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Research Note

***Dang'an*: Contemporary Chinese Archives**

William W. Moss

Western scholars who have worked with records of imperial and Nationalist China are perhaps not so familiar with post-1949 archives.¹ This article introduces archives management in the People's Republic of China (PRC).²

For more than 2,000 years, Chinese written language has linked people who have locally different oral languages. This lends archives a political significance often taken for granted in China. There is profound respect for the antiquity of records (on bone, stone, bronze, bamboo, wood and silk as well as on paper), a respect that dignifies contemporary archives and archivists. Long archival traditions affect modern archives management and use of archives by scholars. Ordering history by imperial reigns and year within reigns persists in preference for chronological order rather than division into functional series. Court compilation of official histories survives as today's archivists compile and publish selected documents of historical events. During the 19th century, Western methods and forms of record-keeping were introduced and amalgamated with imperial methods of preservation and categorization, and may still be found in Chinese archives today. Soviet, German and American methods were absorbed partially during the 20th century.

Archives work after 1949 was preoccupied with trying to pull together, restore and make useful the surviving remnants of a beleaguered past, and to build a systematic record of the present for useful social reference. The effort was aborted for a decade during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Since 1978, however, archive maintenance and management has received renewed attention and priority from central, provincial and local governments. Conditions and access are changing, although perhaps more slowly and inconsistently than seems tolerable to Western users. Only just rehabilitated and rejuvenated in the 1980s, the archival profession now faces reform of governmental and economic structures and the

1. The author has visited more than 20 Chinese archives since 1982, from the national and central level (including the Central Archives at Wen Quan village, which few Westerners have visited) to the provincial and county level, as well as archives of institutions and commercial enterprises (see Appendix).

2. Archives are documents created and used as tools of organized human work and kept indefinitely for their intrinsic, evidential and informational value to institutions that framed or accumulated them. The terms "archives" and "records" are used interchangeably in this article. Eclectic manuscript collections and electronic databases are not yet significant properties in Chinese archive management. Standard international archival practice requires archives to be kept according to their provenance in "record groups" so that the records of one agency are not mixed with those of another. Archives are also kept in their original filing order and are not rearranged to suit subject classifications. They thus differ significantly from libraries and information centres.

introduction of electronic communications that basically change archival roles and practices. How Chinese archivists handle these challenges determines what records will be available to the next generation.

History: Revolution to Reform

Archives were an early concern of the PRC government. Although many Kuomintang (KMT) archives were removed to Taiwan by 1949, many former KMT government personnel – including archivists – simply continued their work under the new government. After coming to power, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) set up archival functions in Party, government and military units, and urged them to collect and synthesize past archival experience and adapt foreign archival expertise to build a practical national archives system. Archival work first focused on gathering, preserving, arranging and describing records of earlier regimes and on reconstituting and reorganizing extant holdings. However, the system evolved somewhat idiosyncratically with the proliferation of unit-based records offices until the mid-1950s.³

Initially, the new Communist government collected and inventoried surviving national assets, including archives, under the supervision of the Expropriation Work Commission (*Jieshou gongzuo weiyuanhui*) headed by Vice-Premier Chen Yun.⁴ In December 1949, the Central Military Commission ordered the collection of records and histories of revolutionary groups and military units. The following year they issued edicts to protect property, such as archives, from plundering and profiteering and to prevent betrayal of state secrets. In February 1951, the Archives Section of the Expropriation Work Commission's Nanjing Office merged with surviving remnants of the KMT's Historical Institute to form the Third Historical Institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Its task was to collect and catalogue remaining records left by the KMT government and all warlord governments. (The Third Institute became the Second Historical Archives in 1964.⁵) Document departments (*wenxian bu*) of Beijing's Palace Museum Library and Shenyang's North-east Library also resumed collection and work on Ming and Qing dynasty archives, which had been dispersed when the Japanese invaded

3. Zou Jiawei, Dong Jian and Zhou Xueheng, *Zhongguo dang'an shiye jianshi* (*A Brief History of China's Archival Profession*) (Beijing: China People's University Press, 1985), pp. 235–36.

4. Events cited here and throughout, such as the establishment of the "Expropriation Work Commission," are found not only in *ibid.* but also in a chronology found in Deng Lichun, Ma Hong and Wu Heng (eds.), *Dangdai Zhongguo de dang'an shiye* (*Contemporary China's Archival Profession*) (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1987), pp. 431–464.

5. A curious historical irony is that in the early 1960s a U.S. intelligence-gathering operation spent much time and effort collecting every scrap of material on a seemingly mysterious "third institute" of the Academy of Sciences, assuming that since its function remained stubbornly obscure it was undoubtedly of high military significance.

(though many records, taken to Taiwan in 1949, were unrecoverable). Emphasis on collection and preservation in this early period imbued archivists and bureaucrats with a strongly protectionist ethos that still persists instinctively half a century later.

In April 1951, the General Office of the CCP Central Committee and the Secretariat of the PRC Central Administrative Council convened separate national conferences of Party secretaries-general and heads of government secretariats. Both conferences' agenda included document management (creating and handling active correspondence) and archive management (preserving and handling records of completed actions). The meetings produced the first set of archival regulations of the PRC: the "Provisional Rules for Protecting State Secrets" and "Provisional Rules for Managing Public Documents." They set the form and tone of archival work, established the Party Central General Office (*Zhongyang bangongting*) as the source of archival authority, and indicated the General Office of the Central Administrative Council (later the State Council) as executive agent of that authority. China's leading archival journal, *China Archives* (*Zhongguo dang'an*), was first published by the Party Central Secretariat in 1953.⁶

Adoption of the PRC Constitution in September 1954, and re-establishment of provincial-level governments under a new State Council of the PRC produced three durable results for archives: the establishment of a State Archives Bureau (*Guojia dang'anju*) under the General Office of the State Council to handle nation-wide archival matters; a Central Archives (*Zhongyang dang'anguan*) under the Party Central General Office to keep records of former large administrative regions (abolished in the 1954 governmental reorganization), CCP records and records of the revolutionary movement from the 1920s to 1949; and a national system of provincial and local archive management bureaus and repositories. In January 1956 the CCP Politburo approved rules for managing records in Party organs at all levels, and PRC President Liu Shaoqi endorsed the rules and applied them to government agencies and military units. That April, the State Council issued a formal Directive "to improve archives work." It defined archival principles and set a goal to "establish a national archives system under unified principles and to manage archives scientifically for use by state agencies and scientific research."⁷ The State Archives Bureau was told to emphasize nation-wide "unification" of archives management; to standardize file creation and retention; to expedite PRC records arrangement; to work on records of revolutionary

6. The journal was first issued in April 1951 under the title *Ziliao gongzuo* (*Research Materials Work*) as an "internal use only" document, and was not given broader circulation until 1957. Now publically available, the same journal was retitled *Archives Work* and then became *Zhongguo dang'an* (*China Archives*) in January 1994. It has been published by the State Archives Bureau since 1955.

7. "Guowuyuan guanyu jiaqiang guojia dang'an gongzuo de jue ding" ("State Council decision on strengthening nation-wide archives work"), 16 April 1956, as printed in *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo dang'an fagui huibian, 1949 nian 10 yue–1992 nian 6 yue* (*Compilation of Archives, Laws and Regulations of the People's Republic of China, October 1949–June 1992*) (Beijing: Law Press, 1992), pp. 17–21.

history and former regimes; to set up record offices in government agencies and to establish archive management bureaus and repositories in provinces, cities and counties; to train professional archivists; and to improve the study of archival science. The Directive's closing paragraph noted that "archives work is a disciplined speciality and important work, but it is still a weak link in the work of state agencies, so leadership at every level must give it sufficient attention." As a result, the first provincial archives of the PRC was established in 1956 in Henan province, and the Central Archives opened in 1959. By 1966, 28 of the 32 provinces and autonomous regions had established archives.

During the first decade of the People's Republic, Party and state records were managed separately. At Zhou Enlai's instigation, the Party Central Committee decided, in January 1959, to put them under one system.⁸ The State Archives Bureau, under Party Central authority, assumed regulation of both Party and government archives. This Directive further vested authority over archives in provincial or local Party committees. Today, one may find that a local archives bureau director is also deputy secretary of the local Party committee. In the early 1960s, the State Archives Bureau developed a new set of regulations concerning the management of provincial and local archives. New archival facilities were built and an archival training programme was established at the People's University (*Ren Da*).

Then, archival work came to a dead stop. On 23 June 1966, the Party Central General Office denounced and denied the validity of previous archival work by promulgating a "Notice on Exposing the Anti-Party, Anti-Socialist Black Line in Archives Work." A year later, the Party Central Committee, Central Military Commission and Cultural Revolution Small Group issued a joint instruction on "ferreting out and taking over enemy archives," and in early 1969 they abolished the State Archives Bureau and archival entities at all levels of government.⁹ The Cultural Revolution shut down the Chinese archival profession for more than 12 years. But secret instructions were issued early in the period, reportedly at Zhou Enlai's instigation, to protect state secrets (September 1966) and "confidential documents and archives" (February 1967).¹⁰ Red Guards attacking the establishment and "seizing power" were constrained not to go into archival stack areas. These actions saved many important government and Party records and historical archives, but many that had not been sent to a repository were dispersed or destroyed.¹¹

In late 1975, the archival system began to be restored along with other

8. "Zhongyang guanyu tongyi guanli dang, zheng dang'an gongzuo de tongzhi" ("Party central notice on unified management of Party and government records"), 7 January 1959, in *ibid.* pp. 22–23.

9. "Guanyu jiefu dang'an gongzuozhong fandang fanshehuizhuyi heixian de tongzhi" and "Guanyu jieguan qingcha diwei dang'an de zhishi," both cited by title without accompanying text in the chronology found in *Dangdai Zhongguode dang'an shiye*, p. 449.

10. *Dangdai Zhongguode dang'an shiye*, p. 449.

11. Apart from this information, gleaned in part from conversation with archivists, available sources, such as those cited in previous footnotes, tend to be silent on details of the effect of the Cultural Revolution on the archival establishment. For example, the foreword

structures damaged or abolished during the Cultural Revolution, but the State Archives Bureau was not restored until early 1979. A draft archives law was introduced to the Fifth Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in June 1979, and in August the Bureau held a nation-wide conference of provincial and central government archivists, at which the Party Central Committee reaffirmed the 1956 basic mission, policies and organization of archival work.

Chinese archivists spent the next decade rebuilding, improving, broadening and deepening the archival establishment, with special emphasis on building and developing municipal and county archives. Concurrently, the State Archives Bureau renewed its interest in the archival management experience of other countries. China joined the International Council on Archives (ICA) and began to send delegations abroad and to receive delegations of foreign archivists. China will host the 13th ICA Congress in September 1996, in Beijing.

At the end of a decade of restoration and reconstruction, the National People's Congress passed the Archives Law of the People's Republic of China, and the State Archives Bureau promulgated it on 1 January 1988. The Bureau subsequently issued implementing orders. Order No. 1, "Implementation Measures for the Archives Law of the People's Republic of China" (19 November 1990), is a gloss on the law and identifies the State Archives Bureau as the sole authority for interpreting it and any regulations implementing it. Order No. 2, "Procedures to Open Records at Every Level to the Public" (26 December 1991), includes provisions for access by non-mainland Chinese compatriots and gives local archive directors broad authority to interpret and apply the order to suit local conditions. Order No. 3, "Trial Procedures for Foreign Organizations and Individuals to Use Chinese Archives" (effective 1 July 1992) gives principles and procedures for non-Chinese to use Chinese archives.¹²

As Chinese archivists entered the 1990s, they left behind political struggles and began a new era of more confident development and assertion of the importance of archival work and of archivists in China and in international circles. The Chinese archival profession is currently encountering new and different challenges in a rapidly developing and changing economy and society, both domestically and internationally.

Structure: Institutions and Processes

The archival structure corresponds to PRC government structure, so it involves agencies at three basic levels: national or central archives;

to *Zhongguo dang'an shiye jianshi* gives it passing mention as a period when archival research was "bogged down," but offers no treatment of the period in the book's main text.

12. For a gist and commentary, see William W. Moss, "Archives Law of the People's Republic of China," *The American Archivist*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Spring 1991). For the Chinese text of the law and State Archives Bureau Order No. 1, see *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo dang'an fagui huibian, 1949 nian 10 yue–1992 nian 6 yue*, pp. 1–16. The Chinese texts of Order Nos. 2 and 3 may be found in *Dang'an gongzuo*, No. 2 (1992), pp. 7–8.

archives in provinces, autonomous regions and special municipalities; and archives in subprovincial cities, counties, townships, districts, villages and so on. There are four parallel aspects to the structure: policy management; custody and administration of the records themselves; archival science education; and professional archivists associations. Institutional relationships among the four modes are well integrated and in many cases one agency or institution may perform two or more functions. At each level in the system, there is an archive management bureau (*dang'an guanliju*) and a custodial institution or repository (*dang'anguan*). In 1992 there were more than 3,400 archive management bureaus and more than 3,500 archival repositories.¹³ The two functions have in the past been lodged in separate but often interlocking agencies and staffs. In recent years a move towards leaner government has merged the two into one agency with one director-general, although this often produces two deputy directors-general one for the policy management function and one for the custodial and service function.

There are two kinds of repositories: comprehensive archives (*zonghe dang'anguan*) which house all kinds of records from all kinds of units in a geographic jurisdiction; and specialized archives (*zhuanye dang'anguan*), which are limited to custody and management of archives in a special medium (such as still photos, motion pictures, audio and video recordings), or to the records of a discrete agency or function (Foreign Ministry, People's Liberation Army, municipal construction, or geological data, aerospace technology and so on).

The term "historical archives" is applied to records created before 1949, and two national-level comprehensive but historically-specialized repositories are devoted to them: the First Historical Archives of China in Beijing for Ming and Qing dynasty records (*Di yi dang'anguan*); and the Second Historical Archives of China in Nanjing for records of governments between 1911 and 1949 (*Di er dang'anguan*). Records of the 1919–49 revolutionary movement may be found in the Central Archives in Wen Quan village, north-west of Beijing, and in various provincial, municipal and county archives, but they are part of the comprehensive archives for their jurisdictions. The historical archives holdings of the Liaoning Provincial Archives are drawn from the whole of the north-east region, including the former entities of Liaodong and Manchuria. The Tibetan Autonomous Region Archive has extensive archives of religious and political documents. Some document collections are in libraries and museums. For instance, Yuan Shikai's papers (including the original document of the infamous "21 Demands" with his handwritten notations) are said to be held in the Tianjin Municipal History Museum.

The State Archives Bureau in Beijing presides over the entire archival system. Its director-general reports to both the General Office of the Party

13. The figures are taken from a summary report on contemporary Chinese archival education presented by Chen Zhaowu, senior professor of the Archives College of China People's University and editor of *Dang'an tongxun* (*Archives Bulletin*), at the Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Montreal, 1992. A copy of Chen's report and an English translation are in the possession of the author.

Central Committee and to the General Office of the State Council of the PRC. The Bureau directly manages the Central Archives, the First Historical Archives and the Second Historical Archives. It provides policy guidance, standards and instructions for archival work in central government agencies, enterprises, institutions and organizations, and to archival work agencies at the provincial level and below, although these are all under the political, financial and routine administrative control of their respective agencies or levels of government. At the central government ministerial level, each agency has three functions that are closely related to archives and over which the State Archives Bureau has at least nominal professional leadership authority: documents management work (creation and handling of current documentary communications and files), lodged in the operating departments, offices and sections of the agency; an archives management office (*dang'anchu*) that interprets State Archives Bureau policies and directives and directs their application to the record-keeping operations of the agency, oversees the correct establishment of files, records appraisal, scheduling, retirement of files from operating offices to the agency repository and transfer of files to a central national repository; and an archives repository office (*dang'anshi*) which preserves, arranges and describes the agency's archives and provides reference services to support current operations.

In provinces, a combined archive management bureau and repository has several subordinate offices. An administrative office handles accounts, facilities management, logistics, the director's correspondence and the like, and another office handles personnel and labour relations. For policy management, a laws and regulations office studies national laws, policies and regulations, advises the director on local applications and recommends and drafts local directives; a records guidance office advises agencies and other units on managing traditional paper documents, and a scientific and technical guidance office does the same for audiovisual and electronic records; and an education office provides in-service training to the bureau and its clientele. On the custodial side, a research and compilation office selects and publishes documents on significant matters; a technical office manages environmental conditions, security systems, preservation and repair of records, microfilming and digital imaging, and the technical work for computerized catalogues; while an archives administration office arranges and describes the holdings and provides reference service and reading room supervision.¹⁴

Today's Chinese archives, at whatever level, contain two broad classes of material: archives (*dang'an*) and reference materials (*ziliao*). Archives are records produced and deposited by agencies, arranged into record groups (*quanzhong*) according to agencies of origin. Within record groups, records are for the most part arranged chronologically in dossiers or files

14. The organization described here is based on an organization chart and information provided by the Shandong Provincial Archives Bureau in 1992, and it is offered as only generally representative of component functions. Visits to other provincial and municipal bureaus indicate that other local variations exist.

(*juan*) filled with documents (*wenjian*). Each *juan* has a cover and a sewn binding to prevent pages from straying, and is labelled with the record group title and number, file name and number, date span, number of pages, repository name and other identifying data. Reference materials are a supplementary library not only of publications of the archives itself but also of books, pamphlets and other materials useful to archivists and their clientele. The *ziliao* may include foreign publications pertinent to subjects in the records. Individual “volumes” of reference materials are called *ce*, and the total holdings of a repository are often given as two separate quantities of *juan* and *ce*.

The archival educational system also operates nation-wide. There is archival work training in secondary schools, colleges, postgraduate institutions, in-service training, adult education, correspondence courses and television courses. The Archives College of China People's University (*Renmin Daxue*) traces its origin to November 1952, when a special course in archival science was set up jointly by the Organization Department and Propaganda Department of the Party Central Committee. In 1992, there were nearly three dozen institutions of higher learning offering archival education courses, with a full-time faculty of 600 and over 7,000 students enrolled. Nearly 60 secondary schools offer archival service training, and in 1992 they had a total enrolment of more than 1,000 students. In-service training, from the provincial level to the Archival Cadres Education Centre in the Beijing suburbs, offers courses to thousands of mid-level and higher-level archivists. The State Archives Bureau, the State Education Commission and the Chinese Archives Society are all involved in this educational system.¹⁵

The Chinese Archives Society (CAS), founded in November 1981, has ministerial, provincial and local chapters and a quadrennial national convention. Its headquarters are in the State Archives Bureau, and its leadership is drawn from the national archives management system and from professors of archival science in universities. The Society encourages research in archives preservation, management, the history of archival management and archival management education. CAS publishes journals and bulletins of professional interest and encourages archivists to share their experiences locally and nation-wide. It is a collective advisory body to the national archival enterprise, much as the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference is advisory to the national government. It is the professional and academic aspect of a complex, thoroughly integrated archival establishment.

Characteristics: Principles and Controls

Chinese archives' relations with the CCP Central Committee and PRC State Council are intimate and dependent. Archives management cuts across and works with all Party and state ministries, commissions and agencies, in a way that is unlike any other agency or function below the

15. Chen Zhaowu's report.

level of the Party Central Committee, State Council and Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. It reaches into and affects every aspect of government, so it is of great importance to central authorities. Principal officials of the General Office of the Party Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council take a direct interest in selecting the leadership of the State Archives Bureau and directors of provincial level bureaus. They are also directly involved in review and approval of policies, plans, regulations and directives of the State Archives Bureau. Direct involvement in archival leadership, policy and administration by principal officials of these two powerful central agencies means that archivists must be carefully responsible to the highest national authorities as they meet changing circumstances with new policies, but it also means that China's archival enterprise enjoys from those same authorities an exceptional preferment that archivists in other countries may envy. This characteristic of Chinese archives has four corollaries: a governing "national archival *fond*"; a principle of centralized and unified management; a mission of state service; and comprehensive application of these principles nation-wide in all kinds of units (agencies, institutions, enterprises and mass organizations) at all levels of the Party and state.

All records are deemed integral to the national heritage; none may be disposed of without proper authority. Prior to 1978, much Chinese archival practice was drawn from the Soviet model, and the system still bears traces of that origin. China adopted the Leninist notion of a "national archival *fond*" (*guojia dang'an quanzong*), by which all significant records are the property of the people of China and of such national value that they must be in the custody of and managed by the state. The PRC Archives Law specifically states this principle as a governing one, no matter what the origin (public or private) of the documents and whether they are in the custody of state authorities or not. Means to acquire documents and keep them in trust not only include routine transfers to state archives from work units, but also exhorting private owners to donate materials, offering reasonable compensation to encourage donation, and the forcible seizure of potentially endangered records.

Archives are under state copyright. State Archives Bureau Order No. 2, article 11, explicitly declares: "Publication rights for records in archives at all levels are vested in the archives together with relevant units authorized by the State." No document or any extract from or copy of any document may be removed from an archive or published without the express permission of the archive in which the document resides. There is no equivalent to the concept of "fair use" for illustration.

It is national policy that archives must be managed by centralized and unified control procedures (*jizhong tongyi guanli*). National laws, policies, standards and procedures for archival work are applied in one nation-wide system so statistics and cataloguing may be compatible and cumulative, so management and inventory control can be thorough, and so managers and users can work efficiently and effectively. Leadership is

centralized and administration is distributed among agencies at each level. Implementation is in three stages: policy formation and promulgation; propagation through an iterative process of meetings to urge thorough implementation and compliance; and the actual application of policies by adapting them to local conditions.

The State Archives Bureau directs the system. The Bureau prepares directives, clears them with superior authorities and implements them nation-wide. In many cases, it co-ordinates preparation and execution with other central agencies whose records may be concerned. The Bureau promulgates and distributes policy documents, regulations and instructions. At the time of the issue of important new directives, the Bureau may hold national or regional meetings of provincial-level archive leaders to review main points, explain the need for implementation, and urge prompt, complete compliance. Provincial-level leaders then hold similar meetings in their own jurisdictions. As with all comprehensive schemes, local variety is tolerated to the degree that it remains undetected and to the degree that when discovered it can be justified by special local conditions.

Although the State Archives Bureau is the central archival authority, it must share real power over resources and practical applications with central ministries and with local government authorities that deal with their own archival matters on a day-to-day basis. The Bureau's capability to collect and distribute resources is limited. Its main strength lies in its close relationship to the Party Central Committee and State Council, concentrated professional expertise in its staff, and conditioned expectation that the Centre will lead. Its effectiveness in using this strength lies in the skill with which Bureau leadership identifies and provides reasonable and workable policies to meet changing conditions, the persuasiveness with which it manages the iterative process of exhorting distributed managers to follow its lead, and in the wisdom with which it recognizes and tolerates justifiable local variations and corrects unacceptable ones. The process is aided by a large number of professional journals, published nation-wide, that carry the message and spread it throughout the system. Regulation of compliance through periodic inspection and appraisal, rewards and penalties, is still new to the Chinese archival system. Characteristically Chinese, emphasis remains concentrated on rhetorical leadership rather than enforcement. There is a model of performance elements and numerical ratings for archival institutions, but its use is still somewhat tentative and experimental.

In theory, Chinese archives "serve the people" by serving the Party and the state. This mission appears vestigial in a rapidly changing society and an expanding and diversifying clientele. It is nevertheless persistent and must not be dismissed prematurely as a controlling characteristic. The PRC Archives Law provides that archives should be "opened to society" (*xiang shehui kaifang*). Recent archival literature urges Chinese archivists to change their focus of work and thought from preservation and protection to service. The range of services and appreciation for a wider scope and variety of social uses for archives is expanding.

Nevertheless, “opening to society” is sometimes rather narrowly construed. It still may have distinct biases, not only chauvinistically in favour of Chinese society but politically in support of uses already endorsed by the state as most directly pertinent to national social development. The closer they seem to support national economic development and other current policies, the more confident archivists are they are doing their jobs well. This places high priority on serving a clientele, closely allied with Party and state, that makes significant contributions to China’s modernization and development. The less directly users are concerned with these national imperatives, the less urgent and less important their needs appear to archivists. A secondary but strong service imperative is to provide specific evidential documentation to courts (case files), work units (for unit histories) and individual citizens (birth, marriage, death certificates and so on). The archival reference service in China is conditioned to these needs, and archivists have long experience in modes of service that support them. Thirdly, archivists feel they are satisfying the policy of “opening” by publication of documentary compendia, exhibitions of documents, contributions to radio and television broadcasting, and the like. Archives publish hundreds of documents on selected historical subjects annually, but they are often motivated as much by a return of publication profits to the archives and a sharing of proceeds with the staff and editors as by scholarly objectives.

Archivists publicize their contributions to major state projects. After the 1974 Tangshan earthquake, they provided documentation of water mains, sewers, electrical lines and the like in the recovery and restoration of the city. They have contributed hydrological data and other information for the Three Gorges Dam project on the Yangzi River. Nationally and locally, archivists make sure these contributions are celebrated in newspapers, magazines and television broadcasts. They are also fully reported to the Party Central Committee and State Council.

The Chinese archival lexicon does not include a concept of “access” as a scholar’s or citizen’s right to examine original documents directly. Chinese archivists persistently translate “access” as “archives-use services” (*dang’an liyong fuwu*) which has a rather different perspective and emphasis. There is no “freedom of information” law or principle; directors of repositories have what is virtually a peremptory power to deny access; and there is no systematic route for appealing against such decisions. It is users who must justify their need for access to archivists, not archivists who must justify their restrictions to users. Even when serving users on assignment from government agencies, it is the archivists who decide, from the users’ definition of research scope and focus in their application, which record groups, folders and documents are pertinent to their topic. Broad academic, exploratory research does exist in pre-1949 archives, both by Chinese and foreigners, and such use is increasing, but there is little sense of a “multiplier effect” of improving citizen knowledge of history through academic and private researchers and their independent publications. What archivists expect and are conditioned to serve is selective use of archives by those on assignment for

their work units, or by citizens who must verify some credential of their past for an official purpose or for the compilation of family histories. They are, therefore, less familiar with and less adept in serving open-ended inquiries where the scope and content of research may be general, broad, exploratory and indefinite. Some Chinese archivists even look on open-ended academic inquiry as something of a nuisance that distracts them from their real mission, and this may allow a certain impatience to seep through the customary show of helpful hospitality in the reference service.

Unless there is an extraordinary understanding and communication between the user and the archivist, many pertinent materials may escape attention. It is possible, even for foreigners, to develop a productive relationship with archives service staff, based in part on mutual respect of each other's expertise and in part on patient explanation and negotiation, but it takes great understanding and care to succeed. In fairness to Chinese colleagues, it must be remembered that it is only in the last decade that they have themselves experienced a fundamental shift in operations from reflexive responses to a more open and expansive sort of service. It may require a full generation of adaptation to a more open society before the mode and mood of operations is fully congenial to scholarly research.

The Archives Law of the PRC permits, but does not require, that records in state archives be "opened to society" 30 years after their dates of origin. Economic, scientific, technical and cultural records may be opened earlier, if circumstances permit. This is consistent with international practice endorsed by the International Congress on Archives, but there are significant exceptions. Records that bear on state security and national interest (not further defined) may be restricted up to 50 years or longer if necessary. In addition, depositors of records have strong proprietary interest in the records they deposited, and records are not opened without the depositor's consent. This provision is intended to protect the interests of private donors of personal papers, but in practice depositing state agencies have first use privileges to the documents they deposited, and this interest may impede full opening to society. It is also the case, although not mentioned in the Archives Law, that records may be withdrawn from public use without notice, when archivists are working on their publication projects or on exhibitions and other forms of orthodox "opening to society."

Records must first be preserved, arranged and described before they may be opened. This is a common impediment to reference use the world over, but it is codified as a requirement in the PRC Archives Law. This provision, far more than the foregoing, may be the principal bar to opening the greater bulk of records in contemporary Chinese Archives. Apart from records of top Party and government agencies in the Central Archives and certain specialized agency archives in Beijing, significant bodies of truly sensitive state-security records are not found in most of the comprehensive national, provincial and local archives. Rather, over-generous appraisal of a high percentage of records as having permanent

retention value has crammed local archives with records that are potentially openable, but for the processing needed to make them usable. Emphasis on preservation and a duty not to dispose of the national archival heritage wantonly have led to extraordinary records retention rates of from 50 to 100 per cent of working unit files. (By contrast, the U.S. federal government retention rate is said to be about 2 per cent.) Preservation, arrangement and description are labour-intensive, manual processes for which there are no electronic short-cuts.

Finding aids are, for the most part, composed to find individual files. Summary description at the record group and repository level is sparse and more often used for internal administration than user guidance. Archival repositories, such as those at the provincial level, have card catalogues to names and subjects in individual files, but there are few broad guides to subjects across record groups and repositories. There are three “catalogue centres” (*mulu zhongxin*) now being developed, one for each of the principal areas of “historical archives”: at the First Historical Archives in Beijing for Ming and Qing dynasty records; at the Second Historical Archives in Nanjing for records of governments between 1911 and 1949; and at the Central Archives for records of “revolutionary history” since 1919. Each centre has a computerized database into which is fed information about the contents of individual files in its own holdings and records in other archives. In 1994, these centres were still in the early stages of development, and were not yet heavily used either by archivists or users. The automated system at the Central Archives, for instance, is still used only for internal reference by staff. It is a good system, however, and this author was shown a demonstration of its capability, such as the ability to identify records (that had thus far been entered into the system) pertaining to Zhou Enlai’s participation in negotiations between the Nationalists and Communists during the war against Japan.

All this, of course, means that scholars who are accustomed to the privilege of free searching in totally unrestricted archives are, and will be for some time to come, frustrated by the relative intransigence of the Chinese system. In the main, scholars who concentrate on topics that pre-date the founding of the PRC and/or have little to do with political parties, national defence or foreign relations are likely to find greater fulfilment than those who study these subject areas or need more contemporary access. Although Chinese archives are indeed “opening,” and although the degree of openness when contrasted with that of earlier years is remarkable, there is nothing to suggest that even the most diligent assault by Western scholars on the Chinese protective system will produce the kind of openness that such scholars consider their professional right. Chinese “openness” is likely to be characterized more by the publication of official histories using archives than by the unrestricted availability of the original documents to the general public or foreign researchers. Still, those engaged in pre-20th century history, and to a certain extent in the history of non-Communist China from 1900 to 1949,

are likely to find increasing opportunities to examine and profit from access to original documents.

Changes: Modernization and Reform

Principal characteristics of the Chinese archives system are likely to be modified and perhaps changed radically in the decade ahead by the effects of "modernization, reform and opening to the outside world." Although the system will probably remain closely tied to, dependent on and responsive to CCP and PRC central authority, new patronage and funding support may be sought and found in the generous, ready and more flexible resources of new and enterprising segments of society. Idiosyncratic demands for services and a proprietary interest in their own records by independent enterprises and institutions will force the archival system to serve both the state and a more independent commercial economy. This will increase the cost of archives management. At the same time, the Chinese government, at all levels, is restructuring and streamlining, often cutting back, and decentralizing not only responsibilities but also authorities and initiatives so as to permit greater incentive for growth and development at local levels. These changes mean that enterprises and institutions are likely to develop their own archival repositories, perhaps even outside the state system. Ownership of documents and control of their use will be more in the hands of local corporate originators than under the Centre. Archival services to industrial, commercial and service enterprises are likely to be preoccupied with new objectives and techniques and may incur new and different obligations.

Increasing local authority presents a challenge to the principle of centralized and unified management, and a dilemma for central authorities. It will be tempting to encourage archival support and funding from independent enterprises in order to supplement and relieve a heavily-strained central treasury, but independent economic reliance erodes central authority and control. To maintain "centralized and unified management" central authorities must redouble their efforts and improve their skills in the iterative process of exhortation that convinces diverse and often autonomous managers of archives that their own interests are best served by voluntary conformity to national standards. It may also prove necessary to impose more intrusive and detailed inspection, auditing and compliance controls on relations between the archival system and the commercial world. Both courses are far more costly and vulnerable to errors and failures than the present system.

There are other consequences. For archivists, decentralization means that they must learn and "belong to" new communities of interest, new organizational systems and new communications systems with new needs for archival reference services. Their professional identification will become more diverse and complex, their obligations and loyalties more divided, with many more difficult choices as to the "correct" or best action in any given situation. For scholarship, it means that users will face more diverse and more proprietary controls that are more arbitrarily

idiosyncratic to localized owners than they have been under the co-ordinated centralized system. Ironically, the state-centralized system is only now beginning to adapt attitudes and operations to a more open, “user-friendly” mode of service, and is working to remove restrictions to use of archives.

A noticeable shift to a government of laws and regulations requires still greater reliance on record-keeping and documentary evidence and less on contemporary rhetorical and ideological interpretative skills as the basic reference points of government and for resolution of issues. This means more archives and greater and more frequent use of archives by many more people. In addition, the shift from a planned economy to a market economy introduces a competitiveness among commercial enterprises and sometimes among institutions and other social organizations, competition that urges greater control over and protection of a unit’s own archives to prevent information leaks that would undermine or destroy competitive advantage. Proprietary commercial enterprises and privatized institutions will resist access, acquisition and control of their archives by others, including state archival agencies. This is already apparent in current business. The state, which has enjoyed monopoly control of all archives, becomes therefore a competitor for proprietary evidence and information.

A shift from microeconomic to macroeconomic planning has a concomitant effect of decentralizing authority, investment, budgeting and financial control, and hence decentralizing archives management. Responding to the needs of local conditions often requires modifying or even abandoning national standards and procedures. Although there has already been some specialization, and hence functional decentralization of archives (such as those of motion pictures and still photographs), there seems to be an increasing tendency towards specialized rather than comprehensive archives. The State Archives Bureau and the Central Archives seem to have little to do with management of the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or those of the People’s Liberation Army, although the State Archives Bureau does provide the general national standards and policy framework in which that management takes place. There is evidence that other ministries are finding it more and more convenient and even necessary to have their own records at hand and under their own control system, responsive to their own needs.

“Modernization” also means that increasing use of electronic communication and information systems challenges traditional manual archival procedures and assumptions in ways that are as yet hardly imagined by Chinese archivists. They are beginning to explore and experiment with using electronic information management for comprehensive cataloguing of archival holdings. Eventually, it should be possible to go to one of the three electronic “catalogue centres” now being developed and locate material in any Chinese archives that is pertinent to pre-1949 Chinese history. However welcome this development may be for historians, it does not begin to address issues of how to develop similar and complementary cataloguing for post-1949 records, nor for records of the present and future (that are likely to be more and more in

electronic form and require radically different cataloguing procedures). Nor does it begin to address the use of electronic information systems for the management of archives: for appraisal and scheduling of records as they emerge from agencies and other work units; for transfer and accessioning of records into archives; for internal arrangement, preservation and description of holdings and their locations in repositories. These will require very different sorts of education and training of archivists, drastically changed perspectives on work priorities, and greater requirements for many kinds of expensive investment in a much more complex and sophisticated archival infrastructure. Indirectly, electronic communications will also accelerate the decentralization process noted above.

Chinese archivists have participated in the shift in the past 15 years from serving "class struggle" to serving "socialist construction." In both modes, however, they have responded not to idiosyncratic needs of individual users but rather to the needs of corporate users that are integral to and justified by national priorities. They are rather like a very large corporate archive in the West, responsible chiefly to the needs of the corporation – in this case the state – with little sense of responsibility to the ordinary citizen or to a scholar who wishes to study the corporation. Archivists maintain their preferred status in national resource allocations by making sure that corporate needs are filled promptly and completely. There is no comparable rate of return from idiosyncratic individual customers. Use of archives is still dominated by official requirements rather than scholarly research, and it is likely to remain so for some time. Nevertheless, even within that context, reference service requests are becoming more frequent, demanding, diverse, detailed, exploratory, intrusive and complex. Archivists must satisfy the new demand, or lose their patronage in a much more competitive society. There is an extraordinary wealth of records in contemporary Chinese archives, and there will be steadily increasing pressure on the archival management system to serve broader scholarly interests as well as narrower governmental needs. However, contracted projects under state archival control for the publication of state-approved histories are likely to dominate idiosyncratic scholarly access and use for the next decade or so. The archival system will move more slowly and reluctantly into a more open (and more expensive) mode of research and reference services.

There is also some fear that archives may be irrelevant in a fast-changing world of electronic information. A recent journal article notes: "Some comrades think archive management is a product of old structures and should be abolished." The article responds by asserting:

In the current structural reform [of government agencies] we must simplify and retrench most units; some must be done away with, others combined, others changed. So it is especially important in this period [of structural transformation] to strengthen

archive administration and management so as to protect the integrity of records and research materials.¹⁶

The future of archives in China greatly depends on just how well central authorities strengthen archive management, at great cost, to meet the simultaneous challenges of decentralization, a competitive market economy and electronic communications. It further depends on the will, imagination, dedication and creative invention of archivists to diversify and master not only the past but the future. Western scholars seeking greater access need to open and maintain a constant dialogue with both Chinese scholars and archival authorities. Confrontational demands or gloating publicity of “scoops” that exploit lapses in the Chinese archival system are likely to induce an anti-foreign siege mentality. Change will come slowly, through long, tedious, patient dialogue acquainting Chinese with the mutual benefits of greater openness. To that end, regular international conferences and exchanges must be sponsored and pursued energetically. Western scholars should help Chinese archivists improve Chinese archives, including abetting the restoration or copying of alienated records that are part of China’s cultural heritage, at the same time as they seek and argue the merits of greater, deeper and broader access to Chinese archival sources.

Appendix

Archives Visited

- Beijing: Central Archives (1995)
First Historical Archives (1982, 1986, 1992, 1993)
Beijing Municipal Construction Archives (1992)
Tong Xian County Archives (1992)
Ministry of Chemical Industry Records Office (1992)
Beijing Iron and Steel Works (*Shou Gang*) Archives (1992)
Yunju Temple Carved-stone Archives (1994)
- Dunhuang: Dunhuang Municipal Archives (1995)
- Nanjing: Second Historical Archives (1982, 1986)
Jiangsu Provincial Archives (1986)
- Guangzhou: Guangzhou Provincial Archives (1982, 1993)
Foshan Municipal Archives (1993)
Jinan University Archives (1993)
- Hangzhou: Zhejiang Provincial Archives (1986)
- Jinan: Shandong Provincial Archives (1982, 1992)
- Shenyang: Liaoning Provincial Archives (1992)
Dong Ling Municipal District Archives (1992)
- Shanghai: Shanghai Municipal Archives (1982, 1986)
- Sichuan: Sichuan Provincial Archives (1995)
Chengdu Municipal Archives (1995)
Dujiangyan Municipal Archives (1995)
Wen Xian County Archives (1987)

16. Zhang Manbiao and She Dongxuan, “We cannot weaken archives administration and management,” *Zhongguo dang’an*, No. 1 (1994), p. 17.

- Tianjin: Tianjin Municipal Archives (1992)
Tianjin Municipal Construction Archives (1992)
Nankai University Archives (1992)
- Tibet: Tibet Autonomous Region Archives (1995)
Lhasa Municipal Archives (1995)
Shannan Prefectural Archives, in Zedang (1995)
- Qufu: Confucian Family Archives (1982, 1986, 1992)
- Xinjiang: Xinjiang Autonomous Region Archives (1995)
Wulumuqi Municipal Archives (1995)
- Xuzhou: #3 Mining Hospital Record Office (1982)