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# Disciplines Derived from the Discovery of Historical Archives

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## 1. Introduction

In our understanding, a discipline is an organizational form of teaching, or different kinds of knowledge organization, such as Mathematics, History, Philosophy and so on (Longsi & Zhong, 1990). In fact, if research meets three basic elements, it can be recognized as a discipline. First, it should have certain specific research subjects or research area. Second, it should form a set of its own theoretical and knowledge systems. Third, it should adopt its own specific research methodologies (Yang, 2016).

In China, there are a few disciplines that have emerged from the discovery of various historical archives based on documents written/inscribed on various materials over history, and some of them have given rise to world-renowned studies in the areas of Oracle Bone Studies, Bamboo Slips and Silk Studies, Dunhuang Studies, and Hui Studies.

These newly formed disciplines mainly take different methods already available from existing disciplines and build their own knowledge systems related to the different material, cultural and evidentiary aspects of these historical archives. In this way, these newly discovered historical archives have given birth to new disciplines. Although these new disciplines are based on the historical archives, they involve multiple fields and methods and hence these discovered archives become a very important traction between different research fields. For this reason, the newly formed disciplines are named after the found archives, which further highlights the direct effects of the discovery of historical archives on the formation of disciplines.

As an important cultural heritage of humanity, the newly discovered archives attract attention not just from researchers, but also from society in general. On the one hand, people are able to understand the different aspects of society's development through the deep research into these historical archives, which can promote the progress of scientific research as well as of human understanding. On the other hand, this understanding cannot be reached with only one method or through one existing discipline. It is necessary to assemble a multi-disciplinary, team of researchers and make the unification of various research methods come true. Therefore, these studies cannot be solely attributed to a certain class of existing disciplines such as History, Literature, Economics,

Sociology and so on. Hence, only a new and comprehensive discipline can contain all the relevant research approaches needed.

Historical archives are the most original and direct record of the development of human society, and also, they are generally authentic sources. Hence, these historical archives are a primary source for people carrying out research. Besides, in addition to their content, the physical carriers of the archives often have historic value also. For instance, with the change in writing systems from inscriptions on oracle bones to writing on bamboo slips and then to paper as well as to electronic documents now, the physical carriers also record and reflect the evolution of human writing tools. Since the content or text is dependent on the media, protecting the physical carriers of these archives is also very important, and cannot be replaced by digitization alone.

From the above, it is clear that the discovery of historical archives is conducive to form a new discipline, and this aspect should be paid attention to and explored. However, in archival management, this value is often neglected. This paper describes four disciplines that are derived from the discovery of historical archives, which prove the special value of these archives in attracting attention from researchers.

## **2. Four Disciplines Derived from The Discovery of Historical Archives in China**

In the history of discipline development in China, there are four disciplines formed by the discovery of historical archives; namely, Oracle Bone Studies, Bamboo Slips and Silk Studies, Dunhuang Studies, Hui Studies. This article will introduce these four disciplines separately from their origins, content, research approaches, and some related crucial developments. The aim of this paper is to detail and describe the direct effect of these historical archives in the birth of new disciplines. It should be noted that this paper is not about the content recorded on these historical archives. Instead, this paper uncovers an important value of these archives from the archival point of view by describing the development of four new disciplines that evolved from these archives.

## 2.1 Oracle Bone Studies

In 1899, an official of Qing dynasty named Yirong Wang went to a drugstore for his illness. He bought a lot of Chinese medicines home, and by chance, he found one of the herbs called keel was carved with some glyphs. Because Wang had been studying epigraphy for a long time, he instinctively judged that these markings were not ordinary. Then he started to research these keels, and finally, he confirmed that these signs were Shang dynasty characters and that these keels were in fact oracle bones, a type of carved bones or turtle shells used in divination. The discovery of these oracle bones confirmed the existence of Shang dynasty. After this discovery Wang sent people to buy more than 1,500 pieces of bones carved with characters, often thrown away or reburied by farmers. Because of him, a cheap Chinese medicine ingredient was suddenly revealed to be an invaluable historical archive. Later, the biggest scale of oracle bones' excavation was at Yin ruins, Anyang, in Henan province, and this is now famous all over the world. From 1928, the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica carried out 15 explorations in Yin ruins and found large quantities of oracle bones as well as many other precious historical remains, which all became important archaeological materials (Wang, 1999).

Today, Oracle Bone Studies has given rise to several research fields. The first one is for the inscribed characters, which is basic for understanding the oracle bones; this is about the characters' identification, appraisal and interpretation. The second one for the divination; since the oracle bones were used in ancient times, the characters carved on the bones is useful in understanding the inscriptions and methods of divination. The third one is for organizing; called "join together" and "arrangement." "Join together" means to put the segments together to re-integrate an oracle; "arrangement" means put related oracle bones together so that they can reflect the related histories. Besides that, there are a lot of other research topics such as the etiquette of ancient China, the geography, and so on that have been derived from these oracle bones (Li, 1999).

As precious and important historical materials, the oracle bone archives have considerable value for research and reference. They not only reflect the historical process of social development in the Yinshang era and Western Zhou dynasty, but also involve etiquette, astronomy, calendar, art, medicine and so on. Also, the oracle characters provide a very important reference for the study of the

historical development of Chinese calligraphy (Zhang, 2017). In addition to Mainland China, the oracle bone archives are now also distributed in Taiwan, Japan, Canada, the United States and Britain (Zhao & Yang, 2015). This increased international communication and cooperation also promoted the Oracle Bone Studies as a discipline.

## **2.2 Bamboo Slips and Silk Studies**

Bamboo slips and silk were two important mediums for writing on in ancient China, and the bamboo slips and silk archives are also very valuable.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, British-Hungarian Marc Aurel Stein and Swedish Sven Hedin were the two crucial people who made contributions to the excavation of Bamboo slips and silk archives. After that, with continual excavations, people started to research all aspects around these archives. For one aspect, it mainly refers to the bamboo slips and silk themselves, which includes the morphological study of the physical carriers as well as the study of the content such as characters and signs. The broader aspect refers to other research that regards archives as historical materials; for example, linguistics, philosophy, documentation science, intellectual history, astronomy and calendars and so on (Yang, 2016).

One of the famous discoveries in China around Bamboo slips and silk archives is the Qin bamboo slips, which were found in Yunmeng in 1975. Because these archives were stored in coffins, they were protected well. The bamboo slips were intact and the writing on the bamboo slips was clear. Now these archives are stored in Hubei provincial museum, and they are presented and arranged scientifically. These archives are also famous for their arrangements, because of their high quality. Most of the Qin bamboo slips archives reflect the construction of the law in Qin dynasty and could be primary materials for both historical and modern law research (Ji, 1976).

Later, such bamboo slips archives were also found in Japan, Korea, and North Korea. The archives discovered in these countries around China made the Bamboo slips culture in the East Asian region more connected, and become important materials for history, culture, and communication between countries. This attention from different countries also promoted the development of the new discipline of Bamboo Slips and Silk Studies (Yang, 2016).

### 2.3 Dunhuang Studies

In 1900, a Taoist named Yuanlu Wang found a cave in Mo Kao Grotto at Dunhuang, and the cave was piled up with scrolls and documents from 16 countries (a period of Chinese history) to the Northern Song dynasty. The total was more than 60000 pieces, which were related to many aspects of society and research. Except for the studies which other archives also may related to, such as history, geography, archaeology, astronomy and so on. They also involved topics such as music, sports, dance, minorities, religion and so on, and most of them are Buddhist classics and monastery documents. However, Stein paid off cave keeper Wang and sent these archives as well as other cultural relics out of Dunhuang to England (Wang & Zhu, 2011). Stein is one of the main collectors of Dunhuang archives in Britain. The relics and archives he got from his four expeditions in northwest China became important materials for Dunhuang Studies and also laid the foundation of international Dunhuang Studies (Wang, 2004).

Today, Dunhuang Studies has become an internationally famous research discipline. The British library has led the establishment of an international cooperation project called *International Dunhuang Project*. China, Japan, Germany, France, Taiwan and the United States are all the members of this project. The goal of this project is to make people get access to and use these precious materials more freely through the Internet (<http://idp.dha.ac.cn>).

### 2.4 Hui Studies

The ancient Huizhou documents record the social activities of Huizhou people, which contain contracts, private books, official books, decree documents, litigations, rural regulations, genealogy books, letters, singing scripts, religious books and so on. These original records are the most authentic and specific reflection of Huizhou's social and cultural development. The large-scale discovery of ancient Huizhou documents began in 1950s, and because of the large quantity, the ancient Huizhou documents were regarded as the fifth major discovery of the Chinese historical literature in the 20th century after the unearthing of oracle bones, bamboo slips and silk archives, Dunhuang relics and the archives of Ming and Qing dynasties.

The Huizhou archives reflect the prosperity of Huizhou culture in history, and also leave us with a cultural heritage of great value. Hui Studies is a comprehensive discipline that takes these archives as research subjects (Huang, 2001). As primary sources these archives are distinguished by their continuity, specificity, accuracy, and representative nature, and they have inspired new historical research (Li, 2016).

Sun Yat-sen University is the pioneering organization of Hui Studies, and the founder of Hui Studies was Fangzhong Liang, who is a professor of history in Sun Yat-sen University. He also pioneered the history of the library collection of Huizhou documents in Sun Yat-sen University, which made the library of Sun Yat-sen University known as one of the earliest collectors for ancient Huizhou documents (Wang, 2016).

### **3. Conclusion**

The four cases above show the special value of historical archives in forming a new discipline. Although the emergence of these disciplines and the discovery of the respective historical archives may seem fortuitous, in fact, there is an inevitable connection between them. Here, we describe these relationships and provide their implications for archives management.

First of all, with the development of Humanities and Social Science, people pay more and more attention to the excavation of original materials and also pay more attention to their use. These discovered archives are in large number and variety. They not only have the commonness being primary information sources, but also have the special characteristics of becoming research information. Therefore, from the discovery of new archives to the formation of new disciplines is the result of the interaction between new research questions with new materials (Luan, 2013).

Secondly, another reason that can attract the attention of researchers to the discovered archives is their scale. The four cases mentioned above are all huge collections. Because of this, these archives can be more interrelated and conducive to systematic study. So the large numbers of items in these archives hold more research value than just the discovery of a unique copy. That is also the reason why new disciplines form around them, rather than incorporate them into an existing discipline.

Thirdly, for discipline formation and development, as mentioned before, the physical carriers of these archives also contain a lot of useful information for research. Once the archives are unearthed, their condition and environment around are changed, and so, it is archival departments' duty to prevent them from erosion and destruction. It is a joint work of both excavators and archivists to preserve archives' in their original unearthed state as much as possible.

Last but not least, the scope of the dissemination is another important reason for forming and promoting a discipline. Even though much of the discovered archives in China are overseas (historians and archeologists like Stein and Sven Heding took these archives out of China), they still promote cultural communication between China and other countries.

It is easy to see that although the discipline formation from the discovery of archives is inevitable, it also needs certain conditions. From the archival management perspective, archivists need to protect the archival integrity and originality of these archives when filing and arranging. Besides, it is also necessary to speed up the dissemination of the various research findings arising from the archives, so as to be able to form a new discipline.

Moreover, these historical archives are also the precious cultural heritage of human society, and many of them are kept in museums. For instance, the oracle bones are currently stored away in the National Library, Henan Anyang Yin Ruins Museum, Shandong Provincial Museum, and the Nanjing Museum. However, from an archival standpoint, they are no doubt valuable, because they are the clear, authentic and original records of human activities. Therefore, for such items, which belong to both archives and cultural heritage, the museums, archives, as well as libraries should cooperate to work with and provide access to these valuable materials to researchers. Fortunately, digitization provides more opportunities for resource sharing between different organizations and places. We conclude that we should all make good use of digitization to make these resources more amenable to the development of new disciplines.

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