

## International Scene

# Archives in Japan: The State of the Art

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**Abstract:** Although Japan has a long history, its archival traditions are still developing. The author gives a brief history of Japanese recordkeeping and its archival institutions. She also discusses archival legislation and the Japan Society of Archives Institutions. The article includes a translation of the Japanese archives law and an annotated bibliography of English-language articles on Japanese archives.

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JAPANESE ARCHIVES ARE little known abroad, probably because Japanese archivists do not use languages other than Japanese. In addition, an archives system—considered essential in most countries—is not yet well developed in Japan. Nevertheless, Japan has a long tradition of preserving old records. One can find archiveslike facilities dating from as early as the sixth and seventh centuries in government offices called *Kan No Fudono*, which means a repository for official documents.

### A Brief History of Japanese Archives

According to Japanese ancient history, Shoso In, the oldest existing museum in the world, was built as a treasury of the emperor of Shomu in the eighth century to celebrate the seventy-seventh anniversary of his death. Both the old wooden building and its precious holdings are still well preserved today. Among those precious holdings are more than 11,000 pieces of *Monjo*, paper records of the government administration of the eighth century. However, with the passage of time, the volume of records increased and they ceased to be preserved as precious treasures. In Japan, as in every country, too many records create preservation difficulties.

The year 1868, the year of the Meiji Restoration (called *Meiji Ishin*), was a remarkable turning point in Japanese history. In that year, the Japanese feudal era came to an end and Japan's modern age began. The newly established Meiji government abolished the former policy of national isolation and published the slogan *Bunmei Kaiaka*, meaning *civilization*. People were sent to Europe and America to study the customs of Western countries. Existing records testify to the attempts these people made in the late nineteenth century to bring the archives and records management system to Japan. We know that their efforts were unsuccessful and that they sank into the waves of Japanese industrialization at the turn of the century.

Professor Ludwig Riess, a German historian employed by the Japanese government at the end of the nineteenth century, wrote an essay in *Shigakukai Zasshi*, no. 5, the journal of Shigakukai, the first historical society in Japan. Riess insisted that the society's first priority should be the tasks of preserving and arranging records and preparing reliable finding aids for the existing historical materials. Unfortunately, most Japanese historians ignored Riess's essay and devoted themselves to their own historical research. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Professor Shuko Miura, of the Historical Department of the Imperial University of Kyoto, visited Europe. On returning to Japan, Miura introduced his experiences as a user of the Public Records Office in the United Kingdom, the Archives nationales in France, and the Dutch National Archives, among others. He made the point that there are archives in European countries which are very convenient institutions for historical researchers. Miura's introduction also disappeared into the noise of two world wars.

The confusing period after World War II created a difficult situation for recordkeeping. From the time of the Meiji Restoration, most offices had kept records of their activities. Old records called *Komonjo* were also found in old houses and warehouses. Because these were paper records, their postwar value as recyclable material exceeded their original archival, informational, or even evidential value. In addition, air attacks on major cities had destroyed innumerable records, along with their owners. In the centennial history of Naikaku Bunko, the Cabinet Library, we find an account that the library lost 47,000 volumes of Western books to fire. It is also known that for weeks at the end of the war, many people were engaged in burning the records of the war administration to avert accusations of war crimes. Not until the end of the 1940s do we find documentation of the occupation army instructing the Japanese to

set up archival repositories to preserve the records of government administration. By that time, innumerable records had already been destroyed by recycling or burning.

At about the same time, a movement began to preserve old documents (*Komonjo*) of the premodern era found in family belongings. This movement was proposed by historians who issued the call to not destroy *Komonjo*, because *Komonjo* are important research materials. People were urged to keep them at least as they were, instead of throwing them into the garbage. In the 1950s, just before the beginning of urbanization, there were many old traditional wooden houses surrounding major cities and in the suburbs. Such old houses usually had warehouses (*Kura*) in which *Komonjo* were often found. It was difficult in the confusion of the postwar period to convince people of the historical value of *Komonjo*.

### The Existing Archival Structure

In 1951, in response to the historians' appeal, the Ministry of Education set up its Repository of Historical Documents (Shiryokan) as a repository for *Komonjo*. In 1952, Shiryokan started an annual training course for handling *Komonjo*. The first trainees were mainly from larger libraries. Shiryokan became the Department of Historical Documents of the Institute of Japanese Literature in 1972. It is not an active archives accessioning records. The present archival training course run by Shiryokan, the most scholarly training course in Japan, is based on the original training course founded in 1952.

In 1959, the first local Japanese archival institution, Yamaguchi Ken Monjokan, was established in the Yamaguchi prefecture. From the beginning, Yamaguchi Ken Monjokan held administrative records of the prefectural government as well as several significant *Komonjo* collections. Yamaguchi Ken Monjokan is also famous because its staff introduced T. R. Schellenberg's

*Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (1956) to the Japanese only a few years after this remarkable book appeared in the United States. In the same decade, another national archival institution, Boeicho Senshibu, was set up to follow the pattern set by Shiryokan. The present English name of Boeicho Senshibu is the War History Department of the Library of the National Institute for Defense Studies under the Defense Agency.

Three prefectural archives were set up during the 1960s, in Saitama, Tokyo, and Kyoto. Their founding signalled the birth of Kokuritsu Kohbunshokan, the National Archives of Japan, which followed in 1971. In the following decade, the 1970s, there was a rush of archives foundings. Two national archives were established—the National Archives under the Prime Minister's Office and Gaikoh Shiryokan, the Diplomatic Record Office under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—as were seven regional archives, in the prefectures of Fukushima, Ibaraki, Kanagawa, and Gifu and in the cities of Hiroshima, Fujisawa, and Amagasaki. At the end of the 1970s, there were fifteen archives at the national, prefectural, and city levels.

In 1974, eager archivists met to form Shiryō Kyo, the Liaison Council of Institutions for Preservation and Service to Historical Sources. There were about twenty founding members, mostly from the staff of various archives in Tokyo and its neighboring prefectures. The organization is now called *Zen Shiryō Kyo*, the Japan Society of Archives Institutions (JSAI).

Another surge of archives foundings occurred in the 1980s, as archives were established in nine prefectures, Hokkaido, Tochigi, Gunma, Chiba, Toyama, Aichi, Osaka, Hyogo, and Hiroshima, and in four ordinance-designated cities, Kawasaki, Nagoya, Osaka, and Kitakyushu. By the 1980s, the number of archival institutions of national and prefectural level had almost doubled, compared with that of the pre-

vious three decades. From 1951 to 1979, fifteen archival institutions had been founded, and from 1980 to 1989, an additional thirteen archival institutions started their services. This rush to found archives seems to have continued into the 1990s.

The National Archives of Japan recently prepared a statistical report on records held in various regional governments as of 31 December 1989. The report shows that six prefectural archives are expected to open after 1992. In addition, eight prefectures and cities have scheduled new archival institutions as part of their plans. All forty-seven prefectures and eleven ordinance-designated cities are expected to be operating their own archival institutions in the future. It is generally thought that this trend of archives growth is due largely to the long awaited archives legislation *Kohbunshokan Ho*, the Public Archives Law of Japan (PAL), which was drawn up in December 1987. PAL was finally promulgated and entered into law as of 1 June 1988 (see the appendix to this article). Although no reliable data are available on the founding of smaller city or town archives and related organizations, the recent increase in institutional members of the Japan Society of Archives Institutions leads one to believe that archives on the local level are also increasing.

### The National Archives of Japan and the Public Archives Law

On 2 July 1991, the National Archives of Japan (Kokuritsu Kohbunshokan) celebrated its twentieth anniversary. It has been administered under the Public Archives Law since June 1988. The National Archives of Japan was established as an auxiliary organ of the Prime Minister's Office in 1971, on the recommendation of the Science Council of Japan to avoid the possible dispersal or loss of official documents. The loud demands of historians spurred the recommendation. In preparation for the founding of

a national archives, the Prime Minister's Office undertook the National Archives Project, a ten-year study of various aspects of archives in many countries. They studied, for example, the National Archives of the United States in the 1960s.

In 1971, the National Archives of Japan started with fewer than fifty staff members. It was organized into three divisions: General Affairs; Archives; and Naikaku Bunko, the Cabinet Library. The original building and staff proved to be less than half that planned for by the ten-year study. Among the three divisions, the Cabinet Library is unique in that its history spans more than a century. The Cabinet Library was established in 1883 as a central government library in the Prime Minister's Office. When it became part of the National Archives, its holdings included more than 500,000 volumes of significant collections, including *Komonjo* and official documents of the pre-Meiji era.

The Archives Division was set up as a totally new division with the task of archives maintenance. First to be opened to the public were the old records of the Prime Minister's Office which formerly had been kept in the neighboring stacks of the Cabinet Library. At the time of the founding of the National Archives, there were few archives other than those transferred from the Prime Minister's Office.

The Public Archives Law of Japan (PAL) is a very short piece of legislation, having only seven articles. Reading PAL, one may easily recognize that the law describes archives institutions as essential at all levels of administration. PAL is administered by the Prime Minister's Office and the archival services are the responsibility of the Archives Division of the National Archives.

Japanese archives are not centralized. Because they are independent of one another, the National Archives is equal to any local archives. Before PAL was set in place, the National Archives maintained contact with local archival institutions and their staff

by sending the director-general of the National Archives to JSAI's annual meetings. In addition, after the archives law was set in place, the National Archives began to prepare several new programs such as a directors' meeting of prefectural and ordinance-designated city archives and a one-week training course for local archives staff. These programs have been held annually since 1988. Thus, the National Archives expends great effort to maintain better contact and deeper exchanges with local archival institutions and their staff. These exchange activities of the National Archives are based on Article 7 of the PAL: "The Prime Minister may, upon request, provide guidance or advice to local public entities for the operation of Public Archives." For example, when a foreign archives expert visits Japan, the National Archives and JSAI cooperate to hold lectures and meetings.

### **The Activities of the Japan Society of Archives Institutions**

As mentioned earlier, the Japan Society of Archives Institutions was founded in the mid-1970s and has become significantly more active since 1985, when the decision was made to join the International Council on Archives (ICA) as a category B member (national professional association). Increased activity also resulted from discussions that accompanied the preparation and drafting of the PAL. JSAI contributed to the drafting of the law, which is said to be among the most recent archival legislation in developed countries. The PAL is also unique because it was introduced by a member of the House, the Honorable Niro Iwakami, the first president of JSAI. His personal enthusiasm for the preservation of archives led him to take a key role in the Diet in the promulgation of the PAL. Iwakami was encouraged in his preparation of the law by JSAI's activities, including the development of professional training opportunities for local archival staff.

As early as 1974, the JSAI began to meet with staff from various local archives. Since that time, the society has continued to hold its annual meeting at various local archives and related institutions. These meetings discuss practical issues. In 1983, for example, the meeting was addressed by Frank Evans, who was in Japan on a UNESCO mission. Evans made clear to his Japanese colleagues that they and their work had many counterparts in other countries.

The tenth International Council on Archives Congress, held in Bonn in 1984, was the first chance for the JSAI to send several members to an international conference. Four JSAI colleagues joined the Bonn congress to have the experience of meeting archival colleagues from all over the world. This encouraged the JSAI to finally submit its application to join ICA as a category B member, and it joined that organization in 1986.

Before JSAI joined the ICA, its idea of international exchange was to read and translate foreign literature into Japanese. Since joining, the JSAI has expanded this idea. JSAI members now attend international conferences, workshops, and regular archival studies courses, such as those at the University College of London. The JSAI has also had several visits by foreign archival experts; one significant visit was from Michael Roper of the Public Record Office of the United Kingdom in the summer of 1986. JSAI colleagues began to conquer their language barrier by trying to communicate and discuss their concerns with overseas counterparts. In 1988, at the eleventh ICA congress, more than ten Japanese colleagues were in Paris, among them Niro Iwakami, the principal author of the Public Archives Law of Japan. His enthusiasm for archives preservation was unchanged, and his contribution was acknowledged by the ICA at the closing ceremony, when he was introduced as the awardee of the ICA Medal of Honor.

In June 1989, the National Archives of



Japan invited Jean Favier, president of ICA and the director-general of the Archives of France, to Japan. Favier's visit had a great impact on all Japanese archivists because his *Les Archives* is the only piece of Western archival literature translated into Japanese and published in Japan. He was welcomed by the National Archives, and he met with Crown Prince Hironomiya during his short stay in Japan. The National Archives and the JSAI held a joint lecture at which people assembled not only to hear Favier's speech on the French archives but also to join him in formally awarding the ICA Medal of Honor to Niro Iwakami.

In spring of 1991, Charles Kecskeméti, the executive director of the ICA, visited Japan. In Tokyo, Kyoto, and Chiba, he made several speeches on world trends in archives. These meetings were crowded with colleagues who discussed with Kecskeméti various issues they are facing. It is worth noting that Japanese archival colleagues are highly interested not only in getting information from abroad but in making personal exchanges with overseas counterparts.

There are several other archival professional associations in Japan: the Business Archives Association and the College and University Archives Associations, which are located both in Kanto (eastern Japan) and in Kansai (western Japan). In addition, there are related associations, such as the Records Management Society of Japan, Japan Library Association (with various suborganizations), and the Local Historical Research Association. The JSAI maintains contact with these organizations, although these contacts could be closer.

### Professional Issues

Unlike librarians or museum curators, archivists have no legally established professional status in Japan. Since the beginning of modern archives in Japan in the 1950s, there have been many discussions and attempts by national and local author-

ities, as well as by JSAI members, to establish the profession of archivist. In 1989, the JSAI submitted an official demand to the prime minister to consolidate the status of professional archivist, to set up a qualification system for archivists, and to establish the profession as soon as possible.

Although there is a provision concerning professional personnel in PAL (see Article 4, Paragraph 2 in the appendix), Supplementary Provision No. 2 states, "For the time being, Public Archives . . . may operate without appointing professional personnel as set forth in Article 4, Paragraph 2." It is quite usual in Japanese personnel management to move a person from one position to another after two or three years of service. Most archives are subject to this type of management. Hence, most archival personnel cannot feel that their positions are stable. In fact, no matter how qualified they are for archives work, most archivists move on to positions in other departments, such as finance or tax administration. It is, therefore, most urgent for the staff of Japanese archival institutions to gain an established professional status that holds the promise of stable archival positions. The National Archives organized a "Research Group on the Training and Qualifications of Professional Staff Engaged at Archive Institutions."

Movements to create opportunities for practical education and training for support staff and archivists are also under way. One example is a one-week training course that the National Archives has periodically offered since 1988. Another is an eight-week course begun in 1952 and administered by Shirayokan, the Department of Historical Documents of the National Institute of Japanese Literature. Beginning in 1990, the JSAI has held preconference workshops, and the Business Archives Association plans to start its own course at Hosei University in the spring of 1992. Thus, since PAL was promulgated in 1987, many archival colleagues have made efforts to develop var-

ious archival courses for their own professional training and education.

### **Perspectives and Conclusion**

The current focus of the Japanese archival community is on increasing the understanding of records management as a concept that supports archives service as its foundation and on consolidating archival legislation related to the archives profession. Furthermore, it is essential to raise the pub-

lic's understanding of archives in general in Japan. Japanese archivists expect to develop more exchanges with libraries and information communities as well as with the historical community. At the same time, we expect to widen international information exchanges and personal international exchanges. Such efforts will help Japanese archivists to develop and progress in the coming twenty-first century.

## Appendix: The Public Archives Law of Japan

### Article 1 (Purposes)

This law aims to prescribe necessary matters pertaining to Public Archives in view of the importance of preserving official documents and others as historical materials and of making them available to the public.

### Article 2 (Definition)

The term *official documents and others* in this law means official documents and other documents (except those of current use) which are in the custody of the state government or of local public entities.

### Article 3 (Obligation)

The state government and local public entities shall be responsible for taking appropriate measures for preservation and utilization of official documents and others which are important as historical materials.

### Article 4 (Public Archives)

1. Public archives shall be the institutions that aim to preserve and make available to the public those official documents and others which are important as historical materials and to make investigations and research into matters pertaining thereto.

2. There shall be in a public archives a director, professional personnel who make investigations and research into official documents and other important historical materials, and such other personnel as may be deemed necessary.

### Article 5

1. Public archives shall be established by the state government or by local public entities.

2. Matters pertaining to the establishment of a public archives to be established

by a local public entity shall be prescribed by regulation of the entity concerned.

### Article 6 (Accommodation of Funds, etc.)

The state government shall make efforts to accommodate local public entities with funds necessary for the establishment of public archives or to use its good offices to obtain such funds on behalf of such entities.

### Article 7 (Technical Guidance, etc.)

The prime minister may, upon request, provide technical guidance or advice to local public entities for the operation of Public Archives.

## Supplementary Provisions

#### 1. (Date of Enforcement)

This law shall be enforced as from the day which shall be fixed by a cabinet order and shall not be later than six months from the day of promulgation of this Law.

#### 2. (Exception About Professional Personnel)

For the time being, Public Archives to be established by local public entities may operate without appointing professional personnel as set forth in Article 4, Paragraph 2.

#### 3. (Partial Amendment to the Law concerning the Establishment of the Prime Minister's Office)

The law concerning the establishment of the prime minister's office (Law No. 127 of 1979) shall be partially amended as follows: The following item shall be added to article 4, after item 7: *Item 7—(2) Matters Pertaining to Enforcement of the Public Archives Law (Law No. 115 of 1987).*



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