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Archives in the People's Republic of China Revisited

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This article updates and supplements an earlier article on the same subject.¹ It is based on readings of Chinese archival literature over the past four years and on information gained during the 1986 Society of American Archivists study tour of Chinese archives.² The focus is on the structure, organization, principles, and practices of archives in the People's

Republic of China (PRC), which is to say post-1949 records of the PRC and its revolutionary antecedents since the May 4th Movement of 1919. Archives of what PRC archivists call "the old regime," records of imperial dynasties and various governments between 1911 and 1949, are mentioned only briefly.³

¹See William W. Moss, "Archives in the People's Republic of China," *American Archivist* 45 (Fall 1982): 385-409; and Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, "Lenin's Archival Decree of 1918: The Bolshevik Legacy for Soviet Archival Theory and Practice," *American Archivist* 45 (Fall 1982): 429-43.

²An SAA delegation visited national, provincial, municipal, and county archives in Shanghai, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Qufu, Beijing, and Chengdu during a tour of the PRC, 6-30 April 1986. Other sources include *Dangan Guanli Xue* (Studies in Archives Administration), compiled by Chen Zhaowu et al. from lectures delivered in an archives course at Renmin University and published by Renmin University Press in 1979 (199 pp., paper) and *Dangan Gongzuo* (Archives Work), the quarterly journal of the Chinese Archives Association.

³Chinese titles and terms in this article are expressed in standard PRC "pinyin" spelling, with no attempt to phoneticize spellings for pronunciation.

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Organization and Structure of the Chinese Archival System

The organization and structure of the Chinese archival system is one of centralized authority and guidance with decentralized custody and implementation. The structure rests ultimately on the concept of a "comprehensive national archives" (*guojia quanbu dangan*). The comprehensive national archives is broadly perceived as "the national record," composed of many parts that are united by centralized, carefully-regulated management into an integral whole governed by the State Archives Bureau in Beijing. Since all government entities and all institutions and productive enterprises are integral to the state, any document of any significance to the social, political, or economic status of the nation is a potential candidate for the comprehensive national archives. This concept has its roots in the highly ideological Leninist concept of a single national *fond*, modified by Chinese experience to accommodate functional and geographic specialization in a series of sub-archives that in fact make up the integral whole. According to *Dangan Guanli Xue*, the comprehensive national archives is composed of: (1) archives of the PRC (both Chinese Communist Party [CCP] and government) since 1949; (2) archives of all revolutionary entities antecedent to the PRC since the May 4th Movement of 1919 (the CCP, revolutionary activists, CCP labor unions, CCP military units, etc.); and (3) archives of "the old power structure" (imperial dynasties, Canton Provisional Government, Yuan Shikai government, Nationalist Republic, and Wang Jingwei puppet regime under the Japanese).

To this chronological perspective must be added a functional one. Chinese archival work is divided into five broad areas: (1) archives offices; (2) archival repositories; (3) archives management en-

tities; (4) archival education; and (5) archival scientific research. These need a more detailed explanation for full appreciation of the complex centralized-decentralized structure of Chinese archival organization.

Archives Offices (*dangan shi*). Every operating unit at whatever level, whether governmental, institutional, cultural, industrial, agricultural, or commercial, that has a sufficiently independent role to communicate and have relationships with others in its own name is likely to have its own archives office. This is rather more than a records office; it is more comparable to an institutional or corporate archives in the American experience. It is staffed by archivists. The functions of the archives office are to negotiate with line operating personnel, including clerical staffs, the selection and regular transfer of documentation from the workplace to the entity archives office for long-term retention as references needed for future operations; to provide feedback to line units on the completeness and orderliness of files transferred for accessioning into the entity archives office; and to convey to operating units guidance and requirements of archival management provided by the State Archives Bureau so that documentation will meet the needs of the whole nation, the particular segment of the polity or economy served by the entity, and the needs of future historical research in the specialized function that produced the records. Normally, records transferred to such an entity archives office remain in that office's custody and under its administration indefinitely or until scheduled for disposal. They are not normally transferred to more centralized "comprehensive archives" or "specialized archives" (see below) unless they are of exceptional significance. Line operating units, whether farms, factories, hospitals, or other entities, are usually represented in

centralized archives by periodic status, progress, or production reports rather than by organic records of the workplace.

The work of these basic-level archives offices is critical to the whole archival system. Much of the success of that system depends on their proper execution of centrally-issued instructions. In turn, this feature gives archives in the PRC a pervasiveness and a depth of organization throughout the nation that archivists in the United States may well envy. Records that American archivists normally do not think of as archives until after the fact, and perhaps too late, such as the breeding records of livestock or the charting of city utility lines and water mains, are considered by the Chinese to be potentially "archival" at very basic levels of political and economic organization. It is not insignificant to note in this context that the Chinese do not make the same legalistic and semantic distinctions Americans do among "documents," "records," and "archives." The single term *dangan* is employed to cover all three concepts, although there are other synonyms available. (See the discussion of archival management and principles below.)

Archival Repositories (*dangan guan*). The redundancy is necessary because of the English ambiguity of "archives" to mean an institution, a building, and the records contained therein. A *dangan guan* is a building and a custodial institution, but not its contents, which are *dangan*. There are two kinds of these repositories, "comprehensive archives" and "specialized archives." Each may be found at the national, provincial, or local level of government.

A comprehensive archives is the archives of a specific layer of government, and its holdings include a broad scope of records of government functions at that level. There is a national comprehensive archives in Beijing, the Central Archives

(*Zhongyang Dangan Guan*), to which many of the noncurrent but permanently valuable records of national-level ministries and commissions, the State Council, the Central Committee of the CCP, and other similar organizations are transferred on schedules worked out between the State Archives Bureau and the entity concerned. As in the case of the archives office at the basic entity level, the Central Archives provides feedback to the client ministries on the condition of records received and their conformance to arrangement and preservation regulations. There are similar archival repositories for each province, each autonomous region, and each special municipality directly subordinate to the State Council in the PRC system of government. Each, at its own level, performs functions of custody and administration of noncurrent records and feedback as described above for the Central Archives, for the bureaus, and other entities directly subordinate to the provincial council or its regional/municipal equivalent. There are also similar comprehensive archives for many cities and counties that are subordinate, in turn, to councils of provinces, autonomous regions, or special municipalities. Each performs at its own level functions similar to those described above.

Specialized archives are those repositories at any level of government limited to the records of a particular type of material or activity, such as the national motion picture archives in Beijing, which is directly subordinate to the Ministry of Culture, or the "municipal construction archives" of a large city, which has custody of and administers charts and records pertaining to streets, utility systems, or major construction projects, under the auspices of a Bureau of Municipal Construction that reports to the municipal council. In each case, the comprehensive archives for that level of

government has no role in the regulation or administration of the specialized archives. It does not accept records for accession from specialized archives, and it does not set standards for administration and custody of records in specialized archives. This is the function of the "archives management entities," discussed below.

Finally, there are two "historical archives" (*lishi dangan guan*) that may be seen as a variation on the "comprehensive archives" model. They are indeed comprehensive in that their holdings cover a broad spectrum of entities and functions, but they are specialized chronologically, and they are the only repositories administered directly by the State Archives Bureau. The First Historical Archives in Beijing is the custodian and administrator of surviving national-level records of the Ming and Qing imperial dynasties. The Second Historical Archives in Nanjing is the custodian and administrator of surviving national-level records of various governments and governments-presumptive during the period 1911-1949.

Another development that bears watching over the coming years is the institution of certain specialized archives at the national level for significant ministries or for several ministries engaged in related functions. A new repository is being developed for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the clear inference that at some point records of that ministry will no longer be transferred to the Central Archives for custody and administration. Specialized archives apparently also exist for functions having to do with metallurgy, space, and weapons.

It is important to remember that these are institutions of custody and administration of noncurrent records. They do not involve themselves in records management or have any authority over parts of the life cycle of records prior to

accessioning into their custody. They may and do provide feedback on the condition of records received, and may thereby improve records practices in the ministries or other entities concerned, but archival repositories do not prescribe solutions to records problems in operating units.

Archives Management Entities (*dangan guanli jiguan*). For readers who have been looking for the thread that ties all this diversity and decentralization together, the answer lies in the role and function of the State Archives Bureau in Beijing and archives bureaus of the provincial and local governments. The State Archives Bureau derives substantial authority from direct subordination to the State Council, the principal executive arm of the government of the PRC, and from the Central Committee of the CCP. The function of the State Archives Bureau is to devise broad outlines of archival policy and principles for the entire nation, and in consultation with each national-level ministry to devise and promulgate archives management, records management, and records disposition guidance for use by operating entities and archives offices or archival repositories at every level.

For example, the State Archives Bureau and the Ministry of Finance jointly issued an instruction in general terms covering the requirements for documentation and records retention of all records having to do with accounting and finances. This instruction was then implemented in the Ministry of Finance and its own archives office, by provincial bureaus of finance and their archives offices, and by other entities dealing with accounting and financial records throughout the country. At each level a similar process of consultation and refinement of the general instructions into particular local application was

worked out, until a whole network of instructions from the general to the particular permeated the system.

The State Archives Bureau not only designs and promulgates regulations for archival and records management, but staff members also go out to ministries and provincial archives bureaus to review the implementation of the instructions, to offer advice, and to suggest improvements and refinements in local applications. They perform this "review and advice" function for operating entities and for repositories, whether comprehensive archives, specialized archives, historical archives, or archives offices. Archives bureaus subordinate to provincial and other local level governments perform similar functions within their own jurisdictions in close cooperation with and under the general guidance of the State Archives Bureau, with authority derived in part from parent governing councils and in part from the central authority of the State Archives Bureau.

The State Archives Bureau has very broad functions. Even as the SAA study tour was departing Beijing, the State Archives Bureau was holding a nationwide conference to review, improve, and approve a comprehensive system of job descriptions and classifications for those in the archival profession. It also sets national standards for archival education and archival scientific research in cooperation and consultation with those concerned—educators in archival science at principal universities and chemists and physicists or engineers engaged in paper preservation, electronic records, or building systems research and development.

Archival Education. There appear to be three avenues of training and professional development of archivists in the PRC. One, common to all professions, is on-the-job training and development through master-apprentice relationships

between senior and junior staff members. There is also, however, a long tradition of classroom vocational education of archivists. Archives courses may be found in a number of Chinese universities, some of which have developed into independent departments and in one case, that of Renmin (People's) University, into the higher status of a four-year institute. Renmin University has been the preeminent leader in archival education, and its staff of instructors includes respected senior figures in Chinese archives and archival education. The Institute maintains a close working relationship with the Chinese Archives Association, of which its instructors are leading members, and with the State Archives Bureau, whose staff members are occasional lecturers. The courses of study include Chinese and world history, ancient and modern Chinese language, the history and development of the government of the PRC and the CCP, archival theory and principles, clerical documentation, archives management, records preservation and reprography, and the histories of Chinese and foreign archival systems. Calligraphy, statistics for archivists, and principles of administration are also taught. The emphasis is on training for work in archives of the PRC rather than general education in humanities and sciences, closer to the model of vocational education than of liberal education in the United States. Programs of archival courses in other universities are modeled on the same general pattern. There is post-academy training in special languages such as Manchu, Mongolian, and Tibetan. Archival specialists in foreign languages such as French, Russian, and English tend to be drawn from foreign language institutes at major universities. Once employed in archives, they are retrained on the job for archival work.

The Chinese Archives Association (CAA) is the principal body for professional exchange and continuing education. The Association was organized by the State Archives Bureau, and its leadership is drawn from that entity and from the leading archivists and archival instructors in the country. The purposes of the CAA are to organize and promote research activity and publication with respect to archives (content and process); to hold meetings for the presentation and discussion of papers on archival topics; to publish a journal of archival news, theoretical views, and developments; to represent the interests of archives within the larger national society; and to represent Chinese archivists in international archival forums. There are branch associations in provinces, autonomous regions, and special municipalities. There are also branch associations devoted to some of the specialized archives, such as the aviation, space, metallurgy, and weapons industries. Membership in the CAA and its branches is limited to practicing archivists at the level of assistant archivist or assistant instructor, or assistant engineer (e.g., one involved in environmental systems for archives) and those of higher rank. The society has eleven special committees dedicated to the promotion of education and standards in the fields of archives management, records management, historical editing and publishing, automation, microfilming and reprography, conservation, scientific and technical reports, archival education, foreign archives, and basic archival theory and history.

Documentation and Archives Management

General Principles. To understand Chinese archives, one has to grasp the broadest implications of the totalitarian

principles that underlie them. Documents, like enterprises and institutions, are integral to and justifiable in terms of their participation in realization of the socialist state. At different times this principle may take on new rhetoric, but it persists. At present, for instance, the "four modernizations" or "socialist modernization" are the goals and driving forces to be served by people, enterprises, and documentation. In an earlier period the concept was "socialist construction." Both appraisal of future evidential value and archives management principles and practices spring from this basic and underlying perspective of society and the state. Basic documents in the development of Chinese archives under the PRC emphasize this point of view. *Dangan Guanli Xue* specifically cites the Soviet Union's experience with archives as the source of Chinese archival principles and practice. On 16 April 1956, the State Council issued a "Decision on Strengthening National Archival Work," which stated, among other things, "the fundamental principles of archival work are centrally unified management of national records, protecting the integrity and safety of records, and the use of archives to facilitate the work of the state."⁴ On 7 January 1959 the CCP Central Committee, at the suggestion of Zhou Enlai, issued a "Circular on Unified Management of Party and Government Archives." The publication provided that party and government records, which had been administered separately, should be kept together in custody and administered under one unified management concept. It underscored the following: "Using archives to facilitate the work of party and state is the basic aim of archival work."⁵

In the Chinese view, according to *Dangan Guanli Xue*, documents are tools

⁴*Dangan Guanli Xue*, 11.

⁵*Ibid.*

of the workplace. They are created by and in the assistance of furthering on-going work in an office, farm, factory, store, college, hospital, or any other functioning component of the society. It is this organic relationship to the actual work process that gives documents their high evidential value and warrants the investment of time, effort, and resources to select and preserve the best of them for future reference. By implication, and to a large extent (apparently) by exclusion, retrospective descriptions of past events are slighted, except as they appear in periodic progress and production reports. Not all documents, however, become archives. Only those documents deemed by managers of the workplace and their archivists to be of continuing reference value beyond immediate utility in that workplace are selected for transfer to the entity archives office for long-term or indefinite custody according to negotiated retention schedules for each type of record. No document that is not "completed" (i.e., which has not yet served its useful life in the workplace or is still subject to some action) is transferred to the archives office. Documents are not classed as "records" because of some inherent abstract quality, rather they become "archives" when deliberately chosen for retention because of their continuing reference value to the organization that produced them. This very pragmatic and nonacademic view of documentation permeates most of Chinese archival practice, although there is recognition of future historical research value in appraisal guidelines.

Arrangement. The Chinese employ a concept similar to the American record group or the French *fond*, called in Chinese a *quanzong*. A *quanzong* is the archives of a single "files-establishing unit" (*lidang danwei*), i.e., one that can correspond with others on its own

authority and may have independent budgeting and resource allocation authority within its own function and may have authority to appoint and remove personnel. The *quanzong* is the principal unit of arrangement and management, from which all else is derived, and it has an organic relationship to the entity that created the records. The familiar concepts of *provenance* and *respect des fonds* are firmly embedded in the *quanzong* concept as may be shown by the following excerpt from the standard Chinese text on archives management:

The archives produced by an entity or personage reflect the process of development and change in its ideology and activities and the inherent historical linkages among them, and these are inseparable from the whole. . . . each constitutes a *quanzong*, and the archives from different *quanzong* must not be mixed or confused. The archives of one *quanzong* must not be dispersed, and their division into series, establishment of individual file units, cataloging, and other arrangement work must be based on the integrity of the *quanzong*. Arrangement according to *quanzong* offers the greatest degree of preservation of historical linkages among documents, comprehensively reflecting the entire composition and processes of the entity and facilitating good administration and reference use.⁶

There are three special variations on the *quanzong* concept in Chinese archival practice. "Joint record groups" (*lianhe quanzong*) may occur when two files-establishing units have such a close and integral relationship that their records cannot be separated without endangering historical understanding of their respective functions and relationship. This may happen, for instance, when one entity in fact performs two

⁶Ibid., 45.

separate functions under two separate names (in English "wearing two hats" or in Chinese "one establishment with two titles on the door"). "Archival collections" (*dangan huiji*) are also permitted when fragmentary surviving documentation from a number of small and closely related entities are put into a single *quanzong*, particularly when functional demarcations among the entities or the records are unclear. Finally, there is something that translates literally and somewhat quaintly into "a herd" of *quanzongs* (*quanzong qun*), in which small but discrete entity record groups may be clustered together for archival convenience and covered by the same *quanzong* number.

The Chinese have also thought carefully about problems of fine-tuning the *quanzong* concept to allow for changes in the nature, composition, subordination, function, or even ideological disposition of the files-establishing unit. Elaborate rationales are constructed to guide Chinese archivists in deciding which archives belong in which *quanzongs* and which *quanzong* designations should change because of historical developments and ideological evolution.

Within *quanzongs*, arrangement is called "classification" (*fenlei*) into "categories" (*bulei*), but may without serious damage to the Chinese concepts be translated freely into "series arrangement." It mirrors the familiar division of record groups into series and subseries by subordinate hierarchical units, by names/topics, by chronology, or by combinations of these commonly used "classifiers." The Chinese word for "arrangement" is worth a brief mention here. It is *zhengli*, and its literal meaning is "to set to rights" or "to make neat and tidy." It infers that much of the work of arrangement should, in fact, have been done by the originating office and that what remains for the archivists is merely

to restore odd strays to their proper places and to make sure the edges of the paper are evenly matched in a file after assuring that the file is complete. The concept also carries, by implication, some sense of "sanctity of the original order."

The basic unit for physical handling is the "file" (*juan*) or "volume" (*ce*). It is not uncommon in Chinese archives to find closed files that have had preservation work applied to them bound with thread into volumes, when the archivists have the time and resources to apply such work. Binding has two benefits. It prevents individual documents from straying, and it prevents loose documents wearing each other through rubbing when the file is handled. The drawback is difficulty in photocopying and exhibiting single documents, which does not seem an impressive objection to Chinese archivists.

Each file folder or volume has a standard cover on which are entered standard elements of basic description: *quanzong* number and title, series number and title, folder title and number, perhaps a brief description of contents, and often the name of the archivist who prepared the cover sheet. Folders/volumes are arranged on shelves within series by number, series within *quanzongs* by number in their turn, and *quanzongs* are sequentially arranged by their numbers; the whole is described in a stack locator posted on the wall of each *kufang* or stack area.

Other means of basic description include "catalogs" (*mulu*), which are comparable to our folder title lists or shelf lists, and "record group introductions" (*quanzong jieshao*), which resemble our registration statements but may be more extensive. They include scope and content notes, provenance, descriptive title, and perhaps some of the processing history of the body of material within the

archives, including names of personnel responsible for the work.

Chinese archivists tend to rely heavily on card indexes to the locations of significant names and topics or events found during processing or research. The name/event/topic is entered on a card about the size of a 3"x5" card with its *quanzong*/series/file location data and the name of the person who drafted the card. The card is then filed by name/topic/event in a master card file of all such index cards in what looks very much like a standard library card catalog cabinet. The selection of items for inclusion is based on the subjective knowledge of the archivist engaged in the work, reinforced by experience from reference inquiries.

Dissemination and Use of Archives

Contrary to American experience and practice, the chief emphasis in Chinese archival work on dissemination of content information is on publication of selected document texts centered on historical themes considered by archivists and historians to be significant in Chinese history. Each of the major archives, whether at the national or provincial level, has what is commonly translated as a "compilation section" (*bianji bu*) involved in historical editing and documentary publication. The finished product is printed from original text, sometimes with photocopies of particularly significant original documents as illustration and sometimes with supplementary photographs, and it is distributed or put up for sale, in hard copy or microform or both. The work is done by archivists in repositories but may be done as joint ventures with historians from universities.

Most research in China is performed as officially sanctioned or work-required activity rather than as liberal academic inquiry. In imperial China the approved annals of the court or "veritable records" (*shilu*) were the official histories of the

day, and the writing of official histories remains a principal activity. Although there is no formal policy prohibiting independent research, the interests of party and state are clearly with official activity, and it has first priority on resources, service, and attention from archivists in state-run archives. This may on occasion result in independent research, often by foreign scholars, being slighted somewhat. But generally Chinese archivists are friendly and will, within the reasonable constraints of state security and competing demands, provide good and helpful service to foreign scholars, particularly if the foreign scholar takes the time and trouble to develop a good working relationship with the staff of the archives in which he wishes to do research. Even in the most helpful cases, though, it is common for a Chinese archivist to be far more of an intermediary in the task of seeking out appropriate sources than American scholars are accustomed to tolerating from reading room personnel. The visiting researcher may not even be permitted to scan for himself the pertinent *mulu* (catalogs), but rather must rely on a reference archivist's understanding of his research interest and a good faith attempt to locate pertinent material.

Summary

In the Chinese view, archives must meet the needs of society. Only the most useful of documents should be selected for retention, and this selection is the archival function of acquisition (*shouji*), which must be systematic. Archives are complex, and making them useful requires that they be classified into categories for effective use; such classification is the archival function of arrangement (*zhengli*). Not all archives are equally useful, and because they are so voluminous not all can be retained indefinitely. Only the best can be kept, and

evaluation is the archival function of appraisal (*jianding*). Archives are vulnerable to theft and damage, so they must be protected against loss; this protection is the archival function of preservation (*baoguan*). These functions are all designed to make archives useful, but uses are changing continuously to satisfy all sorts of evolving needs, so archives must be prepared meticulously, described thoroughly, and provided promptly to researchers; preparation, description, and providing to researchers are the archival functions of reference (*liyong*). Archival statistics are kept to understand archival work processes and to manage them systematically and scientifically. Archival work is essentially service. It neither produces material goods nor issues directives. Its importance lies not so much in what archivists do or in what they produce as in the documents they manage. It is subordinate to and in the service of the Party and the state.

There is a beguiling simplicity in this paraphrase of the nature and content of archival work from *Dangan Guanli Xue*. In this simplicity lie both the strength of Chinese archival work and its potential for difficulty in accommodating the needs of an increasingly diverse and complex society. Chinese archival work reaches deeply and broadly into the routine functioning of a wide variety of government and economic enterprises, but the ability to master the records of those entities as they are permitted more local initiative under new policies will depend on the continued voluntary acceptance by the local entities of the critical value of central regulation of records management and archives, an acceptance seldom found in American society. The Chinese archival scene will be worth watching over the next several years to see how archivists handle records in an exciting and rapidly evolving situation.