

Harvard China Fund Proposal: A Digital Archive for Chinese Local History

Submitted by James Robson and Michael Szonyi, Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University

Abstract

In 1984, Chinese customs officials in Hunan province intercepted a shipping container bound for the antiques markets in Hong Kong that was filled with over one thousand small wooden religious statues dating from the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) to the present. These statues are but one example of how the simultaneous revival of traditional cultural forms in China and the perilous threats to the preservation of China's cultural patrimony create both the opportunity and the urgent need for systematic collecting and archiving of local history materials. This project aims to develop the infrastructure and lay the foundations for a permanent international digital archive for China's local history that will preserve precisely these kinds of rich historical materials. In many parts of China, the revival of religious ritual traditions and the compilation of lineage genealogies have become an important element in local life. Study of this material may thus be critical for understanding not just China's past but also its present and future.

The archive will bring together the collection work currently being done in different regions, and encourage further collection, digitization, and analysis of local history materials. The archive will consist of a wide range of media, including scanned or photographed documents (ranging from land deeds to genealogies); photographs of objects and scenes; audio files (such as oral history interviews, folklore, and religious recitations); and video files (such as rituals). The data will be tagged with a common vocabulary and metadata so as to permit the creation of village level data assemblies and enable comparative queries. The long-term goal is to establish multiple interoperable databases that will together comprise a permanent archive of digital versions of unique historical documents and materials.

At the core of the proposal is infrastructure building: the creation of the digital archive. The newly created archive will be populated with materials collected in several regional pilot projects (Fujian, Zhejiang, Guangdong, Jiangxi, North China) led by local Chinese scholars and their students. The main substantive project in the first phase will be research and analysis of the rich body of material from the Hunan region. The surviving statues contain a small cavity in their back that is filled with a variety of objects (medicinal herbs, paper money, and desiccated insects), but the primary object of scholarly importance is the "consecration certificate" (*yizhi* 意旨). These provide detailed information such as names of the donors—as well as wives, sons, daughters, and other relations—the address where the statue was enshrined, the identity of the statue, the reason for the consecration, and the date. During the tenure of this project we will continue cataloguing these materials, supplement the data with new information from family genealogies (*jiapu* 家譜) and other local manuscripts, and archive new material based on carefully focused fieldwork into areas that we have identified from the "consecration certificates" as being of utmost significance. These statues and their contents provide unprecedented new vantage points onto the study of local Chinese religion, history, culture, and society.

We envision this HCF project as providing seed money to create the archive and begin the work of enriching it with newly collected materials. New content will be uploaded to the archive by scholars in the field or by a curator. Ultimately, the archive would be housed within the Harvard library system. The development of this archive will constitute a major capacity-building initiative, establishing Harvard as the leading institution in the field. The construction of the archive will create linkages between Harvard and the leading scholars of Chinese local history in China and elsewhere, encourage collaboration, and create opportunities for Harvard students to conduct research and make an important contribution to the preservation and study of the rich materials of China's past.