

## International Scene

MARJORIE BARRITT AND NANCY BARTLETT, editors

# Differences and Similarities in Chinese and American Approaches to Archives

XU YUQING

**Abstract:** The author discusses five main differences between archives in the United States and China: differences in national history and the formation of archives; differences in the archival administration system; differences in archival management; differences in the research use of archives; and differences in archival education. He remarks on some strengths and weaknesses, as he sees them, in the American archival system.

*About the author:* Xu Yuqing studied English and history at Fudan University in Shanghai. He has worked in the archival profession for more than twenty-five years. He is deputy chief of the Foreign Affairs Division of the State Archives Bureau where he arranges the visits of foreign delegates and translates articles from foreign archival publications. This article was written as a product of the author's participation in the 1990 Research Fellowship Program for the Study of Modern Archives administered by the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan and funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Research Division of the National Endowment for the Humanities, a federal agency. The author expresses his sincere thanks to Kenneth P. Scheffel, Marjorie Barritt, and Nancy Bartlett of the Bentley Historical Library for their assistance.

THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF China and the United States of America represent two great nations: the former, the most populous country with an ancient civilization; and the latter, the most scientifically and technologically developed country. Archives, as the cultural heritage and mirror of social life, are important to the concerns of the peoples of our two countries, especially historians. The importance of archives is increasingly recognized by both societies and the status of archivists is continually improving.

Approaches to archival administration in China and America bear marked similarities, especially the procedures of acquisition, arrangement, description, preservation, and reference. The principle of provenance is respected and followed in both countries. We are both involved with introducing modern advances in the management of archives such as microfilming, computer network systems, and optical disc processes. We also share an interest in developing new means of making our holdings more accessible to users. American archival institutions prepare several types of finding aids such as card catalogues, inventories, guides, indexes, contents lists, general information bulletins, statistical abstracts, and annuals. In Chinese archives, similar finding aids are also prepared so that better service can be given to researchers.

In addition to these main points of similarity in the archival work of our two countries, there are significant differences in approaches to archives administration and records management.

### **Differences in National History and Archival Formation**

Although China has a long history, most records kept in Chinese archives were created in the twentieth century. Ancient records and archives occupy only a small part of our archival holdings. This resulted mainly from disruptions stemming from

changes in feudal dynasties, civil wars, natural calamities, and foreign invasions. When Emperor Qin (221-207 B.C.) first unified China, he killed more than 1,000 intellectuals and burned all manuscripts and books from opponents to his rule in a bid to achieve unified thinking. When the first Qing emperor (1644 A.D.) conquered China, many records and documents were burned for the sake of consolidating the Manchu minority rule over the Han Nation. The invasion of China by eight foreign powers at the turn of this century resulted in many archival materials and records being lost or burned. So before the founding of New China, archival work remained in a very poor and backward condition.

Existing archival institutions in China have only a brief history. The First Historical Archives of China, which contains the records of the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368-1911), and the Second Historical Archives of China, which holds mainly the records of the Kuomintang Government (1911-49), were created in 1925 and 1951 respectively. The Chinese Central Archives, which contains the records of New China, i.e., records of the revolution led by the Chinese Communist Party and records of permanent value received from central agencies and departments of the party and government after 1949, was established only in 1959, about twenty-four years after the opening of the National Archives of the United States. All thirty provincial-level archives were formed after 1957. Their holdings consist of records created after the founding of New China in 1949. Archival history in the United States is obviously quite different. Though it is quite young, the United States has benefited from the good fortune of a favorable geographical location. America has escaped the ravages of war that China has endured many times. It has received contributions from many groups and nationalities, each of which has added a special sense of its own history.

Figure 1



First Historical Archives of China.

From the middle of the nineteenth century, historical societies were established in various states. These societies collected and preserved precious records and manuscripts. The nation's most precious documentary treasures such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, were identified and well protected from the beginning.

A movement to establish archival pro-

grams in various states was vigorously launched at the turn of this century. Alabama established the nation's first formal archives program in 1901 and by the end of the First World War, one-third of the American states either had established archival institutions or had passed laws relevant to archival programs. In contrast, Chinese provincial-level archives were created a half century later.

Figure 2



The Sichuan Provincial Archives is one of thirty such repositories in China.

### Differences in Archival Administrative Systems

In the past four or five thousand years of civilized history, China has always pursued a centralized and hierarchical system and management structure. Under the Confucian orthodoxy, which controlled and ruled the Chinese people for more than two thousand years, subjects were to obey their feudal rulers absolutely and the supreme power always resided in the feudal emperor or empress. To some degree, the influence of Confucian orthodoxy remains even today. Archives in China were designed to serve feudal dynasties as a centralized administrative tool. This is why the records now preserved in China's historical archives are basically those relating to the imperial court, including diaries, imperial genealogies, and edicts and routine reports to emperors. Pri-

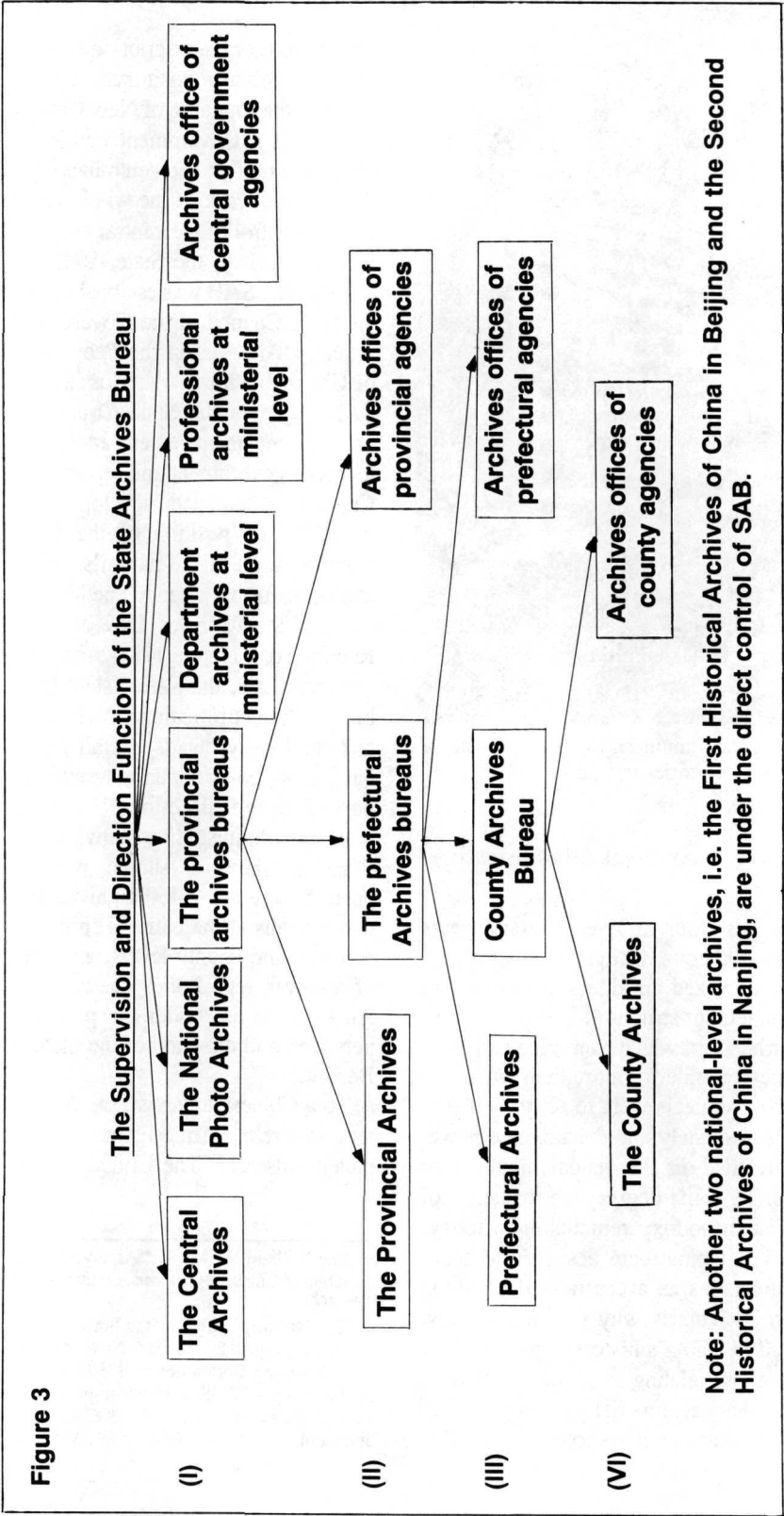
vate records or manuscripts are seldom found in any archival repository.

Since the founding of New China in 1949, the People's Government continues to implement a unified and centralized system and the archival work of the whole nation is under the control of the central archival administration agency, the State Archives Bureau (SAB). The SAB was established in 1954 by the State Council of the Government. In his article, "Archives in the People's Republic of China," William W. Moss states that the SAB "advises the State Council, provides archival and management advice to various levels of government and reports to the State Council on archival developments nationwide."<sup>1</sup> The position of the SAB in the administration of the nation's archival work has been further strengthened by the enactment of the Archives Law of the People's Republic of China in 1988. According to the Archives Law, the SAB "shall be responsible for the entire nation's archival endeavor and shall carry out its overall planning, organization, co-ordination, systemization, supervision and direction."<sup>2</sup> A nationwide archival administrative network has taken shape in China, as shown in figure 3. At present there are 3,460 archives administration bureaus at the national, provincial, prefectural, and county levels, and the number of archives repositories has reached 3,500. All of them are under the professional supervision and direction of the State Archives Bureau.

To a Chinese archivist, the American system of archival management seems completely different. The United States is quite

<sup>1</sup>See William W. Moss, "Archives in the People's Republic of China," *American Archivist* 45 (Fall 1982): 385-409.

<sup>2</sup>The law was drafted by the State Archives Bureau of China, adopted by the Sixth National People's Congress Standing Committee in 1987, and became law on 1 January 1988. See the accompanying "Archives Law of the People's Republic of China: A Summary and Commentary" by William W. Moss.





a young country with a history of a little more than two hundred years. People in this nation come from various nationalities, have brought different experiences and, perhaps as a consequence, practice diversity and experimentation in their administrative structures. Therefore it is easy and natural for the United States to maintain a federal system of government. One of the characteristics of the federal system is a relatively precise division of powers and responsibilities between the central government and state governments, the states being quite independent from the central government.

As an independent agency of the federal government, the National Archives and Records Administration is only responsible for the prompt collection and safekeeping of the records of permanent value from federal government agencies. NARA lacks a nationwide authority and does not impose any rules, regulations, or directions on state archives which are organized in a variety of ways. Coordination in archives stems mainly from such professional organizations as the Society of American Archivists, national records management associations, and other regional societies or associations.

Due to the successful efforts of archivists and historians, archival management at the federal level in the United States is well developed and even holds a leading role internationally. However, local public archives in some states are in a miserable condition and are almost neglected. As Francis X. Blouin, Jr. pointed out in his report at the Second European Conference on Archives, "the city archives of Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Detroit are in disarray and without proper legislation or administration."<sup>3</sup> In some counties there is

no archival repository. In contrast, local archives in China have a sound foundation and many American visiting scholars have shown deep interest in the management and accessibility of local archives in China.

**Names of archival repositories.** When people in China talk about *records*, we usually refer to public records and scientific and technical records. Private records or manuscripts are not mentioned very much in our archival work. This is because private records occupy a very small place in our archival holdings. All records and archival materials are preserved in archives repositories. Holdings of libraries are mainly books, newspapers, magazines, and other printed materials.

In the United States, many libraries, especially at universities, actually serve as archives. This is quite different from China. For example, the Bentley Historical Library collects and preserves private records and University of Michigan records, so actually the Bentley is an archives, not a historical library. When I was planning to go to the Bentley for a two-month research fellowship on archives management, many Chinese colleagues asked me why I was going to a library to study the subject, because they do not know the real function of the Bentley Historical Library and other university libraries. Things are quite the same with presidential libraries in America. When we translate "presidential libraries" into Chinese, we often put the three Chinese characters of archives after the library so that Chinese readers may understand the exact meaning of presidential libraries.

It is also confusing to a Chinese archivist to find that in the United States even a term used in the name of an archival repository sometimes has different meanings. For example, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin serves as the archives of the state government and a repository for private records. Yet, the Historical Society of Michigan collects nothing archival, al-

<sup>3</sup>Francis X. Blouin, Jr., "Convergences and Divergences in Archival Tradition: A North American Perspective," *Second European Conference on Archives Proceedings* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1990), 22-29.

though it promotes an interest in history. The State Archives of Michigan in Lansing holds state government records, but unlike Wisconsin's, handles little else.

### Differences in Archival Management

Although both China and the United States have adopted quite similar approaches to records acquisition, arrangement, description, preservation, and access, their different social systems have led to some variations in archival management.

**Records acquisition.** One of the functions of archives administration bureaus at various levels in China is the responsibility for the supervision and administration of the scientific and technical records of enterprises such as mines or factories, businesses, and scientific institutions. The government has under its control not only public records transferred from government departments and agencies, but also scientific and technical records transferred from businesses. In China we do not pay much attention to the collection of private records, while the collection and preservation of scientific and technical records hold quite an important role in our archival work.

It appears that archival acquisition in the United States is mainly of records of federal and state government agencies, leading to the predominance of government records in archives' holdings. American archivists are also concerned with the acquisition of private manuscripts and university records. Because American businesses are privately owned and not subject to government control, scientific and technical records created by them are often neglected. Many of these records are beyond the reach of public records acts or other records regulations.

**Administration of government records.** In China, most records management is directed and supervised by the archives administration bureaus at various levels. We usually establish an archives office in every government agency, enterprise, or organi-

zation. The main functions of the archives office are: (1) to collect and preserve records of the agency that are still current or semi-current and have permanent or long-term value, and to transfer the records of permanent value to the national archives for permanent preservation after a period of ten to fifteen years of retention; and (2) to provide professional supervision and direction to those who are in charge of the management of active records such as records receptionists, records managers, and secretaries. At the beginning of every year records kept in various offices are processed and those of permanent or long-term value are transferred to the archives office. To some extent, the archives office in China serves as the records center, but unlike Western records centers, the archives office is much smaller and only serves one governmental agency.

Because of their voluminous holdings, some large government departments in China such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, and the Ministry of Culture have gradually developed the archives office into a departmental archives. Records of permanent value in these large government departments are no longer transferred to the national archives. For example, the China Film Archives preserves 200,000 copies of motion picture films and more than one million records and drawings about motion pictures. Its holdings resemble those of a national-level archives, but actually it is a departmental archives because it is under the control of the Ministry of Culture.

In the United States, Canada, and European countries, records centers were established for the temporary preservation of non-current or semi-current records transferred from government agencies and these records are disposed of according to the retention schedules after a definite period. This economical method can save much space for government agencies.

Archives administration in the United

States includes unique features that are incomparable internationally. The Archivist of the United States is directly appointed by the president. Since the Second World War, every retired president has established a presidential library for the records of his administrative activities and personal life. The well-equipped National Archives features forty-five million feet of holdings, a staff of 3,936, and a well-supported budget. All these facts are something unique in the world and worthy of envy and admiration by archivists of other countries.

Particularly striking to the Chinese observer is the care and concern that President Franklin D. Roosevelt showed for American archival work, which I believe is unprecedented in international archival history. In a commemorative article, Fred W. Shipman, director of the Roosevelt Presidential Library pointed out that the "National Archives was indeed fortunate in having Mr. Roosevelt's active interest during the first years of its existence."<sup>4</sup> As an assistant Secretary of the Navy in the early years of this century, President Roosevelt was very interested in the collection of the Navy's records. Later, as president, he paid close attention to the establishment of the National Archives and visited it in 1937. It was President Roosevelt who first put forward the idea of establishing the presidential libraries and made it a reality. I think we will never find a government leader of another country who showed as much concern about records management and had such a close connection with archival work as did President Roosevelt. In accepting an honorary membership from the Society of American Archivists in 1942, he referred to the importance of "the duplication of records by modern processes like the microfilm so that if any part of the country's

original archives are destroyed, a record of them will exist in some other place."<sup>5</sup> Clearly the good foundation and advanced level of the archival work in the United States owes much to President Roosevelt.

Presidential libraries are truly a very good way of managing this particular group of federal records. To a certain degree, presidential libraries can be regarded as the White House archives, and what they hold are the valuable core records of the government administration. So it is of great significance to establish a presidential library for every retired president. Now America has nine presidential libraries. Because of their establishment people become more acquainted with archives work in America. During my two-month stay in the United States, I watched two news items about archives on American television, one about the videotape on President Kennedy's life produced from records and films kept in the Kennedy Library in Boston, and the other about the completion of the construction and opening to the public of the Nixon Library. From these examples, I would say that the significance of archives in the United States is increasingly recognized by society.

#### **Administration of local records.**

American archivists and historians are quite concerned about the condition of local archives because archival work below the state level is either neglected or totally nonexistent. Some states even have to seek help from universities in order to obtain local repository facilities. I think this is caused mainly by the decentralized management of the federal system.

Because the archival work in China is managed in a centralized manner, we have quite a good foundation for local archives. According to "The Staff Establishment

<sup>4</sup>Fred W. Shipman, "Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 1882-1945," *American Archivist* 8 (October 1942): 229.

<sup>5</sup>Letter from Franklin D. Roosevelt to R. D. W. Connor, president, Society of American Archivists, 13 February 1942, as published in "News Notes" in the *American Archivist* 5 (April 1942): 120.



Standard of Archives below the National Level," which was drawn up jointly by the Ministry of Personnel and the SAB and approved by the State Council of the Government, the number of staff in a county archives is normally maintained at five to ten and the minimum is three. The staff number increases with the volume of the archives' holdings. Funding for the construction of county archives comes mostly from the county government and partly from the provincial archives administration bureau.

### **Differences in Research Use of Archives**

As mentioned above, the main holdings in the archival repositories in China consist of public records and scientific and technical records. Readers consulting public records are basically those who are engaged in history research and the compiling of local histories. Readers consulting scientific and technical records are those who are engaged in machine engineering, electronics, and the natural sciences. At present, an increasing percentage of readers is consulting scientific and technical records in order to get a direct economical benefit from records.

Access to archives in China requires an identity card, usually a work certificate. Records are routinely opened thirty years after creation, although records related to state security or legal cases, or records which may impinge on personal privacy, may be closed for longer periods. Finding aids and catalogs are directly accessible to researchers; name and place indexes have been prepared for many collections. Foreign students and scholars must have an introductory letter from the Chinese institute that is sponsoring their stay in order to be allowed access to archives.

Researchers in American archives and libraries show more interest in private rec-

ords and genealogical materials. According to the statistics, 70 percent of patrons in American archives and libraries are consulting genealogical records. Since most Americans are descendants of immigrants, it is natural for them to have a great interest in those records reflecting their origin and the history of their forefathers.

Chinese are not very interested in genealogy. Earlier some families had a considerable amount of genealogical information in their private possession, but much of this was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, either by the Red Guard, or by the frightened families themselves. Most genealogies which had been placed in libraries survived the Cultural Revolution. The Imperial genealogy of the Qing dynasty has survived and has been partially micro-filmed by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City, Utah.

### **Differences in Archival Education and Training**

Archivists trained in the 1950s were the first generation of archivists for the New China. In the 1950s archivists had six months or one year of training and then were "distributed and dispatched" to archival positions. Current Chinese archival education differs from that in the United States in two major areas:

(1) **Admission requirements.** In China we have an archives college under the People's University of China in Beijing and archives departments in thirty-seven universities throughout China. The archives college and departments admit, through examination, students graduated from the senior middle school and require a four-year period of study. Graduates may receive a bachelor's degree and can be employed by archival repositories or archives administration bureaus at various levels. According to the Education Directory prepared by the Society of American Archi-

vists in 1986, many universities in the United States provide a multi-course program on archives administration and records management with one or one-and-a-half years of study. Though the length of study seems shorter than that in Chinese universities, United States programs only admit graduate students.

(2) **Curriculum.** Because the United States is a young nation with a unified language, its archival curriculum is concentrated on archives administration, records management, records processing and conservation, computerization, and other practical subjects. Curriculum for archives study in Chinese universities is more complicated. The first two years of education for future archivists are rather general; the last two years are devoted to basic professional courses and such courses as diplomatics, paleography, ancient records management, and Chinese history. There is little wonder that four years of study are required for Chinese students to go through a university archives course.

Some students who complete the archival education course choose to follow other professions. There is not as much mobility for Chinese archivists as there is for archivists in the United States. Many archivists look to the State Archives Bureau and other central-level archival institutions such as the First and Second Historical Archives as a desirable place to work because of the quality of the historical documents under their care. The State Archives Bureau offers in-

service training courses which are staffed by professors from the archives schools.

The Chinese Archives Society is a national professional organization that was organized in 1981 and meets every three to four years. The leadership is elected by the approximately 3,500 members. The society publishes a quarterly journal entitled *Archives Study*. Membership in the society is free, but there is a subscription fee for the journal. Every meeting of the Chinese Archives Society has a theme. Special committees concern themselves with such topics as archives management, records management, management of technical and scientific records, conservation, and microfilming.

## Conclusion

Although I have listed five main differences in the archival work of our two countries, I feel that we still have a lot of common ground in our archival work. The emergence of new archival media and the introduction of advanced management into our archival work are presenting archivists throughout the world with new challenges, which, in today's "age of information" should be solved collectively. Hopefully, the archivists of China and the United States will have more opportunities to share information and experiences so that we can do a better job of preserving the human heritage and making available to readers the records entrusted to us.