty. The Shanghai Museum reportedly has an archives collection focusing on the history of that city. There are also district archives in Szechwan, Kwangtung, and Hopei provinces.

To visit archives in China is not to follow a well-trodden path. At present, Americans know only in the most fragmentary way of the archival resources of this vast and ancient country.

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## NEWS

### AUSTRALIA

**National Music and Sound Library Opened.** The National Library of Australia, Canberra, opened, on 1 February 1980, a music library and sound recording unit, after ten years of planning.

The first steps toward this goal were taken in 1970 when the National Library acquired a large miscellaneous music collection from a Melbourne music critic and about 30,000 Australian recordings in 1973 from a private collector who is now the library's sound archivist. In addition, the music library includes 350,000 discs; 4,500 rare, nineteenth-century, wax cylinder records; 65,000 opera scores; and 100 original music manuscripts by such native composers as John Antill, George Dreyfus, and Larry Sitsky. The Australian Broadcasting Commission (the national radio and television network), commercial radio stations, and two jails in Victoria have donated 5,000 tapes and numerous discs. Facilities are available for listening to some of the great singers of the past on authentic equipment of the period.

**Archives Kits Published.** The Archives Authority of New South Wales has published two kits: *The Changing Face of the Rocks* and *From Cato Street to Botany Bay*, containing facsimiles of original records in the state archives. The kits are designed to assist teachers and students in Australian history. Persons interested in colonial New South Wales will also find the kits valuable.

**Records Management Pamphlets Available.** The Records Management Office (RMO) of New South Wales is issuing a series of publications entitled *Publications on Records Management*. Five pamphlets in the series, available free of charge, pertain to file format, file creation, principles of keyword classification, manual of key word classification, and general records disposal schedules. Mail requests to Records Administration Officer, Level 3, The State Archives, 66 Harrington Street, The Rocks, N.S.W., Australia 2000.

RMO is also assisting the Staff Development Division of the Department of Technical and Further Education in producing a 16mm. film on how to establish and operate a small record system. Release date is some time in November/December 1980.