

Standardizing Non-Alphabetical Archival Description: A Survey of Descriptive Practices on Japanese Public Records

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Abstract: Many archival descriptive standards have been developed in English-speaking countries. Although there are some variances among these standards, largely, they share the same archival theories and similar writing systems and culture. How can these principles and methods be applied in countries such as Japan, where very different characters and practices are used?

Thus far, Japanese archivists have tended to focus on preserving and describing historical documents created before the twentieth century. As in the USA, we have the historical manuscripts tradition. However, unlike in the USA, we do not have close links to the library community. Partly for that reason, in Japan, nationwide descriptive standards have not been developed until now. But from 1990s, application of international descriptive standards has been discussed, and the management of modern records has been more emphasized.

In order to develop innovative and acceptable standards, it is necessary to conduct foundational surveys of existing practices. Our research, funded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, examined what descriptive rules were implemented in Japanese archival institutions. We compared many finding aids produced by local government archives across the country, particularly focusing on the late-twentieth century records at the fonds and file level. We analyzed the research findings with reference to archival descriptive standards in English-speaking countries and the rules for current records in each parent institution. This research will clarify the main factors that affect the variations in descriptive outputs, and will provide some clues as to how we can harmonize these practices with the global principles and methodologies concerning archival description.

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