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North Carolina's "China Connection": A Strategy for Developing New Archival Materials

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For nearly two years North Carolina's China Council has been collecting and exhibiting old photographs that were taken by North Carolinians who lived and worked in China before 1949. Under the title "North Carolina's 'China Connection'," some of these pictures were mounted as a touring exhibit in 1980-1981 which visited twelve cities where it was seen by some 15,000 people. The photographs, the narratives that interpreted them, and the programs that were staged in association with the exhibit were an enterprise in public education. The North Carolina China Council was concerned in the most immediate sense with introducing the people of the state to a little known chapter of their history.*

This educational enterprise is closely related to the theme of this discussion, but we do not intend to describe it in any detail. Rather, the time has come to emphasize what might be called the hidden agenda of this undertaking. While the traveling exhibit was extraordinarily successful as an educational device, we hoped from the outset that our work might produce in addition some enlarged opportunities for research in American-East Asian relations. Several years ago we began to suspect that scattered through North Carolina was a substantial body of manuscripts and other primary resources, but our problem was that there was no one to tell us where to look for them. In consequence, as we began to assemble the photographs for North Carolina's "China Connection," we hoped that, beyond whatever might be accomplished in public education, the work would smoke out families who had links with China and who might have stored away in their attics materials from which history might be written.

In a word, what we propose to focus on here is an unorthodox strategy for building research materials. Customarily, public education builds on a substantial body of scholarly research, but our tactics stood custom on its head.

* The North Carolina China Council is a non-profit, non-political, educational organization affiliated with the China Council of The Asia Society. The North Carolina China Council seeks to deepen public understanding of China: its history, its culture, and its relations with the United States. The North Carolina China Council is directed by Professor Lawrence Kessler, Department of History, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

The educational enterprises described here were directed by the authors of this essay, by Charle LaMonica who served as the traveling curator of the exhibit, and by Louisa Kilgroo who coordinates the North Carolina China Council's activities.
Our knowledge of North Carolina's links with China was sketchy. Yet, we knew enough to be persuaded that the subject was a potentially important historical topic, and we had some notions as to how the subject might be presented. Our thought was that research might be stimulated—indeed, might become possible through fresh resources—if public interest could be aroused. At this point we are so pleased with the results that we think our work ought to be described. The approach is one that might have applications in other areas.

The local histories of Northeastern and Pacific states do take into account American dealings with the Pacific and Asia, but North Carolina's history, like the history of most states, is recorded without reference to those parts of the world. Historical research on North Carolina has favored studies that have stretched chronologically from colonial times through Reconstruction, a time-frame which, generally speaking, precludes most opportunities to examine the state's "China Connections." Moreover, while researchers in recent decades have examined North Carolina's experience in relation to the larger domestic history of the South and the nation, these broader frames of reference have not stretched beyond the nation's borders. Some efforts have been made to recall North Carolina's roles in wars, but thus far North Carolinians have not been portrayed as having much of any part in the United States' increasingly complex place in world affairs.

One product of these patterns in research and publication was the bemused skepticism that greeted word that we were undertaking the "China Connection" project. North Carolina's historical researchers certainly had encountered "old China hands" with stories to tell about their days in Asia. They knew that back issues of the state's church-related publications described Christian missions and that the memoirs of tobacco men were on library shelves. But the important point is that, given the ways in which North Carolina's history has been conceived, such materials did not appear to add up to much. The prevailing view held that these memories of Asia could be safely tucked away in the remoter corners of our minds. North Carolina's "China Connection" was in the realm of folklore, not history.

Such perceptions certainly have not encouraged major research libraries to devote much of their resources to the collection of new source materials touching Asia or any other part of the world. This is not to say, of course, that these materials are missing entirely from the state's archives and manuscript collections. Among the millions of items in Duke University's magnificent manuscripts collection, for example, is a very large collection known as the "James A. Thomas Papers." Mr. Thomas was for many years a top executive of the British-American Tobacco Company, and his correspondence is an invaluable source for that firm's operations in the Orient. Yet, it probably was not these potentialities for research that were crucial in Duke University's acquisition of these materials. As a close ally of the Duke family, Thomas became deeply interested in and a major benefactor of the university. It was only natural that he should have left his papers in the university library's care. Nor, except for matters of detail, are these circumstances surrounding Duke's acquisition of the Thomas Papers unique. Other valuable collections seem to have landed in libraries more by chance than by design. After all, if scholars do not define a topic as significant, why should our libraries give much attention to it?
Happily, in mounting "North Carolina's 'China Connection'," we discovered no conflicts between our efforts to demonstrate the potentialities of a research topic and our prime concern with public education. The exhibit was designed to show North Carolinians living and working in China through the entire century before Mao Zedong's ascension to power in 1949. North Carolina's missionaries were shown representing all the major denominations and engaging in virtually all of the tasks with which the American missionary movement has been identified—preaching, providing medical care, operating schools, and assisting with rural reconstruction. Tobacconists were depicted advertising and peddling cigarettes, overseeing the production of bright leaf tobacco in China, importing the leaf from North Carolina, and running cigarette manufacturing plants in China. North Carolinians appeared in America's military forces stationed in China, and North Carolina's textile industry stake in the China trade was indicated. All of these activities, of course, were pictured against the backdrop of China's distinctive landscapes and modes of life. Recorded also were China's devastating war experiences, from the Boxer Rebellion to the Second Sino-Japanese war of the 1930s and 1940s. Finally, North Carolinians were seen fashioning a home environment in which to nurture their families.

Altogether it was an exhibit with a story to tell. But, in addition, there were two subliminal messages. To historians we hoped the exhibit would say that here were examples of historical source materials of greater volume and complexity than they might have suspected, the sort of stuff from which articles and books could be written. For families with China connections of their own, the exhibit was to suggest that they might look again in their attics for old letters, diaries, or photographs. These long forgotten items might be more important than they knew.

Beyond these messages the exhibit at least hinted at possibilities for deepening our understanding of Chinese and American history. To this point, historians examining the American presence in China before 1949 have focused on people whose origins were from outside the South. Missionaries and businessmen, for example, have usually been presented as having their roots in other regions of the United States. "North Carolina's 'China Connection'," however, testified that at least one southern state was deeply involved in the processes of American expansion.

For historians who were more interested in North Carolina than China, the exhibit carried word that the "China Connection" held potential for exploring the state's past. America's Christian missions, which for a half-century or more were centered in China, transmitted impulses in both directions across the Pacific. North Carolina's churches were profoundly influenced by their efforts to help send the Gospel abroad. Churches had to organize to sustain the expense of foreign missions, thus producing foreign mission boards, women's missionary unions, and children's missionary bands. Women were enlisted as missionaries and as supporters on the home front, thereby enlarging the responsibilities of that sex in church affairs and striking a blow for feminism. Or, finally, when North Carolina's Protestants debated whether evolutionary theory squared with the Scriptures in the 1920s, their differences were intensified by foreign missions. Who, after all, was fit to carry the Gospel to Chinese? A fundamentalist or a modernist?
Similarly profound impacts on North Carolina's economic development resulted from international trade in tobacco. By the 1930s about thirty-five percent of the bright leaf crop that was produced in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia found its way into foreign markets. The trade not only produced export firms that competed for shares of the market, but it also was a business that touched all manner of other enterprises—banks, railways, ports. It was, moreover, a trade in which China figured prominently. Unlike so many other Americans who found the China market to be a myth, tobaccomen grossed millions of dollars in China. After World War I that Asian country was second only to the United Kingdom as a tobacco market.

Quite obviously what has been said here barely suggests the dimensions of unwritten histories. Yet, perhaps there has been enough to suggest that to some degree the development of modern China and North Carolina have been intertwined and that our understanding of this neglected past will be enhanced if we will collect the records of North Carolina's "China Connection" and do research in them. Nor should we fail to emphasize that the tasks of collecting these records and housing them must ultimately be undertaken by regularly established manuscript departments and archives, not by the China Council which is concerned primarily with public education.

Such are our suggestions for the future. Presently, it should be noted, there already exist resources for beginning research of the type that we have recommended. Not only do our libraries have some books and manuscripts that remain largely unexploited, but the North Carolina China Council has amassed a substantial and revealing record as it has conducted its educational activities over the past two years. When the China Council's work with these materials is completed, this archival collection will be housed in the Southern Historical Collection of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, with some duplicate material also being available at several other manuscript collections in the state.

There are three categories of the China Council's historical materials that are now available: photographs, documentary films, and interview records. The photographs—now numbering over five hundred—were among the treasures North Carolinians brought home from China and have been reproduced from original snapshots preserved in libraries, family photography albums and old trunks. Most of these pictures were made by amateurs using simple equipment. They may not qualify as outstanding examples of the photographer's art, but they decidedly are valuable historical documents. Most of the photographs date from the 1920s through the 1940s, but some are from earlier decades of the twentieth century and even a few were taken in the late nineteenth century. In addition to the touring exhibit described earlier, the best and most representative of these photographs were packaged into a 120-page interpretive book and a 30-minute slide-audiotape program. The visual material and accompanying narration of these productions are divided into sections on "The China They Saw," "The Tumultuous Century," "China as a Place of Work," and "China as Home."

The second category of historical material collected and preserved is documentary films shot in China in the 1930s and 1940s by North Carolina missionaries. Again as with the photographs, much of the footage is rough, and often the color and
contrast are not sharp. But they capture a wide range of sights and activities. The photographers represent three Protestant denominations—Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian—and were located in southern Jiangsu, northern Zhejiang and Guangdong.

One film records hospital and medical work in Huzhou in the 1930s. Another provides glimpses of missionary and medical activity and rural and urban (Guangzhou) scenes from the late 1940s. The third and perhaps the richest of the documentaries offers an intimate view of an interior mission station (Jiangyin), its Christian hospital and laboratories and some of the evangelizing work in the surrounding countryside in the late 1930s. Also included are some remarkable scenes of the complete sericultural work cycle and phases of wheat and rice growing. This film concludes with street scenes in Shanghai and a visit to the historical sights of Beijing.

The interview records, the third type of document available, include videotapes of five former "China hands" from North Carolina and audiotaped interviews with thirty-nine of these folks. The audiotapes have been transcribed and run to about three-hundred pages. The subjects of these interviews, held over a two-year period, were missionaries, doctors, educators, agronomists, military officers—and their children—whose lives and work in China spanned the forty years from the fall of the empire in 1911 to the establishment of the Peoples Republic in 1949.

The information they reveal of interest to historians of China or of American relations with China is too bountiful to list in detail. It may be instructive, however, to give some flavor of what these North Carolinians recalled about their experiences. Some of the topics and events they discuss include:

---Growing up in China, adjustments in family life, fashioning a home in what was originally a strange land

---Treaty port life and attitudes

---Goals of missionary work, their "calling," interdenomination relations, relations with Chinese

---The changing role of women in China mission work

---Missionary involvement in rural reconstruction work, 1920s and 1930s

---Doing business in China, advertising techniques, working with Chinese counterparts and compradores

---Military life, relations with Nationalist governmental and military officials

---Japanese invasion of China in the 1930s and life in Japanese prisoner of war camps

---Contact and relations among foreigners in China
Much more is preserved for researchers, but perhaps the above list is sufficient to indicate the breadth of information available. And we really only have scratched the surface. There are a great many more people out there with stories to tell, and the task of preserving their recollections is urgent. Each year brings a thinning of the ranks of those who lived and worked in China in the first half of this century. Some of these people have more than memories; they also have letters, diaries, memoirs and other historical records that would enrich our manuscript collections and enhance our understanding of the tumultuous period in which they lived and the contribution they made.

North Carolina is not unique in this regard. This one state's China connections are sure to have been duplicated elsewhere, perhaps through comparable enterprises—missionary, tobacco, military—or through enterprises peculiar to their area. It should also be noted that, while our project was restricted to China, researchers could profitably extend their explorations to other Asian nations, or, indeed, to other regions of the world. The effort seems certain to produce some agreeable surprises. Quite recently one of North Carolina's leading historians summed up our own reactions after looking through the China Council's archives: "I never imagined," he said, "that you would find so much."

(This article is a revised version of a paper presented to the Southeast Conference of the Association for Asian Studies, at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, on January 22, 1982. In its original form the paper was accompanied by slides, a motion picture, and video tapes.)