Chinese Treasure Hunt: A Survey of Chinese Manuscripts and Personal Papers

Lillian Yang
CHINESE TREASURE HUNT:
A SURVEY OF CHINESE MANUSCRIPTS AND PERSONAL PAPERS

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PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Manuscripts and personal papers are valuable sources for researchers. The purpose of this study is to (a) determine what original, one of a kind, Chinese manuscripts or Chinese personal papers exist in East Asian Libraries and Collections in North America, and (2) compare general library policies governing the use of Chinese manuscripts and personal papers. A survey was conducted in November 1999.

BACKGROUND

Wanting to find out how other libraries treat their one of a kind Chinese manuscripts and personal papers, I designed and sent out a short questionnaire to members of the East Asian Academic Librarians of California prior to our annual meeting in September, 1999. On the day of our annual meeting at University of California at Riverside on September 10, 1999, I received responses to my survey questionnaire from my California colleagues in ten different academic institutions. The survey results were impressive. For example, one library has in its possession several original letters written by Dr. Hu Shih, a well-known Chinese scholar regarded by many as the father of modern Chinese poetry. These letters had been placed in a box and left unprocessed for years before being noticed by the current Chinese librarian in charge. Another library has an extensive collection of manuscripts and personal papers of the well-known modern novelist Pai Hsien-yung. Yet another has the personal papers of K’ang Yu-wei’s descendant, Prof. Lo Jung-pang, including manuscripts by or on K’ang Yu-wei.

I realized from the findings of my survey of California academic libraries that there could be many more valuable Chinese treasures--original, one-of-a kind Chinese manuscript and personal papers— hidden in different East Asian Libraries/Collections throughout the United States waiting to be discovered. Many opf these treasures are unknown to researchers, scholars, or most librarians.

RESEARCH METHOD

I decided that it would be worthwhile to conduct a nationwide survey of all East Asian librarians listed on the East Asian Libraries ListServe (Eastlib). As I was very much encouraged by the positive responses and cooperation received from my California colleagues, the same questionnaire designed to survey the California East Asian Academic Librarians was used in my nationwide survey. The questionnaire was sent out electronically via the EastLib Listserv on November 8, 1999 with a request that answers to the questionnaire be returned before November 25, 1999. As the number of questionnaire responses fell short of my initial expectation, I followed up with an e-mail message on November 22, 1999 urging the return of questionnaires. Most of the questionnaire
responses were received electronically. Several librarians followed up their electronic responses with fax or regular mail to send in their exact Chinese titles and Chinese characters for their Chinese manuscripts and personal papers (as Chinese word processing capabilities are not available in all libraries). Some librarians requested clarification of the meaning of the terms of “Chinese manuscript” and “Chinese personal papers” before submitting replies.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire was designed with simplicity in mind. It contained fifteen short questions beginning with the respondent’s name and institution and ending with the respondent’s comments. It asked each respondent to describe briefly the most important and valuable Chinese manuscripts and personal papers in the library East Asian collection. It also asked about the library’s policy governing the use of the Chinese manuscripts and personal papers. (See Appendix)

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

Chinese manuscripts—“Manuscripts” means documents written by hand. Documents written by an author, in both typewritten and hand written forms, are defined as manuscripts here. An author’s formal working draft, working papers, etc. are included as manuscripts. For the purpose of this survey, manuscripts can be written in either Chinese or any other language, as long as the author was Chinese. Here, for the survey, the term Chinese manuscripts refers to original, one-of-a-kind, manuscripts. Reproduced handwritten books are not considered one-of-a-kind original manuscripts.

Personal Papers—Files, drafts, working materials, lesson plans, letters, diaries, etc. are considered “Personal papers”. Here, for the survey, it refers only to original one-of-a-kind personal papers written in Chinese or in other languages by a Chinese person.

Archives—“Archives” is an even broader term. It refers not only to an individual’s papers, but also to business and organization papers.

SUMMARY OF QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

Twenty-five East Asian libraries responded to my questionnaire. Ten indicated that they have no Chinese manuscripts or personal papers in their collections. Fifteen libraries responded that they do have Chinese manuscripts and personal papers. But on closer examination, it was clear that some of the Chinese manuscripts listed by the respondents do not quite match the definition Chinese manuscripts (original, one-of-a-kind documents written by hand) used in this survey. Therefore, the number of libraries actually having original, one-of-a-kind, Chinese manuscripts and personal papers may total less than fifteen. Some of the largest East Asian Libraries with large holdings of Chinese collections did not respond to this survey even after repeated queries.

None of the fifteen libraries reported having a written policy governing use of their Chinese manuscripts and personal papers. All of them, except two libraries, indicated that they follow their main library’s policy governing the use of manuscripts and personal papers. Fourteen libraries house their Chinese manuscripts and personal papers in the Special Collections Department of their
main libraries, and thus they follow the main library’s Special Collections procedures in processing the manuscripts and personal papers.

With certain restrictions on specific materials, most libraries allow their Chinese manuscripts and personal papers to be used by their own faculty, students and outside researchers. A few libraries require prior written or oral requests to be submitted before using the materials. All but two East Asian libraries or collections require the use of the Chinese manuscripts or Chinese personal papers to be in the presence of library personnel. Depending on the condition of the manuscripts and personal papers, and the nature of the materials, some libraries allow part of the materials to be photocopied by machine, while other libraries do not allow materials to be copied at all. Other than Hoover, Columbia, UCLA, and Berkeley, few libraries list their Chinese manuscripts and Chinese personal papers in their on-line catalog or on their website. None of the libraries have concrete plans to digitize their Chinese manuscripts and personal papers now, and almost all of them are undecided as to whether they will digitize their Chinese manuscripts and personal papers in the future.

SAMPLES OF TREASURES UNCOVERED BY THE SURVEY

Columbia University’s Chinese Oral History Project – Autobiographies and Related Papers
(Columbia University’s large collection of autobiographies and related papers include memoirs published in book form and in microform on Dr. Shih Hu, Wellington Koo, Han-hun Li, Tingfu Tsang, Hsian-hsi Kung, Kuo-chen Wu, etc. Other oral history manuscripts include Szechwan Warlord Sen Yang. Documentary collections include Tsang Ting-fu papers, Wellington Koo papers, Hsian-hsi Kung papers, etc. and a manuscript copy of “Secret Years of Chiang Kai-shek” by Ginny Connor from an autobiographic account by Chen Che-ju, the wife of Chiang Kai-shek.

Hoover Institution’s Archives holdings on China and Taiwan:
Hoover has a large collection of materials both in English and in Chinese related to China and Taiwan. The personal papers and diaries of Dr. I-ch’i Mei, papers of Ping-Wen Mao, correspondence of T.V. Soong, and papers related to General Claire Lee Chennault, etc. are but a few examples.

Items held by other Libraries:

Letters by:
Dr. Hu Shih
Dr. Lin Yu-t’ang
Dr. Mei I-Chi, etc.

Manuscripts by or on K’ang Yu-wei
K’ang Yu-wei Ban Huang Hui Collection
Chang Ai-ling manuscripts
Pai Hsien-yung’s manuscripts
Wang Mang’s manuscripts
CONCLUSIONS

The survey results point out that there are original, one-of-a kind, Chinese manuscripts and personal papers in many East Asian Libraries and Collections. These Chinese manuscripts and personal papers most often are not listed in online catalogs, nor are they listed on the holding libraries' web pages except in a very few cases. Most of the original, one-of-a kind, Chinese manuscripts and Chinese personal papers are not made known to users through any means at all. They often are kept inside a box unprocessed. Faculty and students on each campus generally have no knowledge of the existence of the Chinese manuscripts and personal papers in their library. Outside researchers also have no way of finding out the holdings of Chinese manuscripts or Chinese personal papers in different libraries. Only the librarians working within each individual Chinese collections may know of the hidden treasure in their own libraries. East Asian librarians in general have little knowledge of the vast number of Chinese manuscripts and personal papers existing in other East Asian Libraries and Collections. These valuable research resources are often kept hidden, unknown and unused for years.

An interesting question arises: Do some East Asian libraries/collections intentionally keep their Chinese manuscripts and personal papers hidden and unknown to outsiders so that their staff do not have to spend time processing the materials nor providing time-consuming reader’s services to potential clients using the Chinese manuscripts and personal papers? Not intentionally, surely, but possibly through neglect, simply because most East Asian Libraries and Collections do not have enough staff to handle even the daily work flow, to say nothing of special processing and services for manuscripts. Therefore, Chinese manuscripts and personal papers receive low priority and low attention from the library staff.

Whatever the reason may be, it seems to me that East Asian Libraries/Collections need to reconsider whether Chinese manuscripts and personal papers merit higher priority in terms of processing and service. After all, a library is not a museum. Library collections are supposed to be not only preserved but also used. This includes Chinese manuscripts and personal papers, which are valuable resources to many scholars and researchers.

SUGGESTIONS

It would be ideal if we could have a union list covering all the one-of-a kind Chinese manuscripts and personal papers in North American libraries. Such a union list would make it much easier for researchers and scholars to find valuable resources hidden in different East Asian Libraries/Collections. If a full union list is too big a task to undertake, a list of selected Chinese manuscripts and personal papers would also be of value.

To compile such a union list, full cooperation from every East Asian Libraries and Collection is essential. Otherwise the list will be incomplete, just as this survey is incomplete because several important East Asian Libraries and Collections with strong Chinese collections chose not to participate. This could mean that the smaller East Asian libraries and collections are more cooperative and more willing than the larger ones to share resource information. But certain outstanding institutions such as Berkeley, Hoover, UCLA and Columbia did participate in this survey. Perhaps if an official body such as the Chinese Materials Committee of the Council on East
Asian Libraries would take up the task of compiling a Union List of Chinese Manuscripts and Personal Papers in North American Libraries, members of East Asian Libraries and Collections might be more willing to participate. Such a union list would be a great aid for scholars, researchers and librarians. It is worth considering.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to extend my sincere thanks to all the East Asian librarians who took the time to respond to this survey. If I am able to obtain permission from all the responding libraries to disclose their holdings of Chinese manuscripts and personal papers (thus, perhaps, inviting queries from outside), I shall be happy to compile a preliminary short list in the future to share the hidden treasures discovered by this survey with all my colleagues in East Asian libraries.
APPENDIX

CHINESE MANUSCRIPTS AND PERSONAL PAPERS IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES
A SURVEY

1. Your Name________________________ Your Library________________________
   Your Phone number__________ Your e-mail address______________________

2. Do you have Chinese manuscripts/personal papers in your collection/library?
   Yes____ No____

3. How large is your Chinese manuscripts/personal papers collection?
   Manuscripts of published work:_____(items)
   Manuscripts of unpublished work_____(items)
   Personal papers______________________(items)

4. Please list and describe (both in English romanization and in Chinese) your Chinese manuscripts/personal papers, especially the most important or valuable manuscripts in your collection:

   (1)______________________________________________________________
   (2)______________________________________________________________
   (3)______________________________________________________________
   (4)______________________________________________________________
   (5)______________________________________________________________
   (6)______________________________________________________________
   (7)______________________________________________________________
   (8)______________________________________________________________
   (9)______________________________________________________________
   (10)____________________________________________________________

   (use additional sheet, if needed)

5. Do you have written policy governing the use of the Chinese manuscripts and personal papers in your collection?
   Yes______ No______

6. Do you follow your main library's policies governing manuscripts, personal papers?
   Yes______ No______
7. Please briefly describe the policy governing the processing and use of you manuscripts and/or personal papers:


8. Please briefly describe how you process your manuscripts and personal papers:


9. Who may use the manuscripts/personal papers in your collection?

   Faculty ____ graduate students______
   Undergraduate students______ Outside people________

10. What procedure one must follow in order to use the Chinese manuscript/personal papers in your collection/library?


11. Must the Chinese manuscripts/personal papers be used in the presence of a staff Member?

    Yes______ No_____

12. Do you allow manuscripts/personal papers to be Xeroxed _________

13. Are Chinese manuscripts/personal papers listed in your online catalog?

    Yes____ No____

    Or listed on the web? Yes__ No____

14. Are your Chinese manuscripts/personal papers digitized?

    Yes________ No________

    Do you intend to digitize your manuscripts/personal papers?

    Yes__ No ___ Undecided____

15. Comments:_________________________________________________

    _________________________________________________________

    _________________________________________________________

    _________________________________________________________

    _________________________________________________________