

## International Scene

# Tibetan Archives: A Report from China

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**Abstract:** The condition of archives in Tibet is not good. Although Western archival thought has made some inroads into archival practice there, the complex history of Tibet and the fact that the vast majority of the documents are written in ancient Tibetan further complicate tremendous backlogs in both arrangement and description. Preservation concerns are also prevalent. All of these factors limit the usefulness of the Tibetan archives for historical research, despite their vast wealth of information on both the political and religious history of the country. Vast amounts of funds would be necessary to begin to remedy the condition of archives in Tibet, however, the earnest intention of archival authorities in both Tibet and China to improve the archives and make them more available for research is encouraging.

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SO YOU THINK YOU have archival problems? You should be an archivist in Tibet! From August 9 to August 13, 1995, I was privileged to join a seminar in Lhasa, Tibet, on Tibetan archives. We visited not only the Tibetan Autonomous Region Archives but also the Lhasa Municipal Archives and the Archives of Shannan Prefecture to the east of Lhasa. We visited stack areas and randomly selected files from shelves for examination. The conference was jointly sponsored by the State Archives Bureau of China and the Archives Bureau of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Since seminar invitations were not issued until after the first of the new year, few scholars and archivists were able to attend. Those able to join me included Wang Guobin of the University of California, Irvine; Yang Cuihua, director of the Modern History Institute in Taipei; and Dr. Axel Plathe of the General Information Programme of UNESCO. The seminar was intended to dramatize the plight of Tibetan archives in the hope of attracting attention and resources to their arrangement, description, and preservation needs.

The Tibetan Autonomous Region Archives has a program of providing professional advice and leadership in archives management to agencies of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and People's Government in Tibet; however, contemporary records, except for some noteworthy documents establishing the present relation between Tibet and the central government in Beijing, are still kept in records offices of operating agencies. The present archives establishment started in 1959 with a working group on archives management set up in response to a directive of the Tibetan Work Committee of the CPC to strengthen the management of cultural relics and archives. When Tibet was declared an autonomous region of China in 1963, an archives preparatory office was set up, and the archives bureau was formally established in 1965. The "Cultural Revolution" (1965-1978) disrupted all activity for more than a decade, and it was not until 1984 that a new repository and management offices were constructed in the western section of Lhasa. The Archives Bureau is divided into three sections: an administrative office; a supervisory office that advises archives management in operating agencies; and an archives office that deals with the acquisition, custody, arrangement, description, preservation, and research use of historical archives (i.e., pre-1950 records and collected documents). The archives, directly under the office of the governor of Tibet, is directed by Zhuo Ga, a Tibetan woman, who is assisted by three deputy directors (one for each functional area).

Western archival concepts (including those from the U.S.S.R.) do affect the style of work in Tibetan archives, but only as they have been filtered through the training that archivists in Tibet have received from the State Archives Bureau in Beijing. For the most part, Western influence is invisibly woven into texts of Chinese training materials on archives management. It is standard practice for Chinese to "sinicize" imported concepts thoroughly before applying them locally.

The history of Tibet is extremely complex, with fluctuating relations among political powers and Buddhist sects within Tibet and changing relations with other nationalities around the periphery of Tibet, including complex relations with the central imperial governments of China ever since the Han dynasty (roughly contemporary with the Roman Empire in Europe). This history is further complicated by the joining of political and religious authority under the 5th Dalai Lama. The archives are similarly complex, an often inextricable mixture of government or political records on the one hand, and on the other hand, Buddhist religious and secular texts and records of monastery and temple management and the management of the "manors" (lands and people) that belonged to them. About 90 percent of the historical documents in the Tibet Autonomous Region Archives are in Tibetan, most of them ancient Tibetan, which differs significantly from modern

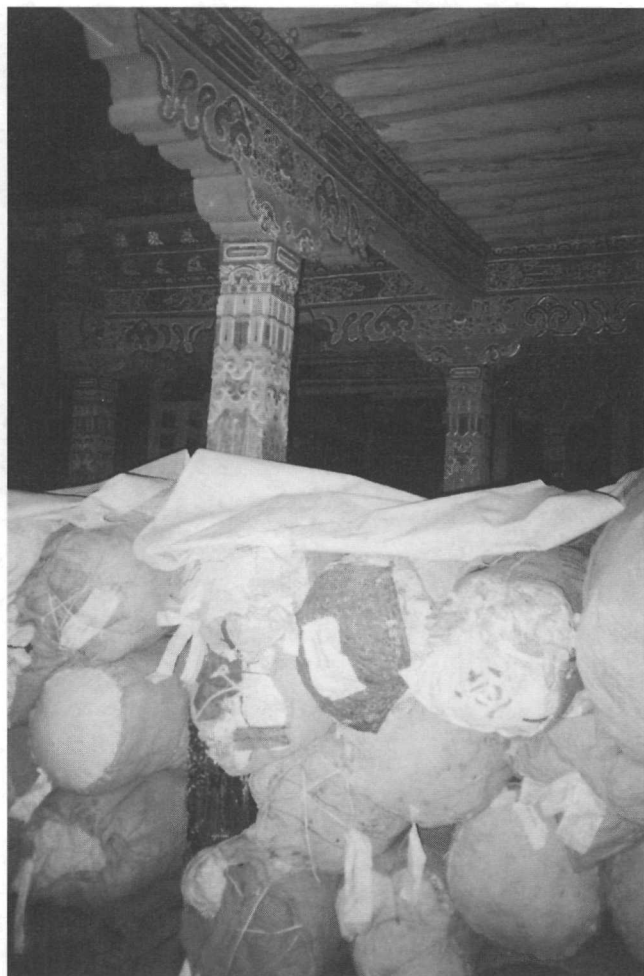


**Photo 1:** Building at the foot of the Potala Palace (17th century) in Lhasa, Tibet. The room used as an archives repository is on the third floor, behind the balcony. (*Courtesy of the author.*)

Tibetan. In addition, there are documents in Sanskrit, Chinese, Manchu, Arabic, Hindi, Nepalese, Altaic languages of people to the north and west of Tibet, and even English and Russian. In round numbers, the three million or so items in the archives are divided into one hundred twenty record groups (fonds), including more than a dozen items from the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty (thirteenth to fourteenth centuries), about ten thousand items from the Ming dynasty (fourteenth to seventeenth centuries), more than two million from the Qing (Manchu) dynasty (seventeenth to twentieth centuries), and three-quarters of a million items from the Republic of China (twentieth century).<sup>1</sup> Material media of the documents varies widely, including silk, wood, palm leaves, and stone, but most items are on a traditional kind of Tibetan paper made from grass. In addition to the documents now in the repository, there are many, perhaps another million or so, in Rigaze (Shigatse), Shannan, Changdu, and various temples and monastery manors. The historical wealth of these materials is staggering. Seminar participants urged the archival authorities in both Lhasa and Beijing to make every effort to open them up to research.

There are, however, significant problems, as I suggested at the beginning of this report. Because Lhasa is not easy to get to (obtaining travel permission is tedious, though not impossible; travel cost is expensive; and the 12,000-foot altitude requires a period of acclimation), scholars are unlikely to flock to the Tibetan archives in large numbers in the

<sup>1</sup>In establishing fonds, Tibetan archives use the same principle of provenance that archivists the world over use; however, because of the disarranged "found" condition of much of their holdings, they have had to apply it on the basis of broad, rule-of-thumb criteria, sometimes bordering on subject categories (as in grouped records from different sources but dealing more or less with the same activity), rather than according to refined criteria.



**Photo 2:** Interior of the Potala Palace Archives, showing heaped bundles of cloth-bound documents. (*Courtesy of the author.*)

near future. Furthermore, since most of the archives are in ancient Tibetan, even scholars who know Chinese are at a disadvantage. A dozen or so senior Tibetan scholars with knowledge of both ancient and modern Tibetan are slowly and painstakingly examining records, document-by-document, to label those in ancient Tibetan with descriptive identifications in modern Tibetan, but users will then have to translate them further into their own working languages. An arrangement backlog includes perhaps two million items, including about 50 percent of the items already in the present repository, and another one million items that need re-examination, rearrangement, and re-description. The vicissitudes of history disarranged them, and present archivists are still in the first phase of imposing some sort of rational order on them. About one-third of the total holdings of archives in the region, or about 1.3 million items, are severely damaged, unarranged, and identified in only the most rudimentary way. In a large room of a deteriorating seventeenth-century building at the foot of the Potala Palace, several hundred cloth sacks, wicker hampers, and leather chests contain an unknown quantity of unarranged documents, many in advanced





**Photo 3:** Zhuo Ga, Director General of the Tibet Autonomous Region Archives, Dr. Axel Plathe, UNESCO General Information Programme, and two senior Tibetan scholar-archivists examine deteriorated documents at the Potala Palace Archives. (*Courtesy of the author.*)

stages of decay. There are also some hundred thousand wood blocks for printing Buddhist texts (religious and secular). Many of the blocks are cracked and broken, but others are still used to print copies for sale to the faithful, with proceeds going to supplement the archives' budget. It was the 13th Dalai Lama who, in 1929, designated the present Potala Palace site as a repository for the wood blocks, and it was used after 1959 for accumulating material from the monasteries before the more valuable portions were further removed to the present archives building. (One may be reminded of the start of the Bodleian Library at Oxford, from Duke Humphrey's assemblage of monastic books after Henry VIII's appropriation of monasteries to the crown.) Documents in outlying centers are reported to be in similar or worse condition, even to reports of documents having been mixed with mud for repair of adobe walls.

The task ahead of the Tibetan archivists is staggering. An infusion of an additional quarter of a million U.S. dollars is needed annually merely to make reasonable progress in the work to be done. Another five million is needed to enlarge present repository space and to construct new repositories and work spaces. Mitigating these adverse circumstances are several factors. The high altitude and relatively dry climate of Lhasa minimize dangers of environmental and insect damage, reducing but not eliminating need for mechanically-aided controls. Prudent construction (thick walls, proper lighting, and sealing of permeable surfaces) may reduce the cost of new facilities. The archivists, the government in Lhasa, and the central government in Beijing seem earnestly keen on improving the condition of the archives, and significant funds have been ordered from the highest authorities to be devoted to that end. They also seem determined to open the archives to scholarly research as speedily as possible.

Research in the archives is going on today, mostly by scholars and officials already residing in Tibet. There are publications of selected documents, such as those related to the major earthquake at Ta Bu in 1700, and biographic materials on the more notable Dalai Lamas. Users tend to produce written history and to mount museum exhibits that serve the interests of Chinese territorial unity with Tibet. A recent article in *Beijing Review*, for instance, stressed the brutal, medieval character of the pre-1959 regime in Tibet, based on evidence extracted from the archives. There is little or no competitive history. This does not mean that competitive history would produce an unequivocal support of the Dalai Lama. In fact, more open and competitive research in both ancient and modern Tibetan archives is likely to continue to produce evidence both for and against any political position now being taken. Problems in arrangement, description, and preservation, however, mean that there is still a long way to go and much work to be done before Tibetan archives begin to play a significant role in enriching the writing of Tibetan history for worldwide understanding.