

ARCHIVES ACTION GROUP WEBSITE

Title:
WHY ARCHIVES?

Greetings and Congratulations
on the occasion of the posting of the AAG Website

from
Beatrice S. Bartlett, Professor Emeritus
Department of History and Program in East Asian Studies
Yale University

“Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it.”
(Santayana)

I have long thought that the Confucian pronouncement, “Humane persons take pleasure in the mountains, Philosophers take pleasure in the sea” (仁者樂山，哲者樂水), applies particularly well to Hong Kong’s alluring landscapes of hills and water, in addition to its population of humanitarians and philosophers. But let us be clear: we would not have this quotation today if people in Confucius’ time had not troubled to make a record of the Sage’s words, nor if later heirs to these treasures had failed to preserve them in what we might call an early Chinese archive.

Those of us who have lived long enough to reflect on the many versions of the past that we have known personally are likely to hope that these memories will be preserved to send messages to future generations. Possibly these remembered experiences will provide models for future rulers and lawmakers, the models being both the good that might be emulated and the unfortunate that should be avoided. The Chinese themselves have a long history of concern for archives and the writing of histories based on archives. Confucius himself is thought to have edited the archives of the Duke of Zhou. Archives were important for the intelligentsia, including the rulers and the court, because they provided valuable precedents and guidance, particularly once these had been incorporated into the numerous and detailed official dynastic histories that Chinese officials have produced out of archives over the course of more than two millennia. Tang Taizong (reg. 627-649) begged to be allowed to see the secret archives of his reign so that he could know what the Tang history would say about him. This story

goes on to relate that officials denied their emperor's request, preferring to maintain the impartiality of the official histories free of imperial interference. Today, chiefly because successive Chinese courts preserved the records of their governments' acts, we have access to much of the wealth of China's history.

My own past has included a strong professional interest in China's archives, particularly those of the Qing dynasty, which I have worked on for more than forty years and about which I have written more than twenty-five articles. My archival excavations have led me into many treasure-filled archival vaults, in the China Mainland, in Taiwan, and even, on a brief visit, in Hong Kong. The experience has given me tremendous respect for China's archivists and their archival traditions. Earliest of the Qing are the eighteenth-century Qing court officials and archivists like Zhang Tingyu (張廷玉, 1672-1755) and Agui (阿桂, 1717-1797) who directed a massive government reorganization that included a re-thinking and re-founding of archival procedures. Later credit belongs to those like Luo Zhenyu (羅振玉, 1866-1940) who, after the fall of the dynasty, saved the Qing archives from destruction and permanent loss. Final honors go to the numerous archival re-organizers of the twentieth century who have managed to bring order out of the chaos of their enormous holdings (a total of between fifteen and twenty million Qing documents across the world). At this point nearly all major Qing records have been saved, sorted, and at least preliminarily listed. Many have been published, either in entire record series (such as the Palace Memorials) or in volumes of documents that provide a sampling on specific topics. Some have been digitized, others even searchably digitized. Few archival institutions in the world come near to equaling this record. The Chinese achievement in creating, preserving, and making these archives available deserve our awe and gratitude.

Now in the twenty-first century, what use are the rotting pieces of paper in archives today? From my years of reading in the Qing archives, I limit myself to two examples from the early and middle Qing that convey advice for future rulers. First, from the Yongzheng Emperor (雍正 1678-1735, reg. 1722-1735), who in 1729 awoke one morning in the Beijing Palace to find that it had snowed heavily during the night. What is more, this had occurred in northern China where it is normally very dry, almost too dry to sow food crops and reap good harvests. Calling this "the benevolence of Heaven", the emperor exulted to his favorite general in the northwest, writing: "Why has this great happiness come to me?" (上天深恩，朕曷勝慶喜?)

The emperor was not planning a sleigh ride. Since ancient times rainfall and snowfall that promised bountiful harvests have been thought to signify Heaven's approval of exemplary performances in imperial management, behavior, and concern for the populace on the part of the Chinese emperors. For a monarch such as Yongzheng, anxious about possible setbacks in the military campaign he was conducting and the drain on the government's exchequer, the heavy snowfall was an auspicious validation of his rule.

In a more general way, the Kangxi Emperor (康熙, 1654-1722, reg. 1661-1722) was also apprehensive about the perils of imperial decision-making. "One day's careless mistake can yield hundreds of thousands of years of misery" (一日不謹, 即數千百年之患) he wrote, sending a message to his descendant heads of government down the ages.

Thus, if archives truly preserve well the history of a people, an organization, a nation, or a community, they will fulfill the aims that the past serve the present and future only when it is remembered and honored. If carried out properly, archival action can inspire many worthy achievements: pride in how far we've come; pride in home, community, locality, province, state, or nation; maintenance of the entity we belong to in an orderly and valorous fashion with respect for all members of the body; lessons and guidance in the preservation of the past, all of which allow us to find out where we come from, learn the lessons of the past, and receive meaning for all our lives.

I hail the work of Hong Kong's Archival Action Group to ensure a future for archives for all citizens of Hong Kong!