



When it comes to literature or personal biography, it is a problem, because some of these accounts are written by hand, and the writing is done with a Chinese brush and in an illegible calligraphic style totally beyond the grasp of a foreigner like me.

Christian Henriot
French historian

French historian still thirsts for knowledge about Shanghai, lauds its rich archives

Q: Why are you infatuated with the history of Shanghai?

A: I am infatuated with Shanghai because Shanghai used to have concessions, of which there is a voluminous literature. That's one advantage it has to offer. Of course, we foreign scholars can read works in foreign languages, but it would be better if Chinese literature is available.

As for the popularity of Shanghai's history as a research subject, it is actually part of an academic trend that started in the 1960s. Historians then began to do case studies that focused on certain Chinese cities. I would say the trend has finally reached China over the last decade.

The good news is that today my Chinese postgraduates and doctoral candidates have better access to archives.

Their research methodology might be somewhat problematic, but they are becoming more skilled researchers.

Chinese and Western historians' approaches differ a little bit. For instance, there is this popular idea in the West of employing the concept of urban space, images or other visual records to chronicle urban history. In China, its influence is still incipient.

Q: How did you become hooked on Shanghai?

A: I wrote my doctoral dissertation at Stanford University, the subject of which is the state of Shanghai between 1927 and 1937, as well as the city's first modern government.

My interest owes to the fact that China is very distinct from the West, in that it had no local governments — in the modern sense of the word — before the 1920s.

It did, however, have county magistrates' office, or *dao tai*, but the cities lacked their own municipal governing structures that we had in the West. And they were not autonomous, either.

This is the opposite of Western history, where we have had an autonomous tradition since the 11th century. China did not have its modern governments until a very late period.

Its first one came into being in 1921, founded by Sun Yat-sen in Guangzhou. My early research at Stanford dealt with that chapter of history, but with a different focus on Shanghai from 1927 to 1937.

I started out with the idea to explore the modernization of Shanghai municipal government then and its relationship with local elites, and how the latter played a role in autonomy and local governance, and what role. This was a trendy topic.

My purpose was to discover if there had been dynamics of a local



Ni Tao

nitao@shanghaidaily.com

Editor's note:

French historian and sinologist Christian Henriot, better known in China as An Keqiang, is one of the most renowned experts on Shanghai's history. He has written about certain obscure facets of the city's past, with publications such as "Prostitution And Sexuality In Shanghai" and "Shanghai, 1927-1937: Municipal Power, Locality, and Modernization." His forthcoming book, "Scythe and the City: A Social History of Death in Shanghai (1865-1965)," is a continuation of that academic devotion to Shanghai. He teaches at Institut d'Asie Orientale in Lyon, France. Henriot recently spoke to Shanghai Daily reporter Ni Tao about his research and how his interest in Shanghai has grown into a lifelong fascination.

democratization movement in China. Nevertheless, the common scholarly approach of applying Western theories to China is ill-fitted, and I figured a Chinese social perspective was needed.

My doctoral thesis was written in 1980. Prior to that, my research was primarily about the newspaper industry in Shanghai, Guangzhou and Hong Kong.

I had wanted to write a history of Chinese newspapers or journalism, only to find that there was already a book in France about this.

I checked its bibliography to see what citation I could use for my own research. But disappointingly, it was hard to locate the archives.

Where can you get a complete collection of *Shen Bao* from that period? Moreover,

most papers only ran two or three issues before they went defunct, such as *Min Li Bao*. This, again, is a fascinating topic, but one that has to be backed up by a substantive body of research.

Q: Why is there more literature on Shanghai than other Chinese cities?

A: Basically it's because Shanghai has a much richer bibliography. Beijing, for example, is also an interesting topic, the information about which is now readily available. But 15 or 10 years ago, things were not that easy.

Shanghai, with a copious supply of information about its own past, is hard to be surpassed in this respect. Many scholars now are turning their attention to Hankow (today's Wuhan) or Beijing, but still, Shanghai is generating the largest body of research.

The richness of bibliography is one factor, and Shanghai's particular history is another. Its development is unique, hugely different from Beijing, and again, it is systematically documented.

I personally know someone who does research on the past of Guangzhou, or Canton as the city was previously known, but the city has scarce literature of this kind. Either it is not well preserved or not treasured for some unknown reasons.

For historians, a large bibliography is everything, something like you journalists, required to sift through considerable information.

Q: A majority of histories on Shanghai chronicle the periods leading up to the 1949 liberation. But there are far fewer after that. Now that limitations are fewer, do you expect the depth and breadth of historical writing on Shanghai to be broadened?

A: Surely they can be broadened to accommodate history after 1949.

We are freer to discuss what happened afterward. There might still be cases where access to archives is still limited, but there is already a large quantity of information offered by civil affairs or public health authorities.

Despite more academic freedom than before, certain limitations remain, mostly in terms of official regulations or bureaucratic oddities. For example, staff at Chinese archives may tell you that part of the documents you want to read are off limits, without naming any reasons. And they demand that I only scan or make photocopies of one third of a document. But I need the remaining two thirds for research. This cold shoulder is sometimes frustrating.

I visit Shanghai's archives once a year, so it's less of a problem for me than for some Chinese scholars. For them it is a big concern, and causes unnecessary

inconveniences. I understand that perhaps something needs to be classified and withheld from the public, but scholars abroad can read or copy whatever they want to read and copy in archives.

That difference has made the life of Chinese scholars harder than their foreign peers.

Q: Over the course of studying Shanghai, have you ever encountered any difficulty such as understanding Shanghai dialects, slangs, things that are quintessentially Shanghainese?

A: Technically, yes I have. But that is invariably the case when you look into old documents and accounts. Even being Chinese sometimes doesn't help.

I had little difficulty coping with official records, most of which are written in a lucid, coherent manner.

But when it comes to literature or personal biography, it is a problem, because some of these accounts are written by hand, and the writing is done with a Chinese brush and in an illegible calligraphic style totally beyond the grasp of a foreigner like me.

But this issue can always be solved by consultations with colleagues and Chinese friends.

Nonetheless, even if you are able to read Chinese, and read newspapers like *Shen Bao*, how much of its contents can you make sense of? I say that because times have changed, so have language and terminology. Adapting to these changes takes time.

Q: Looking back on a 30-year obsession with China, and Shanghai in particular, how do you regard your profession?

A: I would say Shanghai's history is extremely splendid and colorful. It is an inexhaustible mine of research subjects. Every time I come here, I feel refreshed, that there still are plenty of issues that merit and await academic attention.

Although there already are numerous books and papers on Shanghai's past, the possibilities of further discoveries are infinite.

My hope is that Shanghai's archives can be more open in granting more freedom to researchers.

I wish I were younger so I would have more energy to spare for new topics that emerge incessantly. All in all, writing about Shanghai's past is a timeless art.



Shanghai Daily welcomes the ideas of others. Please send your idea to opinion@shanghaidaily.com