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Regional Archives in the People's Republic of China: A Case Study of the Chongqing Municipal Archives and the Yunnan Provincial Archives

Morris L. Bian and Robert J. Jakeman

The emergence of China as an active member of the international community and the growing number of exchange programs between archival institutions in China and the United States have fostered broader professional contacts between American archivists and their counterparts in China. Consequently, American archivists have become increasingly curious about the professional practices of their Chinese colleagues. The following description and analysis offers a case study of the structure, function, and use of Chinese regional archives.

GENERAL BACKGROUND OF CHINESE ARCHIVES

Archival agencies are relatively new institutions in China, dating from the early twentieth century. For example, the First Historical Archives of China (Beijing), which was established in 1925, contains records from the Ming and the Qing dynasties (1368–1911). More recently, the Second Historical Archives of China in Nanjing, estab-

lished in 1957, holds mainly records of the Republican period (1912–49).

In addition to their recent origins, Chinese archival agencies are, without exception, an integral part of the central state bureaucracy at various levels of government. These archival agencies fall under the jurisdiction of the State Archives Bureau (SAB), a centralized agency of national archival administration created in 1954. The SAB supervises and directs the central archives at the national capital, the provincial archives at provincial capitals, municipal archives in major cities, and more than two thousand county archives at county seats throughout China.¹ This centralized system of archival administration contrasts sharply with the fragmented archival arrangements found in the United States, where the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) has responsibility for federal records but has no formal jurisdiction over the records of state and local governments. Moreover, the activities of American archival agencies are not coordinated by a central archival authority as in China but through national and regional archives and records management associations, such as the Society of American Archivists and the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators.²

¹ According to one Chinese source, in 1992 there were more than thirty-four hundred archival management bureaus and more than thirty-five hundred archival repositories in China. See William W. Moss, "Dang'an: Contemporary Chinese Archives," *The China Quarterly* 145 (March 1996): 113–129. According to a more recent Chinese source, in 1995 there were three comprehensive archival repositories at the central level; thirty repositories at the level of province, autonomous region, or municipality directly subordinate to the central government; and 2,554 repositories nationwide at the county level. See the pamphlet on China's archival repositories prepared by the Organizing Committee and the State Archives Bureau of China for the Thirteenth International Congress held in 1996 in Beijing, China. A copy of the pamphlet is in the possession of the authors.

² Xu Yuqing, "Differences and Similarities in Chinese and American Approaches to Archives," *American Archivist* 54 (spring 1991): 206–15.

For most of the post-1949 period, archives at the various levels of government have served the records administration needs of state agencies or the Communist Party rather than the needs of the general public or scholarly research. Because materials in the archives have traditionally been regarded as “classified” or “documents for internal use only,” one of the chief responsibilities of archival staff has been to “safeguard” or “protect” materials in their custody to insure that “state secrets” are not leaked. Of course, personnel who work in the archives (really government functionaries rather than professional archivists until the late 1970s) must be party members and politically reliable.

The movements toward reform and opening to the outside world in the early 1980s, however, have brought many important and positive changes to archival management in China.³ Unfortunately, these changes have proceeded at an uneven pace across China’s archival system despite the nation’s centralized form of archival administration. The following description and analysis of two major regional archives in the southwest region of China—the Chongqing Municipal Archives and the Provincial Archives of Yunnan—serve to illustrate the uneven progress toward more open and accessible Chinese archival repositories over the last two decades.⁴

CHONGQING MUNICIPAL ARCHIVES (CHONGQINGSHI DANGANGUAN)

Until recently the city of Chongqing was an administrative unit of Sichuan province, and the Chongqing Municipal Archives (CMA) was under the direct jurisdiction of

³ For a comprehensive treatment of Chinese archives and recent changes, see Moss, “Dang’an: Contemporary Chinese Archives.”

⁴ The term *regional archives* used here designates archives at the level of province, autonomous region, or municipality directly subordinate to the central government.

the Provincial Bureau of Archives of Sichuan province. A major reform of national administration in 1997 elevated the city of Chongqing to the status of a province under the direct jurisdiction of the central government, placing it on the same administrative level as the cities of Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai. As a result of this change, the CMA acquired the status of a regional archives.

Established in 1959, the CMA became operational the following year, but with the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, archival work came to a standstill. From 1966 until 1974 all the holdings of the CMA were under the control of the Office of Archival Investigation, an agency established under the auspices of the Cultural Revolution and charged with ferreting out “counterrevolutionaries.” Consequently, positive and significant development began only after the late 1970s.⁵

The CMA’s holdings include records from areas in and around Chongqing, with a total of more than 660,000 files,⁶ ranging from the last Qing dynasty (1644–1911) to the 1980s. Qing dynasty holdings are quite limited: there are only about thirty files, all dating from 1775. Holdings for the post-revolutionary period are more significant; as of 1990, when the *Guide to Chongqing Municipal Archives* was published, there were a total of 160,000 files for the period 1949–66,⁷ approximately 24 percent of all the holdings of the CMA. Records from the Republican period

⁵ See Lu Dayue and others, eds., *Chongqingshi danganguan jianming zhinan* (Guide to the Chongqing Municipal Archives) (Kexue jishu wenxian chubanshe, Chongqing, 1990), preface, 1–6.

⁶ The Chinese term for file is *juan*. Typically each *juan* includes a collection of archival documents contained in a file folder. The Chinese use of *juan* in describing the extent of their holdings is clearly different from the prevailing practice of American archival agencies, where linear feet or cubic feet are used for the same purpose.

⁷ Lu Dayue and others, eds., *Chongqingshi danganguan jianming zhinan*, preface, 1–6.

(1912–49), totaling more than five hundred thousand files, make up more than 75 percent of CMA's holdings. Most of the Republican-era records are from the period between 1935 and 1949, an absolutely first-rate collection that covers virtually every aspect of the economic, social, and political activities of Chinese government in the Chongqing area, as well as economic and financial institutions, and the work of various social organizations.⁸

The rich Republican-era holdings of the CMA are not surprising, for the city of Chongqing was not only China's capital during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) but also the center for economic, social, and cultural developments during the war. For example, over eighty thousand files relate to industrial enterprises and financial institutions, many of which were relocated to Chongqing from coastal provinces during the early years of the Sino-Japanese War.⁹ There is little doubt that these archives are rich sources for scholars studying the economic and business history of the Republican decades.¹⁰

Other CMA holdings include extensive published reference materials (*ziliao*), especially for the Republican period. For example, the CMA retains 36,910 volumes (*ce*) of historical books and journals, including contemporary publications, government reports, and statistical surveys.¹¹ The

⁸ *Ibid.*, preface, 1–6, and description of holdings.

⁹ See Zhang Jin, "Republican Business Records in the Chongqing Municipal Archives," *Chinese Business History* 9 (spring 1999):1–2.

¹⁰ For a comprehensive survey of the holdings of major Chinese archives and collections bearing on the economic and business history of Republican China, including the Republic of China on Taiwan, see William C. Kirby, Man-houng Lin, James Chin Shih, and David A. Pietz, eds., *State and Economy in Republican China: A Handbook for Scholars*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center. Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2000).

¹¹ See Zhang Jin, "Republican Business Records."

CMA also publishes documentary editions of historically significant archival materials in its holdings. Two recent volumes are *Historical Materials on the Metallurgical Industry during the Sino-Japanese War* and *Historical Materials on the Chongqing National Government*.¹² Since 1989 the CMA, like several other major regional archives in China, has published its own quarterly journal, *Archival Materials and Research*. A typical issue includes excerpts of selected archival materials and scholarly articles that focus on the pre-1949 period.

YUNNAN PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES IN KUNMING (YUNNANSHENG DANGANGUAN)

In many respects the development of the Yunan Provincial Archives (YPA) in Kunming parallels that of the CMA. Like the CMA, the YPA was established in 1959. During the early 1960s the YPA staff made progress in constructing repositories, creating an organizational structure, and transferring records into its custody. The onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 also took its toll on the YPA: its name was changed several times, and by 1968 its archival work had come to a complete standstill. Not until 1975 did the provincial authorities restore the name of the YPA and allow archival work to resume.¹³

Since the late 1970s the YPA gradually has recovered from the chaos and disorder of the Cultural Revolution. The Provincial Archives Bureau was restored in 1980 with the

¹² See Chongqingshi danganguan and others, eds., *Kangzhan houfang yejin gongye shiliao* (Historical materials on the metallurgical industry during the Sino-Japanese War) (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 1987); Liu Jianye, and Lu Dayue, eds., *Qiandu Chongqing de guomin zhengfu* (Historical materials on the Chongqing national government) (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1994).

¹³ See Zhang Yuan and others, eds., *Yunnansheng danganguan zhinan* (Guide to Yunnan Provincial Archives) (Beijing: Zhongguo dangan chubanshe, 1997), 1–25.

YPA placed under its jurisdiction. Structural changes and adjustments continued throughout the 1980s and the early 1990s. As part of the reform of provincial administration, the Provincial Archives Bureau and the YPA merged into one organization in 1995, although these two names continued to be used in official correspondence.¹⁴

Like the CMA, the YPA holds material from several different periods in the history of the region it serves. A total of 408,187 files span the late Qing dynasty to the 1980s. Holdings from the late Qing period total 1,518 files dating from 1793. YPA holdings from the post-1949 period total 108,829 files, some 26 percent of total holdings, and relate to the political, economic, social, military, and cultural activities of the province after the Revolution. As with the CMA, most YPA holdings date from the Republican period. The repository has custody of 297,594 Republican-era files (73 percent of total holdings), which document the activities of various government agencies, public and private enterprises, financial institutions, and institutions of higher education.¹⁵ Unfortunately, judging from the scholarly literature and anecdotal evidence, the YPA's rich Republican-era records have not received the attention they deserve from scholars or the general public.

The YPA shares with the CMA two other features: a reference collection and a publication program. The YPA's reference volumes total 81,247 with 24,884 relating to the earlier and Republican periods and 56,363 relating to the post-1949 period.¹⁶ The YPA also publishes documentary editions from its collections and has published its own quarterly journal, *Archival Materials of Yunnan Province*, since 1983.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

THE CMA AND YPA: THE PERSPECTIVE OF USERS

Based on the experience of the authors and other scholars, the CMA and YPA exemplify two principal types of archival repositories in contemporary China in terms of their accessibility, their finding aids (open or closed), their restrictions on photo reproduction of holdings, and their fees.¹⁷ The CMA is clearly one of the most open regional archives in China. For Chinese citizens, a simple letter of introduction from the individual's employer and a personal identification card are the only documents required for gaining access to the CMA's holdings. For foreign scholars, the archives also requires a letter of introduction from the scholar's affiliated institution in China, such as a university or a research institute. Once a foreign scholar establishes a working relationship with the CMA, a simple letter from the scholar to the CMA prior to departure is generally sufficient for gaining access to archives for his or her subsequent research trips.¹⁸

In contrast to the CMA, the YPA is less open. For Chinese citizens the YPA has requirements similar to that of the CMA, and it is perhaps as open to Chinese citizens as the CMA. Between 1983 and 1995 the archives received 103,306 visitors and supplied these visitors with a total of 411,590 files of archives and reference materials.¹⁹ For foreign scholars, however, the situation is entirely different. Although connection helps, any foreign scholar must have a formal letter of introduction from the scholar's affiliated

¹⁷ There is a Chinese history research site on the world wide web maintained by the Modern Chinese History Program at the University of California in San Diego. It has a section on archives, which contains valuable information on Chinese archives at various levels. See <http://orpheus.ucsd.edu/chinesehistory/chinese_archives.htm>.

¹⁸ The number of visitors, including their geographical distribution, is one important factor in evaluating the performance or achievement of archives.

¹⁹ Zhang Yuan and others, eds., *Yunnansheng danganguan zhinan*, 1–25.

Chinese institution. In other words, a foreign scholar must first find a host Chinese institution, which in turn must provide a letter of introduction in order for this scholar to gain access to the archives. Moreover, because the YPA is located within the compound of the provincial party committee, foreign scholars are generally denied on-site access to the archives.²⁰ For example, a scholar from Israel's Tel Aviv University visited the YPA between 1993 and 1994. Despite this scholar's connections within the provincial leadership, he was denied on-site access to the repository's catalogues (*mulu*). Instead, the catalogues were brought out to the guard booth, where the scholar selected the documents he wanted to examine. The materials were then photocopied and delivered to his hotel room. Because of the inconvenience he only spent a week at the YPA.²¹

In the CMA virtually all archives for the Republican period (roughly 75 percent of the repository's holdings) are open to users, and cabinets of all catalogues are available for browsing in the reading room. Users typically refer to a guidebook provided by the archives to find the type of records needed, and the staff directs the user to look in relevant catalogues for specific records. Once a user completes a request form (*diaojuandan*), the requested files typically are handed over to him or her within five minutes. The CMA staff handles users' requests politely and with extreme efficiency. Furthermore, there are no restrictions on the kind of catalogue a user may browse or the number of files a user may request.

The YPA also has a reading room with cabinets of catalogues for open records. By 1995 a total of 321,942 files

²⁰ The YPA should relocate to a newly constructed building in a different area of the city of Kunming in the year 2000, which presumably will help remove this obstacle for access to the archives.

²¹ See this scholar's description at <http://orpheus.ucsd.edu/chinesehistory/archive_users.htm>.

had been classified as open,²² which constitutes more than 65 percent of all YPA files and reference materials. In contrast to the CMA practice, YPA staff always lock these catalogues in the cabinets. Upon arrival at the repository, users must state the purpose for which they seek access to the archives along with a brief description of their research topics. If the staff determines that the topic falls within the category of open archives, they provide relevant catalogues to the user. Users who obtain access to the catalogues must still, however, overcome a number of other obstacles. YPA policy limits file retrieval to certain hours of certain days and the number of files that may be requested. Staff encourage researchers to hand copy archival materials and to minimize requests for photocopies. Moreover, they do not honor all requests for photocopy. Indeed, the YPA imposes many restrictions on its users.

When it comes to photographic reproduction of archives, the CMA staff is cooperative and efficient. Both the CMA and YPA have procedures for requesting photocopies, and both repositories have specialized personnel for making photocopies. The CMA typically approves photocopy requests, and the turnaround time is very quick, usually within twenty-four hours.

Both the CMA and YPA charge fees for using their archives. In general, these fees include a service fee (*chadangfei*), a retrieval fee (*diaojuanfei*), a xeroxing fee (*fuyinfei*), and an archival protection fee (*dangan baohufei*) designed, among other things, to defray the cost for repairing damage to the archives in the course of use by researchers. The service fee applies each day a user works in the archives, and each time a user requests the retrieval of files, he must pay a retrieval fee for each file served to him. Of course, a user also has to pay fees for photocopying of archival materials. Both Chinese citizens and foreign scholars are subject to these fees, but as a rule foreign research-

²² Zhang Yuan and others, eds., *Yunnansheng danganguan zhinan*, 1–25.

ers pay three times more than their Chinese counterparts, a practice stipulated by the State Archives Bureau. Fees vary from repository to repository. Although the fees are higher for foreign scholars in absolute terms, they are prohibitively high for most Chinese citizens given the low wages in China. Consequently, few Chinese scholars can afford to conduct substantial and sustained archival research.

Major changes and improvements have taken place in the archival institutions of China since the end of the Cultural Revolution. That catastrophic decade between 1966 and 1976 took its toll on Chinese society, and archival institutions suffered catastrophic consequences along with the rest of the nation. Today, China's archives are an integral part and reflection of Chinese society and are more open and more accessible than ever before. Nevertheless, the reform and opening of archival repositories have not proceeded at the same rate across the nation. Indeed, very uneven development characterizes the process of reform and opening. The cases of the CMA and YPA reveal that while the CMA is clearly a model of reform and opening, that process at YPA proceeds much more slowly. On the other hand, as the policy of reform and opening continues, all Chinese archives in the new millennium will no doubt adopt more liberal access policies.

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