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Overview of Archives and Archival Issues in Japan*

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Abstract

Despite the tradition of maintaining official and private archives since around the eight century, the development of modern archives in Japan was hampered until recently. The following posed huge obstacles to the development: (1) poor records management between central and local governments and (2) lack of understanding of archives among the public. The National Archives of Japan (NAJ) was finally established in 1971; national-level legislations concerning the archives were not set until 1987. Now, in the 2000s, there is a strong movement toward the development of archives in Japan. The following are the primary forces behind the movement: (1) development of “digital archives” owing to the popularization of the Internet, especially the Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (JACAR) that was established as a branch of the NAJ in 2001, and (2) political support for archival institutions and archival issues, as shown in the discussion of the advisory panel under the Cabinet Office of Japan since 2003. In addition, the Japan Society for Archival Science (JSAS) was established in 2004 as the first academic society concerning archival science in Japan. The JSAS promotes the

* The views and opinions in this paper are the author's. They may not be shared by the author's affiliations.

establishment of academic foundations of archival science through the acceptance of theories in the Western world, such as the theory of “records continuum.” While Japan is experiencing such developments, there are numerous challenges for the future developments of archives in the country, such as raising the number of archival institutions, establishment of legislations concerning archives and records management, and promotion of understanding of archives among the public. Among these challenges, the largest one will be to determine the manner in which an accreditation system for professional archivists can be established and stable employment for prospective archivists can be secured.

1. Introduction

The author is delighted to attend the Archives & Records Association of New Zealand Conference. Here he would like to provide an overview of archives and archival issues in Japan for audiences in New Zealand.

The author’s main research interest is legal and policy issues of access to government information, including the roles of archives and libraries. He has already published three English papers concerning these issues in Japan¹. This paper summarizes the previous papers and updates several issues, focusing on the issues of archives in Japan. Due to the limitation of space (and time), the paper mainly deals with the archives of the central government, i.e. the National Archives of Japan.

2. Brief History and Overview of Archives in Japan

Some archivists and researchers may be familiar with an English-language overview

of archives in Japan². Here is a very brief summary of the history of archives in Japan.

There had been a strong tradition of keeping official documents of mastership and *shogunate* as well as private papers in old houses and warehouses in Japan since around the eighth century. One of the symbols of this tradition is *Shosoin*, established at an ancient city called Nara in 756. It is the oldest known archives in Japan as well as a repository of domestic and international treasures. It is registered as a World Heritage by UNESCO. However, the Japanese government as well as the country's citizens had been unaware of the importance of making independent archival institutions open to the public, nor of the basic rules of organizing archival documents, such as "*respect des fonds*," original order, and provenance. Since the *Meiji Ishin* (Meiji Revolution) in the late 19th century, which led the civilization of the entire society, Japanese historians and researchers have visited archival institutions in Europe and the United States and have urged Japanese government officials and the public to establish archival institutions. However, it was not until 1959 that the first modern archival institution was established in Japan. That year, the Yamaguchi Prefectural Archives was established in Yamaguchi Prefecture (in western Japan), based on the archival documents of the Mouri family, who had governed the Yamaguchi area during Edo era (from the beginning of the 17th century to the end of the 19th century). It is worth noting that the first Director-General of the Archives, Masachi Suzuki (1897-1967), introduced the modern archival theory of Hilary Jenkinson and Theodore R. Schellenberg to Japan. Despite this advance, very little development occurred in the ensuing years in Japan. An exception was the establishment of the National Archives of Japan in 1971, after a long-year petition for its establishment by historians. The development of archives was hampered until very recently, largely because of (1) poor records management between central and local

governments and (2) a lack of understanding among the public.

The 1980s saw a little progress on archival issues. First, the “Freedom of Information” regulations urged the establishment of archival institutions among local governments³. This meant that local governments needed to establish their own archival institutions to ensure accountability to their constituency by providing access to their historical documents showing their activities in a retrospective manner. Kanagawa Prefectural Archives established in 1993 was one of these archives opened in response to Freedom of Information regulations.

Second, the Public Archives Law (Law No. 115 of 1987)⁴ was established in 1987 as the result of strong requests from archivists and one parliamentarian, Niro Iwakami (1913-1989). This law issues provisions concerning the management of “official documents ... as historical materials” and public archives at the national and local level. This law also mandates that public archives hire “professional personnel” to perform investigations and research into such official documents under Article 4 of the law. However, Supplementary Provision 2 states: “For the time being, Public Archives to be established by local public entities may operate without appointing professional personnel...” This clause led to a lack of an accreditation system for professional archivists, as well as a lack of effective education and training for archivists in Japan. Worse still, the law does not effectively encourage the establishment of public archives by local governments. Therefore, many local governments still do not have archives because of financial constraints, although in recent years the number of local public archives has gradually risen.

Now in the 2000s we are seeing a much stronger movement toward the development of archives in Japan, especially in (1) development of “digital archives” owing to the

popularization of the Internet, and (2) political support for the archival institutions and archival issues. The following sections deal with such developments.

3. Current Situation of Archival Institutions in Japan

The National Archives of Japan (NAJ)⁵ was established in 1971 as a branch of the General Administrative Agency of the Cabinet (now the Cabinet Office), and became an independent administrative agency in 2001. The change in the NAJ's status has pros and cons; on the one hand, as an independent administrative agency the NAJ has become somewhat freer from bureaucratic barriers and has begun proactive projects such as the Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (discussed later). On the other hand, the change has weakened the NAJ's power and status in terms of the number of documents transferred from each government agency to the National Archives. In fact, The National Archives Law revised in 2000 (originally established in 1999) states that the Prime Minister of Japan, and not the head of the National Archives, controls the transfer of government documents of historical importance from each national government agency to the National Archives⁶. As a result, "an average of 17,000 documents were transferred to the archive from other government agencies every year until fiscal 2000. But that number decreased to 7,759 in fiscal 2002, and to 5,764 in fiscal 2003."⁷

In addition, there is a huge problem in manpower. As of 2004, the staff of the NAJ numbered only 42—an extremely small number as compared with the national archives in neighboring countries (560 in China and 130 in South Korea). This problem of a small workforce is exacerbated by the lack of an accreditation system for professional archivists in Japan, as discussed above.

In spite of these problems, the NAJ staff are positive about new initiatives in recent

years, in part thanks to political support for the NAJ itself and overall issues of archives and records (discussed later). In April 2007, the NAJ issued its own vision statement, “Public Archives Declaration”, for the first time⁸. The key points of this statement are:

The National Archives will be a more appealing “information center,” accessible to each and every person.

Our mission: To contribute to the development of democracy and the realization of a high quality of life through the preservation and use of public archives as shared assets of the people.

Our goals: To become an accessible information service center that selects, preserves, and promotes civic use of public archives.

Our relevance to the people: We will ensure a mechanism for each and every person to have a stake in building nation’s future through the use of public archives.

Along with the NAJ, there are several other national-level archives, including the Diplomatic Record Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs⁹, the Military Archives of the National Institute for Defense Studies of the National Defense Agency,¹⁰ the Archives of the Imperial Household Agency¹¹, and the Modern Japanese Political History Materials Room (*Kensei-shiryôshitsu*) at the National Diet Library¹².

As for local governments, while 30 out of 42 prefectures (63.8%) and 7 out of 17 designated cities (41.2%) have their own archives, only 12 out of around 1,800 municipalities (including cities, towns and villages) --- just 0.4% ---- have archives¹³. This means that a huge volume of local government records without archival depositories have been lost by government staff --- not by archivists ---, or have been kept unopened at the government office. Worse, recent mergers of municipalities,

directed by the central government, have raised concerns among archivists, historians and even the NAJ about the loss of municipal records; in 2005 and 2006, upon requests from the NAJ, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications issued memoranda asking for appropriate management of municipal records during the ongoing municipal mergers.

4. Digital Archives in Japan

Ian E. Wilson, the first Librarian and Archivist of Canada, visited Japan in November 2004 through invitation by the NAJ and said, “In archives that use the Internet in imaginative ways, it is changing archives from the least accessible heritage institution to the most accessible.”¹⁴ This is really true of archives in Japan, and the website of the Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (JACAR, Figure 1)¹⁵ is probably the best example of “the most accessible” archives “using the Internet in imaginative ways” in Japan.

JACAR was established in Nov. 2001 as a branch of the NAJ and as digital archives “for impartially collecting a wide variety of materials and information on the modern history of Japan, neighboring Asian countries, and other countries”¹⁶. JACAR’s website provides access to a database of digital images of diplomatic records from the Meiji era to the end of World War II. The original historical records are stored in the NAJ, the Diplomatic Record Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Library of the National Institute for Defense Studies of the National Defense Agency. As of Oct. 2006, 12,700,000 digital images were available on the JACAR website. The most appealing feature of the website is that it not only offers an English interface but also a catalog and access points in both English and Japanese. Thus, a visitor can search the database using

English keywords or phrases (Figure 2), although the records themselves are in Japanese. It should be noted, however, that users need to install special free software called “DjVu (pronounced *deja vu*)” in order to see high-resolution images of the records on the website. JACAR also holds “on-site exhibitions” concerning the Iwakura Mission to Europe in 1871-73, the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-05, the US-Japan War Talks in 1940-41, and the government’s pictorial magazine in 1937-45.

(Figure 1 and Figure 2 come around here.)

In addition to the JACAR website, the NAJ launched its Digital Archive website¹⁷ in April 2005. Currently, this site offers access to a database of NAJ’s collection of over 1 million volumes of records, with English and Japanese interfaces. The website also provides access to 770,000 digital images from the NAJ’s archival collection, and some images are available at the “Digital Gallery.” (Figure 3)¹⁸ Here, you need to install another free software for handling the JPEG 2000 format in order to see the high-resolution images. It is worth mentioning that the NAJ has opened its definition for EAD (Encoded Archival Description) for the construction of its Digital Archive on its website¹⁹.

(Figure 3 comes around here.)

5. Political Support for Archival Institutions and Archival Issues in Japan

Probably, the most important recent event in the Japanese archival community was the establishment of the “Blue-Ribbon Commission on Improving and Consolidating Public

Archival Systems” in May 2003, an ad-hoc committee under the Director-General of the Cabinet²⁰. Its establishment showed political support for the improvement of archives and records management by the central government, especially the activities of the NAJ.

The main activity of the Blue-Ribbon committee was to conduct field research at national archives in China, Korea, the United States, and Canada, in order to find best and good practices in these countries and apply them to Japan.

After the Blue-Ribbon committee published its report in December 2003, the committee was re-organized into the “Advisory Panel to the Chief Cabinet Secretary on the management, Preservation and Use of the Public Records”. The re-organization involved the addition of a member (a leading scholar of administrative law joined the Panel) and expansion of scope; the Advisory Panel discussed the management not only of non-current government records but also of those in current use. Discussions among Panel members and other experts led to issuing of an interim report titled “Keeping Historical Records into the Future: Challenges for the Development and Consolidation of Japanese Archives” in June 2004. This report described overall challenges facing archives in Japan, and suggested several policy recommendations such as measures to transfer documents from individual government bodies to the National Archives, education and staffing of archivists and record managers within each government body and archive, and management of electronic records.

After that, the Advisory Panel focused on two issues: (1) establishing a records center, in which “important administrative documents can be temporarily placed under integrated management,”²¹ and (2) establishing measures for management of electronic records. To further these topics, the Panel established research groups for each topic. The research was wrapped up in the Panel’s final report, “Report on Integrated

Management of Semi-current Records and Management, Transfer and Archiving of Electronic Records,” published in June 2006. It lists medium and long term challenges related to the above-mentioned issues, though it describes little about concrete measures to resolve them. It seems that the tasks of building a records center and electronic records management have been passed from the Advisory Panel to the NAJ, other government agencies, and members of parliament.

Besides the Advisory Panel’s discussion, it has been recognized among researchers and citizens’ groups that new legislation concerning records management and archival systems for both paper and electronic records is essential for effective records management and archival systems, as well as better implementation of “Freedom of Information” legislation²². The National Institute for Research Advancement, a leading think tank in Japan, conducted research on the “Government Documents Management Law (tentative title)” under commission of administrative law scholars, lawyers, and an archivist (Ms. Chiyoko Ogawa) from July 2005 to July 2006²³. The final report, published in February 2007²⁴, includes two legislative plans for the “Government Documents Management Law,” annotations for the plans, field research reports on archives and records management systems in the United States, United Kingdom, France and Germany, and commentaries from the scholars and the archivist (Ms. Ogawa). The difference between the two plans is to what extent the initiative of the NAJ would be allowed in implementation of management and transfer system for government documents. How either legislative plan, or any modification of them, will be realized is yet to be seen.

6. Advancement of Archival Studies in Japan, and Related Organizations

In Japan, while there have been activities related to archival institutions since the end of World War II, there was no academic association of archival science until the Records Management Society of Japan (RMSJ) was established in 1989. Its scope is management of current records of government and business organizations, and the society includes a number of archivists and archival science researchers. However, archival issues are not the main theme of the RMSJ's work.

The Japan Society for Archival Science (JSAS) was established in 2004. It is the first academic society for archival science in Japan. Before that, a preparatory seminar for its establishment was held in October 2003, and Ms. Ann Pederson from the University of New South Wales gave lectures on archival issues and theories in Australia. She introduced the concept of the "records continuum," and probably that was the first opportunity for audiences in Japan to hear about this influential concept in the world of archives and records. The first conference of the JSAS was held in April 2004, and it invited Dr. Eric Ketelaar of the University of Amsterdam. He also commented on records continuum in the honorary speech for the conference²⁵. Since then, the JSAS has functioned as the core of archival science in Japan. The secretariat of the society is at the Faculty of Letters, Gakushuin University in Tokyo. In October 2006, the 2nd Asia-Pacific Conference for Archival Educators and Trainers was held by the Section for Archival Education and Training of the International Council on Archives (ICA-SAE) at Gakushuin University. It was the first international conference on archival education in Japan, and prominent researchers and archivists from all over the world gave presentations and joined discussions on bettering the education system for archivists.

It is worth mentioning that *Introduction to Archival Science: Memory and Records*

into the Future, an anthology of archival science in English translated into Japanese was published in June 2006 as a joint project of the RMSJ and the JSAS. The first article in this anthology is Dr. Ketelaar's honorary speech for the first JSAS conference. It also includes Terry Cook's "What is Past is Prologue"²⁶, an excellent summary of the development of archival theory in the western world. The other articles in this anthology are those of Theo Thomassen (Amsterdam School of Arts), John W. Carlin (former Archivist of the United States), Jean-Pierre Wallot (former president of the International Council on Archives), and Sue McKemmish (Monash University, and the pioneer of records continuum theory). Both experienced and younger researchers of archival science (including the author himself) translated these articles.

In addition to these academic societies, the Japan Society of Archives Institutions (JSAI), established in 1976, acts as a central practical society of archival institutions and archivists in Japan. The JSAI is affiliated to the International Council on Archives (ICA) and its East Asian Regional Branch (EASTICA). Also, the Business Archives Association, established in 1981, serves as the central body for business archives and corporate history compilations in Japan. Finally, the Association of College and University Archives of Japan, established in 1996, is eager to promote the activities of college and university archives, whose numbers have been increasing in recent years.

7. Conclusion: Future of Archives and Archivists in Japan

As discussed above, there have been "new deals" affecting the state of archives and archival issues during recent years in Japan ---- new deals in terms of digital archives, political support, and academic foundations. On the other hand, numerous challenges must still be faced for the development of archives to continue --- the numbers of

archival institutions must be increased, legislation concerning archives and records management needs to be established, and understanding of archives has to be promoted among the public. The author thinks that the biggest barriers will be how to establish an accreditation system for professional archivists and how to secure stable employment for prospective archivists²⁷; in fact, we have not yet established a formal education and accreditation system for archivists in Japan. These issues relate to the promotion system of any organization, be they government or private, in Japan; generally, we need to become “generalists,” that is, experience several positions rather than be “specialists,” in order to promote our own organizations. It should be noted that the skills and motivations of librarians and museum curators, who have much in common with archivists in terms of dealing “information resources,” has been curtailed in this “generalist-oriented” promotion system. All in all, it seems that the most important aspect is to what extent people in Japan, especially top management of government and private organizations, recognize the importance of information resources and understand the best way to serve specialists of the resources. In addition, archivists and archival scientists need to find their own ways and develop their own expertise to survive in the electronic society.

Finally, the author hopes that this brief paper will motivate the audience at this conference to take interest in the current situation in Japan, and that it will facilitate mutual understanding between New Zealand and Japan concerning archives, records and “information resources.”



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English version of "The US-Japan War Talks"
Font size : Standard : Medium : Large

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JACAR is a digital database of Japan's historical records testifying to its pre-war relations with the Asian countries. It is an ongoing project archiving official documents of the Cabinet, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as the Army and Navy, dating from the Meiji era through 1945. In an effort to share the facts of history, images of the original documents are made public through this site on an unprecedented scale.

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Figure 1: Main page of the JACAR

Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (JACAR)
National Archives of Japan

Please select a search you wish to use.

- [→ A-Z Index Search](#)
Browse main terms used in catalogues and search for the documents.
- [→ Layered Search](#)
Browse the database by classification such as holding organization, creating organization, series, and sub series.
- [→ Keyword Search](#)
Search for the documents by any keywords.
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Search for the documents by keywords (title, writer, organization/personal history) and created date.
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Search for the documents by reference code.
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Keyword Search

You may search by keywords.

Please input keyword

Synonyms & Related Words OFF Display matches per page

About keyword input
 You can enter keywords to search by. The keyword items you can enter as search condition is described below.
 By separating each keywords with blank space, you can perform AND search.
 example) ***Documents containg "Japan" OR "law" are matched.

By separating each keywords with "|" (pipe), you can perform OR search.
 example) ***Documents containg "Japan" OR "law" are matched.

By separating each keywords with "!" (exclamation mark), you can perform NOT search.
 example) ***Documents containg "Japan" but "law" are matched.

Figure 2: "Keyword Search" page of the JACAR



Figure 3: “Digital Gallery” page of the NAJ

Notes and References

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² See for example: Ogawa, Chiyoko. “Archives in Japan: The State of the Art,” *American Archivist* 54, no.4 (1991): 546-554. Ando, Masahito. “English Abstract.” in *Kiroku Shiryo-gaku to Gendai*

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³ The “Freedom of Information” regulations in Japan’s local governments begun with the regulation in Kanayama Town in 1982. It was followed by Kanagawa Prefecture in 1983, the first Prefecture in Japan who established such regulation. It was not until 1999 that the central government in Japan established “Act on Access to Information Held by Administrative Organs” (see ref. 22) as the “Freedom of Information” Act. For more details about “Freedom of Information” issues in Japan, see Koga, “Access to Government Information.”

⁴ National Archives of Japan, “Public Archives Law.”

http://www.archives.go.jp/english/basic_laws/public_archives.html (accessed 2007-06-14).

⁵ National Archives of Japan. <http://www.archives.go.jp/english/index.html> (accessed 2007-06-14).

⁶ National Archives of Japan, “National Archives Law.”

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¹⁰ National Institute for Defense Studies, “Military Archives.”

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¹¹ Imperial Household Agency, “Organization and Functions of the Imperial Household Agency.”

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¹² National Diet Library. “Modern Japanese Political History Materials Room.”

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¹³ See, National Archives of Japan, “List of the Archives of Prefectures and Municipalities.”

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¹⁴ Ian E. Wilson, “Old Institutions – New Opportunities: Archives and Information Management in Government and Society.” (a speech at the international symposium held by the Cabinet Office and the National Archives of Japan, Tokyo, Nov. 12, 2004.) *Archives* (Journal of the National Archives of Japan) 18 (2005): 99. Also available online at http://www.archives.go.jp/event/pdf/acv_18_02.pdf (accessed 2007-06-14). This issue of *Archives* also includes speeches of Steve Stuckey, Assistant Director-General of the National Archives of Australia, who was also invited for the symposium.

¹⁵ Japan Center for Asian Historical Records. <http://www.jacar.go.jp/english/index.html> (accessed 2007-06-14).

¹⁶ Japan Center for Asian Historical Records, “About Us.”

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¹⁷ National Archives of Japan, “Digital Archive.” http://www.digital.archives.go.jp/index_e.html (accessed 2007-06-14).

¹⁸ National Archives of Japan, “Digital Gallery.”

http://jpimg.digital.archives.go.jp/kouseisai/index_e.html (accessed 2007-06-14).

¹⁹ National Archives of Japan, “National Archives of Japan EAD Definition (Ver. 1.07).”

http://www.digital.archives.go.jp/howto/pdf/naj_ead107.pdf. (in Japanese, accessed 2007-06-14).

²⁰ The reports, minutes and other documents of the Blue Ribbon Committee and the following Panel are available online at <http://www8.cao.go.jp/chosei/koubun/> (in Japanese, accessed 2007-06-14).

²¹ “Editorial: Public Records Are Lifeblood of Democracy,” *The Daily Yomiuri*, July 20, 2004, 4.

²² Act on Access to Information Held by Administrative Organs (Act No. 42 of 1999).

http://www.soumu.go.jp/english/gyoukan/060516_03.html (accessed 2007-06-14). Issues concerning this act are described in Koga, "Access to Government Information," and Koga, "Government Information and Roles."

²³ A brief description of this research is available from the Institute's website at <http://www.nira.go.jp/newse/niranews/200509/200509.html#1> (accessed 2007-06-14).

²⁴ *Seisaku Teigen Koubunsho Kanri no Ho-Seibi ni Mukete* [Policy Recommendations for Government Documents Management Law], eds. National Institute for Research Advancement and Shigeru Takahashi (Tokyo, Shoji Homu, 2007). (in Japanese)

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²⁷ Overview of issues on education and training for archives is described at: Hosaka, Hiroaki. "Archival Science and Archival Education in Japan." Ohara, Yumiko. "Fostering Professional Staff of Archives: Development of the Training Programs in the National Archives of Japan." Yoshida, Chie. "One Proposal for International Collaboration in Archival Training." all included in: *The Proceedings of the 2nd Asia-Pacific Conference for Archival Educators and Trainers*, Section for Archival Education and Training, the International Council on Archives, October 2006.