

Visiting Archives in China

EVA MOSELEY

This report is based on visits to Chinese archives with the second study tour of China of the Society of American Archivists, April 1986.¹ All archives in China are government institutions; even the administration of the apparently private archives of the Kong family in Qufu is responsible to the government of Shandong Province.

Our visits generally followed the same pattern. After a welcome, we sat either at tables or in easy chairs and sofas in a large room; there was always tea in covered mugs, and sometimes other refreshments. Tables were usually covered with white cloths, and the teacups were refilled more than once. The tea was particularly welcome as the room was often chilly. There would be short speeches from both sides, generally ending with a briefing by one or more officials of the archives visited. Sometimes there were presentations of archival literature, in some of which I participated with literature from the Schlesinger Library. (After an attempt at humor during the first such presentation in Shanghai, at which the Americans laughed but not the Chinese, I kept it short.) We would then be taken, usually in two groups, on a tour. In most cases there was an exhibition, possibly arranged for us, and we would see the conservation lab and microfilming lab, if any, sometimes the search room (those we saw were extremely busy), and one or more storage areas. There was usually a guestbook to sign and every visit ended with a group photo; some began with one.

There were also three archives seminars, which were exercises in international friendship as well as exchanges of substantive information about what the Chinese call "archivology." The translations made everything take twice as long. They do provide time for taking notes, however, especially for those who, as I do, find it hard to write and listen simultaneously. In addition, there were several banquets, and in most cities we were greeted and/or sent off by an archival delegation, who would come to the station or airport for just that purpose, sometimes at an ungodly hour. When they saw us off, more likely than not they would bring a photo album of our visit and copies of the group photo for all of us. In several places the archives gave us each a packet of postcards. In return, besides the literature, Ed Weldon, archivist of Georgia, handed out Georgia peaches in the form of lapel stickers, and Larry Hackman, archivist of New York, "I Love NY" buttons.

Most people expect, quite reasonably, that China must have very old archives. In fact, however, the practice was that, at the end of each dynasty, a "veritable and approved" (these are contradictory terms!) history of the previous dynasty would be written and the original records destroyed. Except for some ancient writing on stone or shell or whatever, there are few records from before the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

Not only are archives in general not as old as one would expect, but the archives profession seems to be in at least as

¹See the two articles by William W. Moss, cultural and linguistic advisor on the second study tour of China, "Archives in the People's Republic of China," *American Archivist* 45 (Fall 1982): 385-409; and "Archives in the People's Republic of China Revisited," *American Archivist* 49 (Fall 1986): 481-90.

rudimentary a state as it is in the U.S. Discussions of education and standards for individual archivists sounded all too familiar. Educational programs have been few and far between until very recently, but, unlike here, there now not only are university programs, but one can take an archives course on television or by correspondence. The definition of an archivist, something that has occupied the profession in the U.S., would be rather different from ours: when we asked (in Chengdu, capital of Sichuan Province) how many archivists there are in China, our interlocutors said they could not tell us that, but that there are 37,000 in Sichuan, a province with a population of 90-100 million. Evidently this number includes not only what we consider archivists and what we call records managers, but I suspect also secretaries who maintain current files.

Our first visit was to the Shanghai Municipal Archives. Founded in 1959, it has a staff of 106, including three directors and ninety-four professional archivists. Holdings of 11,900 meters include municipal archives since 1949, records of the Communist Party and its organizations, archives of the Kuomintang regime, 1927-1949, and of the foreign concessions, 1851-. They receive more than seven thousand research visits or inquiries a year, and their problems include vermin, mold, faded writing, and space; a new building is planned for 1989, with air-conditioning and more than twenty-seven thousand square meters of floor space, and with a second building as living quarters for staff. They publish subject guides and a periodical, *Archives & History*. Our visit included speeches, a briefing, the presentation of literature, and a tour that concluded with an exhibition of documents by Mao, Chou En-lai, and Chiang Kai-shek.

At the (unplanned) seminar at Fudan University in Shanghai we learned that

the Literature School is one of six branches and is to have an archives department. The course given there meets the requirements of the Shanghai Municipal Archives. A four-year course leads to senior/administrative positions and a two-year course prepares students for lower levels. They study Chinese and world archival history, document compilation, technical administration, archives theory, and library and information science. There was some discussion of the term *quan dzong*, and whether it is comparable to a *fond* or record group. It must be created by an institution, office, or person who or which is independent in administration and has its own budget and personnel. We were also told that there is uniform scheduling of records throughout China; archives keep those records that reflect the functions of a unit.

The Zhejiang Provincial Archives, Hangzhou, also founded in 1959, holds records from the sixty sections or bureaus in the provincial government. The archives has 3200 square meters of stacks and 800 square meters of offices, with a staff of sixty-five, of whom twenty-two are university graduates; twenty-five are women. Holdings of 2800 meters include records of the Kuomintang period and of the Communist Party and its organizations; there are name and subject cards for this material. During 1981-1985 there were 15,000 research visits/inquiries. The archives publishes compilations of documents, including four volumes covering the years 1941-1949.

The Zhejiang Archives Association was founded in 1981 and held its second congress in 1984; it has 599 members. There are also district and municipal associations. The Provincial Archives and the association jointly publish a periodical, *Zhejiang Archives*. There are eighty-eight repositories in the province, with almost 24,000 meters of holdings

and 535 staff, of whom half are middle-school graduates and about 28 percent university graduates. A two-year archives course at Zhejiang University was expected to have thirty-three graduates in 1986. There were ninety-four students in the province taking a correspondence course from Beijing.

The Jiangsu Provincial Archives in Nanjing, established in 1968, has a stack area of 5000 square meters, with 7500 meters of holdings, or 640,000 volumes. They date from 1506—that is, from the Ming and Qing dynasties, and the Kuomintang and Communist periods; most are paper, with some photos and audiovisual materials. The staff of seventy-six works in four divisions: collections, technical, compilation and research, and administration. The archives is open to the public; the staff mounts exhibits, issues publications, and provides consultation. Our informants said that there are not enough staff, nor can they get staff of adequate quality.

A videotape made by the Jiangsu Provincial Archives about science/technology archives showed how costly it can be not to have archives: for instance, when builders cannot find gas and other pipes. Records help in restoring buildings and gardens. (The tape mentioned that the Chinese garden at the Metropolitan Museum in New York is a copy of one in Suzhou.) For textile factories, archives keep fabric samples, patterns, drawings, orders; for turbine factories, manuals and records of each machine sold. Important areas for China are soil archives and records of pigs; pig genealogies can lead to leaner meat. In Jiangsu there are records of coastal resources, although those for fish and shellfish are in the National Ocean Archives. There are also meteorological observations beginning in 243 A.D.

After seeing the videotape, we visited an exhibition in honor of the fortieth an-

niversary of the defeat of Japan and were shown the card catalog.

The Second Historical Archives in Nanjing has the records of the Kuomintang period, 1912-1949, including records of warlords and the Japanese. It is in several beautiful, traditional buildings built by Chiang Kai-shek as archives. There are 1,300,000 items on 340,000 meters of shelves, in four storage areas measuring 10,000 square meters; they are building one more storage area and an office building and improving the older buildings. (There were piles of bricks everywhere and other signs of construction.) The archives opened in 1980 and has six departments: preservation, arrangement, technical, compilation, research, and the office of the journal *Archives of the Republic of China*, begun in 1985. Archivists are also compiling volumes of documents, have contacts with the historical profession and archival associations, and in 1984 held the first symposium on the history of the republic. We saw a very busy reading room, a small vault containing the records of the Kuomintang Administrative Council for 1927-1928, conservation and microfilm labs, and a large exhibition. We were told that they do not publicize exhibits, which are mainly for special visitors.

At Qufu (Chü-foo), the birthplace of Confucius, we stayed in the Kong Family mansion's guesthouse, and we visited the mansion, the Kong Lin (the family forest and cemetery), and the Kong Miao (temple). We met with the Kong Family archivist and county officials and were shown items from the archives, most having to do with land and rents, some illustrated.

The First Historical Archives in Beijing, inside the West Gate of the Forbidden City, was founded in 1925. After posing for a group picture in the hot sun, we had tea in a cool room, a welcome, a

briefing consisting mainly of a video in English about archives in the People's Republic, again very impressive. A tour of the stacks and of the preservation and film labs followed, and we met a scroll-mounting expert. The First Historical Archives has a staff of more than 160, in six sections: administration, research, records management, compilation, technical, and Manchu. It is open to the public; in 1985 there were nineteen foreign researchers, most of them Americans. The staff maintains contact with archivists in the United States, Japan, Canada, and the United Kingdom. We learned here that there are 3006 archives in China and twenty-eight archival education programs, the first having been established at Beijing University.

While in Beijing, we held seminars at People's University. Linda Henry, Trudy Peterson, and I conducted one on one "Standards." In response to Peterson's brief paper about training in the U.S. and at the National Archives, we heard two papers, one about employment standards at the State Archives Bureau and one about new education standards. The State Archives Bureau is in the process of revising titles to improve salaries and, with the approval of the State Council, setting standards for archives and archivists. There are now five levels of employment, with two sub-levels: senior (researcher and assistant researcher), junior (archivist), and primary (assistant archivist and manager). New plans call for a three- to five-year term for each position and salary level. (It was not clear whether promotion would be automatic). Archivists should be university graduates, with different education for different levels; they must know policies and regulations, be able to do independent work, know foreign languages. Examinations for each professional level lead (or

will lead) to reward or criticism.

Following the laxity of the cultural revolution, provisional standards for archives—specifically for acquisitions, scope, staff size—have been issued recently. The National Standardization Committee has seven subcommittees: on documentation, microfilming, forms, etc. In April 1983 a secretariat for standards was established at the State Archives Bureau. On 1 May 1985 standards for description were adopted; these were implemented on 1 January 1986. A National Standards Institute has been set up, but its effect has not spread yet; by 1990 the State Archives Bureau is to issue standard forms.

There was a long discussion of microfilm standards, and many questions about finding aids; several Chinese asked about the use of the Dewey Decimal System in U.S. archives and could scarcely believe that there is no such thing.

At our seminar in Chengdu, I gave a short paper on standard-setting in the U.S., mainly that of the Society of American Archivists, focusing on standards for individual archivists, archival institutions, and education/training programs. Professor Chen then spoke about attempts to "improve education to accomplish modernization" in China, where archives are important for construction and education. In 1976 there was only one archival education program in China; now there are forty-two. The one at Sichuan University in Chengdu was the second. There are few people qualified to teach; some of the instructors are historians, some are chemists or other scientists, three are graduates of the archives department at People's University. Archives workers are also asked to give courses.

Because of the focus on modernization, there is an emphasis on new methods and especially new technology:

Professor Chen emphasized the need to change methods from "handwork." (We tried to convince them that we do a good deal of "handwork" in the U.S., too.) Courses at Sichuan University include archives management, records management, preservation, diplomatics, ancient writing, compilation, audiovisual archives, computer technology, local history, Chinese administrative and archival history, foreign archives, information science, library management, ethics, and statistics. The program combines theory and practice: there are practical and term papers; students must learn to do research.

On our last archives visit we saw the Chengdu Municipal Archives and the adjacent Wenjiang County Archives, in the suburbs of Chengdu. This time we sat on sofas and easy chairs around a large room with fifteen low tables for tea and dishes of apples and candy. Pots of roses sat in two corners and two pots of purple iris in the middle of the floor. Various archivists gave briefings and tours of both archives. (Both institutions use elegant wooden chests, some with chunks of camphor in them.) Chengdu has seventeen counties and districts, each with an archives; there is also a City Construction Archives. The First and Second Municipal Archives hold 540,000 volumes; the Municipal Archives Bureau coordinates the work of archives and gives short-term and television courses. Organizations and enterprises have their own archives. The Municipal Archives expects to build a new building next year. (A building for the provincial archives was under construction.)

The Wenjiang County Archives joined with the Municipal Archives in 1983; the latter has a staff of thirty, fourteen of whom are university graduates; it includes two records managers. There are

135 record groups, with 120,000 volumes. Included are records of the Kuomintang period, organizations, colleges, science/technology, and local history; financial and legislative records; and records of mass organizations of the cultural revolution. Records are arranged in accordance with administrative structure, and then chronologically. "To meet the needs of socialist reconstruction," the archivist has card indexes (with 170,000 cards); provide archives for scholars; do "selected subject work" (compilation?); and mount exhibitions. They use "hand management."

The county is an agricultural suburb of Chengdu, growing rice, wheat, safflower, jute, and garlic shoots. Living standards are rising. The archives was established in 1959, the archives bureau in 1980; the institutions share a building and staff of five: director general, deputy director, and three managers. The bureau guides more than one hundred organizations in the county with regard to their archives. The county archives has 35,000 volumes, most historical, in nine hundred square meters of stack space. There were 581 research visits/inquiries in 1985 and 120 visiting groups; researchers are local and from Sichuan. The Municipal Archives Bureau and the county archives are writing a five-year plan to introduce modern management.

I doubt that any of the two dozen archivists on the trip has changed his or her daily archival practice because of what we saw and heard in China. But our encounter with a small sample of China's people and culture, and our meetings with Chinese archivists, left indelible memories that I am sure have enlarged everyone's understanding of our place in the international community of archivists and the much wider international people's community.