

# On archives

Toshie Awaya, ed. 2005. *Creating an Archive Today*. Tokyo: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. 158 pages, ISBN 4 925243 09 8

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In this new and important work, leading librarians and archivists address some of the challenges they face in creating and maintaining historical collections. How do scholars use archives? How can we ensure that collections endure over time? What are the benefits and dangers of digitisation? These questions and many more are discussed in this very readable compilation.

Based on a conference of the same name, the volume is in three parts, all with a strong focus on Asian themes and collections. The first contribution in part I, 'Creating the Archive' by Graham Shaw of the British Library, addresses preservation and access issues relating to the India Office Records. An archive, he argues, 'only becomes an "archive" once the primary purpose for which its contents were created no longer applies', and he shows how the 'life-cycle of such a large historical archive is rarely if ever one of simple linear development and accumulation' (p.7). To scholars reliant on coherent archives which endure through time, it may come as a surprise to learn that the India Office Records have been frequently 'weeded', including over 300 tons of documents, lists, accounts and warrants which were sold as waste paper in 1860. While focussed

on the British Library collection, much of Shaw's article applies more widely. He makes an important distinction between an archive's 'internal and administrative approach' and that of the external 'research perspective' (p.13). After all, the aims of an archivist (preservation and longevity) may not be the same as that of a librarian (cataloguing and access) or that of a scholar (usability and context).

Masahito Ando, author of the second chapter, is at Japan's National Institute of Japanese Literature. Drawing in particular on examples from Hong Kong and Malaya during the Asia-Pacific War, Ando shows how archives can be entirely destroyed or irrevocably damaged during periods of aggression: 'Because of their usefulness and importance as an information source, archival materials have often been targeted for confiscation or other types of destruction by hostile forces and the ruling authorities, especially in times of political or armed conflict, or through colonial or foreign occupation' (p.26). Ando's paper is a chilling reminder of the impermanence of archives, particularly in periods of armed conflict.

G. Uma Devi's paper is the last contribution in part I and focuses on how oral history can be 'used strategically for

maximum effect' (p.29). Devi, based at the National Heritage Board in Singapore, has extensive experience in the methodology of oral history projects. One of the most interesting sections of Devi's paper relates to the establishment of oral history galleries in schools which in turn enrich the curriculum. Devi's conclusion, namely that the success of such 'heritage galleries' will depend on the 'will, conviction and commitment of various agents and agencies in seeing it to its fruition and beyond' is a point well taken, but the paper itself is regrettably thin on recommendations on how to ensure long-term sustainability.

## Sharing

The University of Chicago's James Nye will be known to many readers. His enthusiasm for disseminating textual collections through innovative technologies has reached a large community of scholars around the world. His contribution to the present volume, entitled 'Shared Patrimony', is one of the most compelling in a generally readable collection. Among other topics, Nye's paper raises the issue of sharing, which he rightly points out is 'not a natural reflex in many parts of the academe' (p.43). Nye's paper is also a healthy corrective to the 'digitisation fixes all' belief still held by many scholars, which assumes that once a collection has been

scanned it is somehow durable and everlasting. 'Suffice it for now to say', Nye continues, 'that after seven years in the trenches working on those digital projects I have gained a renewed appreciation for microforms' (p.45). His scepticism about the long-term viability of digital media echoes a paper by Susan Whitfield, Director of the International Dunhuang Project at the British Library, about what she fittingly called 'the perils of digitisation'. As Nye points out, 'even if the [computer] disks were physically intact after twenty years, most people would be hard pressed to find a device capable of reading the data stored on the disk' (p.45).

Nye's paper also assesses the challenges and outcomes of the projects in which he has been involved through the University of Chicago over the last decade. One of his conclusions, with which I agree without reservation, is that 'our colleagues in South Asia deserve better access to scholarly resources'. Personally, I would even suggest that scholars and librarians in well-endowed universities and institutes in the West should prioritise access to historical archives for communities whose documentary histories they are the custodians of. In the small project which I run, Digital Himalaya, we have found that an unexpected number of users of our online resources come from the areas of South Asia in which the original materials were collected. This is a heartening development, in part explained by the poor state of many library collections in South Asia, with the result that online resources become the first port of call.

David Magier's chapter is a helpful overview to library collection development over the last 30 years. Magier, Director of Area Studies and a senior librarian at Columbia University, suggests that those who would create an archive today 'must do so not by starting from a given set of content, but by understanding the information needs of the scholarly community, and by seeking to co-ordinate with the existing collections, resources and endeavours that are already serving portions of those needs' (p.81). His point is well taken, and important to remember since some archives remain unused through lack of careful

planning. However, I am left wondering whether some archives should be created even if the information needs of a contemporary, let alone future, scholarly community are unknown or untested, simply because the content is important or threatened. One can never predict the interests or questions that will motivate research and scholarship 20 years hence.

The remaining four contributions to the volume focus on specific collections and scholarly production. Asvi Warman Adam looks at 'silenced voices' in the oral history of Indonesia, while Yumi Sugahara examines the structures and content of 19th century manuscripts of Javanese Islamic leaders. Lorraine Gesick's article on the adoption of modern archiving in Thailand and the 'intellectual shift among the Thai élite that it signified' (p.118) raises some interesting questions of wider applicability. As her paper carefully illustrates, the creation of an archive does not guarantee long-term sustainability, as the collection of documents can actually result in their disappearance. 'Is archiving always an act of destruction as well as preservation?' she asks, and from the perspective of the Thai collections which Gesick describes, the answer is certainly yes.

The final contribution by Crispin Bates is an excellent illustration of how archives are actually used. Using ship rolls and letters as previously untapped archival resources, Bates looks at the movement and control of Indian migrants in the colonial labour movement.

In all, then, this diverse volume offers a snapshot of the current debates and concerns of scholars, librarians and archivists brought together in a very readable format. Given the difficulty of purchasing this book in Europe, online or through speciality book sellers, perhaps the publisher could be persuaded to host the individual contributions online, as a kind of archivists' archive? <

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