10-1-1980

The Ch'ing Central Government Archives: Provenance and Peregrinations

Beatrice S. Bartlett

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jeal

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation


Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jeal/vol1980/iss63/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of East Asian Libraries by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
ARTICLES

THE CH'ING CENTRAL GOVERNMENT ARCHIVES: PROVENANCE AND PEREGRINATIONS

Beatrice S. Bartlett*

For Ch'ing historians, the decade of the 1970's has been the decade of archives. At the end of the boom years of the 1960's the late John M.H. Lindbeck published a report to the Ford Foundation on current educational, library, and research resources in the China field (Understanding China: An Assessment of American Scholarly Resources, Praeger, 1971). Not one paragraph in the entire book was devoted to the archival resources of the field. Yet by the end of the seventies the Ch'ing archives in Taiwan had become the focus of intense international scholarly interest and even those in Peking were beginning to be visited by researchers. Never before have Chinese archival materials survived the fall of a dynasty in substantial quantities; never before have scholars in large numbers been enabled to use them. At the present time a great many documents are available in various typeset and facsimile series; in addition, increasing numbers of scholars are heading for East Asia with the intention of poring over the collections and consulting local scholars in person. In the interest of limiting the potentially vast range of subject matter in this article, I shall concentrate on Ch'ing central government archival materials, ignoring the local archives and non-government commercial and private papers which also survive in quantity and which might well be the focus of other articles. I shall first describe the Ch'ing provenance of these materials and then their twentieth century peregrinations.

History of the Collections

During the Ch'ing period (1644-1911), central government archives were scattered in various repositories manned as part of the central government's operations. Thus official papers were held not only in Peking but also at the various imperial palaces and capitals elsewhere in the empire - chiefly the summer palaces outside Peking, Jehol, and Mukden. Local archives also contained copies of central government papers: imperial edicts and lower level directives had to be kept on hand for reference. By far the greatest number of materials was held in Peking and it is the Peking holdings that I shall discuss here.

*For direct assistance in writing this article I am indebted to Dr. Chiang Fu-tsung and Messrs. Chang Wejen and Chao Chung-fu in Taiwan, and to Drs. Michael H. Finegan and Alan Sweeten in the United States. Professors John K. Fairbank and Jonathan Spence commented helpfully on the chapter in my research guide (now in draft) from which this material is summarized. I am also grateful for the financial and moral support of the American Council of Learned Societies, which facilitated much of the research on which this article is based.
The largest archival repository in the capital city was the Great Treasury of the Grand Secretariat (Nelko ta-k'ü 内閣大庫), a two-storey building backed up against the east side of the southern wall of the imperial palace. Holograph documents and record books were regularly cast into thisoubliette to lie there, mouldering and forgotten. Rarely were these papers consulted - no reliable document-level index or accession list to the archival riches of these vaults was ever compiled. Although one eighteenth-century scholar commented enviously that the Grand Secretariat clerks with access to these treasures had all the secrets of government at their finger tips, few had the time or energy to take advantage of this privilege. We also know from Ch'ing sources that the Great Treasury was occasionally tidied up to make way for fresh invasions of documents, the remedy for shortages of space in these instances being the selective destruction of large numbers of the older papers. As a result, only a small proportion of early Ch'ing (1644-1722) materials has survived; much larger percentages have come down from the middle (1723-1820) and late (1821-1911) periods of the dynasty. Although this may also be partly because record keeping was simpler in the early days, the regular burning of papers certainly contributed to the relatively small number of early records that have survived to the present.

Some space in the Great Treasury was used to house books, but there is no evidence that rare books were ever selected for burning as a result of the housekeeping sessions. On the contrary, indexes were compiled and rare old wood-block editions dating back to the Sung were preserved with care. The attention paid to preserving books contrasts sharply with the insouciant attitude towards archives and reflects the long-standing Chinese zeal for book collecting. Knowledge of archives rarely went beyond official circles; archives were never privately collected in imperial times; and in nearly all cases they were burned at the beginning of each dynasty, once the previous dynasty's standard history had been completed.

Grand Council (Chün-ch'i ch'u 軍機處) papers were housed in another Peking archival depository, a building rather erroneously known as the Office of Military Archives (Fang-lüeh kuan 方略館), located in the southwestern part of the Peking palace. Grand Council materials date only from the middle of the Yung-cheng reign (1723-35) and consist chiefly of hand-written record books and draft script copies of the palace memorials. The Grand Council collection also contained maps which had originally been submitted as enclosures to the palace memorials. When it was investigated in the 1920's, the Fang-lüeh kuan was also found to contain some books, including many of those which had been earmarked for destruction in the eighteenth-century Literary Inquisition.

Another large archival deposit in the Peking imperial palace was the palace memorials or palace archives (Kung-chung tang 宮中檔). These memorials (tsou-che 奏摺) were reports from high level officials to the throne. They were rescripted in vermilion by the emperor and held in crates stored chiefly in the Chancery of Memorials (Tsou-shih ch'u 奏事處) but also scattered elsewhere in the palace. After the fall of the Ch'ing, the ceremonial parts of the palace were gradually opened to the public and the palace memorial crates were moved to the former private imperial areas to the north.
It was here that they were unearthed in the 1920's. It is the Taipei Palace Museum's palace memorial collection, about one-tenth the size of the original total, which is currently being reprinted in Taiwan (so far, the K'ang hsi and Kuang-hsu reigns have been completed, with the Yung-cheng reign about half done). Most other printings of archival materials have also drawn heavily on the palace memorial collections.

One set of materials stored in the palace precincts and related to the palace memorial collection was the personnel evaluations (k'ao-yü tan 考語簿). By the late Ch'ien-lung period (1736-1795), these were being submitted as enclosures to the memorials. The emperor would rescript the covering memorial with the words, "The enclosure is being withheld [from circulation]" (Tan liu lan 削露)，and remove the insert bearing the confidential comments which had to be submitted annually by each man's supervising official. Although we know that these were stored in the imperial residential areas where eunuchs rather than officials had access to them, little more is known about them. They have not been reported as having come to light in the twentieth century sorting of the Ch'ing archives.

Other archival holdings stored in the imperial palace during the Ch'ing included the records of the Imperial Household (Nei-wu fu 内務府), those from the early years having been almost entirely written in Manchu. A fine set of maps was also part of the Imperial Household holdings.

Outside the palace and just in front of it were the offices of the Six Boards, the Censorate, the Hanlin Academy, and other capital organizations. Most of these, together with any working files on hand, were destroyed in the battles which beset the capital in the last years of the dynasty. Fortunately, however, destruction of these offices did not always mean the loss of all their documents. For example, materials which might be regarded as Grand Secretariat/Six Board papers were regularly turned over to the Grand Secretariat Great Treasury for storage. Even large numbers of yellow registers (huang-ts'e 黃冊), ledgers of accounts or enumeration which in the Ch'ing system were first dispatched to the relevant supervising board, were eventually deposited in the Great Treasury. A copy, the blue register (ch'ing-ts'e 蓝冊), was diverted to the Grand Council files and stored there. Destruction of one office building did not necessarily mean that all originals and copies of its papers were irretrievably lost.

At an early date Ch'ing archivists were taking sensible precautions against the possible ravages of mildew, insects, loss, fire, and even flooding in the palace by insisting that copies be made of their most important archival papers. The dangers were real. Heavy rains once so inundated the imperial palace in Peking that a boat had to be requisitioned to convey the royal person about his own residence. Fires were common. Many of the palace wells were installed not as a source of drinking water but as means of dousing fires. Long before western governments were formally establishing their own archival depositories, the Chinese were concerned both with making duplicates and with ensuring safe preservation.

In seventeenth-century China (and probably earlier), a kind of prearchivage existed, in that certain types of provincial memorials had to be submitted with the central government file copy attached. This would have been in addition to any copies made for retention at the source. By 1729 the palace memorials were
being copied by capital scribes; by the last quarter of the eighteenth century
duplication of record books had become standard—some were even available
in triplicate. The copies were stored or, in the case of certain important
record books containing copies of hundreds of documents, kept at alternate
imperial residences or taken on the imperial tours to be used for reference.
In addition, certain record books were specially copied (in bowdlerized form)
for the State History Office (Kuo-shih kuan) to use in compiling
the biographies of the official dynastic history.

These policies ensured that loss or destruction of one set of archival materials
did not mean in the Ch'ing, and does not mean now, an irretrievable loss. There
were very few official documents which existed in one copy only. A typical
imperial edict might be available in as many as six or eight places in the
capital alone, a memorial in three or four. Even the confessions of heterodox
rebels were available in two sets despite the fact that the circulation of such
seditious documents was generally restricted. There were few unique materials.
Some, such as maps and diagrams, were unique because they were difficult to
copy. The personnel evaluations (k'ao-yü tan) may also have been confined to
one original only. The fact of the multiple availability of many Ch'ing
documents is a boon to researchers today. Much that is in Peking is also
available in Taiwan.

If past practices had been maintained, the fall of the Ch'ing should have been
followed by the publication of an official dynastic history and the destruction
of all archival materials employed in that enterprise. Disorder in China in
the early twentieth century and the concern of modern historians anxious to use
the materials for research ruled out such a sequence of events. A pre­
liminary draft dynastic history appeared in the 1920's, by which time there
was no question of burning the archives. The only questions concerned how
best to preserve, classify, and make them available to scholars.

The year after the founding of the National Palace Museum in Peking (then
Peiping), a first step towards unified management of the Ch'ing archives
collections was taken with the establishment of a special archives section
within the Museum administration. Although this office went through several
reorganizations and name changes, it is most commonly known as the "Archives
Bureau" (Wen hsien kuan). Faced not merely with packing cases,
shelves, and rooms of Ch'ing archives but with entire buildings crammed full of
government papers, within a decade the Archives Bureau had accomplished the
herculean task of identifying and publishing lists of the chief types of
materials (generally at the record series level) which had come into its charge.

Some hold-outs existed, however, as private individuals who in earlier ages
might have collected rare books now sought to collect archives and enjoy ex­
clusive access to their own private cache of Ch'ing documents. Many small boxes
and crates remained independent of Museum holdings. Another exception

1Gradually many of the major collections of surviving Ch'ing central govern­
ment papers were purchased by or donated to the Museum and put in the charge
of the Archives Bureau.
to Museum ascendancy in the field was the fairly substantial collection which belonged to the National Museum of History (Li-shih po-wu kuan 历史博物馆) and was housed in the Meridian Gate (Wu-men 武门) of the palace. These materials had originally been earmarked for destruction in one of the periodic sweepings of the Grand Secretariat Great Treasury but had been saved at the last minute and in 1909 removed to chambers in the Meridian Gate. When in the early 1920’s the National Museum of History found itself in straitened circumstances, several thousand burlap bags of priceless Ch'ing archives were sold to local paper merchants for recycling. The merchants appear to have realized the value of their purchases, for suddenly Ch'ing documents began to appear in the Peiping markets, strung up for sale piece by piece. They were spared only by the intervention of a wealthy private collector, Mr. Lo Chen-yu (龍振玉), who by chance spotted them on a casual stroll through the market-place. Although Lo published many of the books and papers which thus came into his charge, one life-time and one house were not adequate to deal with even the relatively small proportion of the old Grand Secretariat collection to which he had fallen heir. Eventually most of his documents passed to the Institute of History and Philology of the Academia Sinica where Mr. Li Kuang-t'ao (李克超) was delegated to select documents to appear in the one hundred fascicles of the Ming-Ch'ing shih-liao 明清史料 (Ming and Ch'ing Historical Materials). Much of this collection is now held by the Institute in Nankang, Taipeı, and supervised by Mr. Li’s successor, Mr. Chang Wejen (鍾維健), who has plans for making it available in archival (rather than published) form, for research. It has been estimated that the entire published Ming-Ch'ing shih-liao constitutes only two percent of the present collection now in Nankang. Another estimate is five percent. Whatever the numbers, it is certain that even this small sweeping from the Grand Secretariat storehouse is vast. The remaining Ch'ing archival materials are boundless by comparison.

The founding of the Museum’s Archives Bureau as a custodial staff did not settle all problems connected with the archives. Although the Bureau accomplished wonders, chiefly in bringing order out of chaos sufficient to issue lists of the many record series in its care, war threatened to bring a halt to the work. In 1933 the Museum began shipping its archives south. First stored in Shanghai, late in 1936 the collection was moved into a new Museum building in nearby Nanking. The Japanese march south cut short the occupancy of these new quarters; once again the Ch'ing archives were on the move, now crated and shipped by rail to western China. Brought back to Nanking after the war, their peregrinations did not cease even then. Of the roughly two thousand crates of Archives Bureau Ch'ing central government papers on the docks of Nanking in 1948, approximately two hundred, or 10 percent, were carried off to Taiwan, transport of more crates soon being halted by the exigencies of the civil war. It is believed that all or nearly all of the remaining eighteen hundred crates were eventually restored to Museum custody in Peking and are now housed in a new building specially erected for them in 1974-75.
Collections now held in Taiwan

Three main Ch'ing central government archives collections now survive on Taiwan, all located in the city of Taipei. The largest and most varied is at the National Palace Museum in Wai-shuang-hsi, a northern suburb of the capital city. Two other collections are held at the Academia Sinica, one, the Ming-Ch'ing shih-liao, at the Institute of History and Philology; the other, materials inherited from the late Ch'ing ministry of foreign affairs, the Tsungli Yamen, at the Institute of Modern History.

The Museum collection was directly inherited from the Peiping Archives Bureau founded in the 1920's, the chief difference being that the Taipei Museum now holds only about ten percent of the parent collection. The principle of selection is not clear and indeed, in the difficulties of the wartime evacuation of Nanking, assignment of crates for Taipei may have been left to chance. I have been informally told that Manchu materials were slighted in the exodus because there was no one on hand who understood Manchu. Nevertheless, the Taipei Museum possesses a large storeroom devoted to Manchu, Mongol, and Tibetan materials. Many of these are rare books (sutras, old dictionaries) rather than archives, but there is a good number of Manchu-language palace memorials. Few Manchu-language record books appear to have come, but there is a number of Manchu volumes of the Diaries (Ch'i-chu chu ts'e) as well as of the Veritable Records (Shih-lu). One of the Museum's most valuable Manchu-language holdings is the forty volumes of the Chiu Man-chou tang written in old orthography on the backs of Ming documents (also possessing value for research) and supplying crucial information about the two pre-conquest Ch'ing reigns of Nurhaci and Huang T'ai-chi. Ms. Chang Wei is in charge of these materials, which in general have not yet been sorted, catalogued, or readied for the use of researchers. The Manchu-language palace memorials of the K'ang-hsi and Kuang-hsu reigns have been published as part of the Museum's publication of the Chinese-language palace memorials. Presumably this will continue as the memorials of other Chinese reigns appear.

The bulk of the Museum's archival papers are in Chinese and derive from three chief Ch'ing sources: the Palace Archives (largely palace memorials—about 158,000 items), the Grand Council Archives (embracing the hastily written draft script copies of the palace memorials, 190,000 items, and approximately 1500 record books), and the State History Office materials, which consist of several thousand record books and a large number (not yet counted, possibly as many as 10,000) of draft official biographies composed during the dynasty for eventual inclusion in the dynastic history. Although many of these biographies were published during the Ch'ing and afterwards, the biographic packets are still useful for research because they often contain documents and information that were omitted from the final biographies. The Museum regards its many volumes of Chinese-language Diaries and Veritable Records as archival; strictly speaking, these are edited works and probably should not be so classified. No archival materials at the Museum are known to be directly derived from the Grand Secretariat Great Treasury; no crates identified as having a Grand Secretariat origin were transported from the Nanking docks to the Museum. This means that
the Museum possesses no routine memorials (t'i-pen or tsou-pen) and no yellow registers (huang-ts'e). Moreover, no blue register (ch'ing-ts'e) copies of the yellow registers are to be found in the Museum's Grand Council materials. Nearly all these large assemblages of documents, amounting to several millions, are today in Peking, the one exception being the unsorted and uncatalogued routine memorials at the Ming-Ch'ing shih-liao collection in the Institute of History and Philology, Nankang, Taipei. To my knowledge no significant cache of yellow or blue registers is to be found anywhere on Taiwan, although occasionally a stray example turns up.

Although the National Palace Museum has no full catalogue of its archival holdings available to researchers, most of its collection is sorted and ready for use. Even if a document is not listed in the reading room catalogue or in one of the eleven record series put in order by the Museum and announced as ready for use in its journal Ch'ing Documents at the National Palace Museum (Ku-kung Wen-hsien issues of 1971 and 1972), the Museum staff will fetch it upon request. The difficulty is in knowing exactly what is available; guesswork and consultation are usually necessary to establish what materials the Museum is likely to possess on any given topic. The articles of predecessors may also contain some clues. During my years at the Museum, I attempted to make a very rough catalogue of the Museum's unlisted and unannounced record series by asking randomly for titles which I knew to have existed in Ch'ing times. Sometimes my requests bore fruit, on other occasions a laconic "not here" (wu) would be scrawled across my requests. Once I had established the existence of a certain title, the next problem would be to learn which reigns, years, and months were covered by the series. Sometimes the problem was compounded by a series' name change. Some of the other researchers contributed information. An outsider's attempt to compile a catalogue is fraught with difficulties and there is little assurance that the necessary hit-or-miss tactics will produce a complete or correct listing. The question now is whether or not to publish such an incomplete listing - there is a danger that it might mislead readers into thinking that items not caught in my torn net are not to be found at the Museum, thus discouraging a potentially valuable trip. Those planning to do research at the Museum would do well to begin by corresponding with the Museum's director, Dr. Chiang Fu-tsung in order to ascertain exactly what relevant materials will be available.

During the 1970's the Museum did supervise compilation of two valuable indexes to two of its memorial collections - the two collection in which the memorials are filed as individual items rather than as documents copied into albums. An index card was made for each item in the two collections (a total of nearly 350,000 cards), each bearing the dispatch date, memorialist's name and title, a summary of the contents, the imperial response, and the Museum's retrieval number. So useful are the index cards that a general idea of the major events of a year or a decade can be gained simply by reading the cards! In addition to these cards, which are filed chronologically, for the palace collection there is also a file for each memorialist, so one man's documents can be retrieved, as well as a subject-matter file ingeniously keyed to eighty-seven topics, each memorial having been assigned one and only one subject. Few
published collections of Ch'ing documents are usefully indexed; the Museum's card indexes are therefore often a helpful entering wedge for a researcher new to a subject and alone worth a trip to Taiwan to consult.

The Ch'ing archives at the National Palace Museum cover a wide chronological sweep (early seventeenth century to 1912) and a wide variety of types of documents. Almost as varied is the Ming-Ch'ing shih-liao collection at the Institute of History and Philology, Nankang, but although it covers a lengthy chronological range, most of its documents date from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the Grand Secretariat/Six Board system dominated the government and the Grand Council was only slowly rising to dominance. After the middle of the eighteenth century, when the Grand Council had achieved dominance and more and more reports were being filtered through its sieve, collections containing Grand Council materials tend to be more useful for many types of research. The Institute does possess some palace memorials and a number of palace memorial copies, both of which might be regarded as Grand Council materials. But the strength of its collection lies in the memorials and record books of the old routine system, a system which was in decline by the nineteenth century.

It is difficult to write about this collection with accuracy, for its unpublished sections are not generally open to the researching public. On the one hand it contains materials of unusual value, some of which are unique; on the other hand, many items are in poor condition. The pages of one record book may be scattered through several wrappers; the folds of one memorial may be separated from each other and almost impossible to identify and reunite. With the exception of the judicial archives which have been sorted and indexed with admirable care by the curator, Mr. Chang Wejen, there is no complete catalogue. The new building erected in 1977-78 to house the collection was a necessary first step towards the reordering of this collection, but much remains to be done.

The other chief repository of Ch'ing central government materials in Taiwan is the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, also in the suburb of Nankang outside Taipei. This was the earliest of the Taiwan collections to be opened to foreigners for research and is probably the collection from which most documents have been published. Since its chief set of materials is the Tsungli Yamen (late Ch'ing foreign office) archives, dating from 1861, it is most useful for topics in late Ch'ing foreign relations. During the last three reigns of the Ch'ing, foreigners were increasingly involved in commercial and religious as well as diplomatic activities in China, so the coverage is fairly broad. Nevertheless, there are a great many topics which remained totally outside of the sphere of foreign affairs which cannot be studied at the Institute.

The Institute makes all its Tsungli Yamen materials available to foreign researchers. Unfortunately, however, its catalogue is highly inadequate, consisting of one small handwritten folio of about one hundred pages. The Institute has concentrated its efforts on publishing fine reproductions of documents with detailed tables of contents which are a joy to use. The way into the remaining unpublished archives is not equally clear.
The Institute also possesses some late Ch'ing materials from the early twen­tieth century ministries as well as their continuations in the early Republic. These archives are as yet unsorted and uncatalogued. They include, for example, documents from the late Ch'ing Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce (Nung-Kung-Shang pu). Plans are currently underway to arrange them.

[Editor's note: The readers of this Bulletin, and the members of the Com­mittee on East Asian Libraries, are most grateful to Dr. Bartlett for com­pleting this paper despite the difficulties under which she was working. During the time she was writing it, her apartment was undergoing renovation, and most of her papers and books were in storage. She therefore had to work partly from memory, partly from correspondence, and partly from published items; in addition, she was about to go abroad, and was therefore working under a deadline. A less conscientious person would probably have withdrawn from the undertaking. Dr. Bartlett had hoped to add a list of the publications of the institutions to which she refers, but for a number of reasons was unable to do this. We hope to be able to present such a listing in a future issue.

At present, however, we should like to call attention to a compilation produced at the Institute of Modern History in 1966-67 on funds contributed by a group of some 10 American universities. This undertaking was organized chiefly by Professor C. Martin Wilbur of Columbia University. The result was a mimeo­graphed listing entitled Chung-kuo hsien-tai-shih tzu-liao tiao-ch'a mu-lu, in 10 volumes plus a one-volume supplement. Although the organization of this work is too complex to be discussed in this note, it contains listings of archival materials pertaining to foreign relations held by the Institute of Modern History—the Tsungli Yamen archives—and also archives held by the Committee for the Compilation of the National History of the Central Committee of the Kuomintang Party, as well as newspapers, magazines, and gazettes held by the latter. Although the chronological scope of the work varies in its different parts, the overall period covered is from 1894 to 1949. Sets of this work are held by the institutions which contributed funds toward its compi­lation; the Library of Congress was able to purchase one of the very few additional sets produced. The preface states that permission to use any of the items listed must first be secured from the organization which holds it, and that further reproduction of this list is not permitted. The compilation was produced by persons working under the direction of the late Professor Kuo T'ing-i and Professor Li Yu-shu.]