

Chinese Archival Practices: The Impact of Culture and Government Policies on the Research of American-based Historians in Chinese Archives

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INTRODUCTION

This research compares previous literature on Chinese archives with recent testimonies of United States-based historians about their experiences using Chinese archives. Past literature analyzing the relationship between Chinese and American archival practices ultimately point to differences rooted in cultural thinking and government policies. It is hoped that comparing the literature and personal commentaries can help identify potential solutions and trends that will enable United States-based historians to use Chinese archives more effectively and for Chinese archivists to understand their American users.

LITERATURE REVIEW

- Literature indicates that historians no longer take advantage of the educational and research services that archives supply
- The roots of Chinese archives lie in the Qing dynasty archives
- Archival practices influenced by general European, German, Soviet, and American practices
- 1954: the State Archives Bureau (SAB) was established to oversee standards for all repositories at each government level
- 1992: law outlining policies for access of materials by non-Chinese researchers established; foreign scholars still have a difficult time conducting research
- 1998 the Archives Law was established to emphasize public access to records, user services, and expanding user services and social uses of the archives

FACTS ABOUT CHINESE ARCHIVES

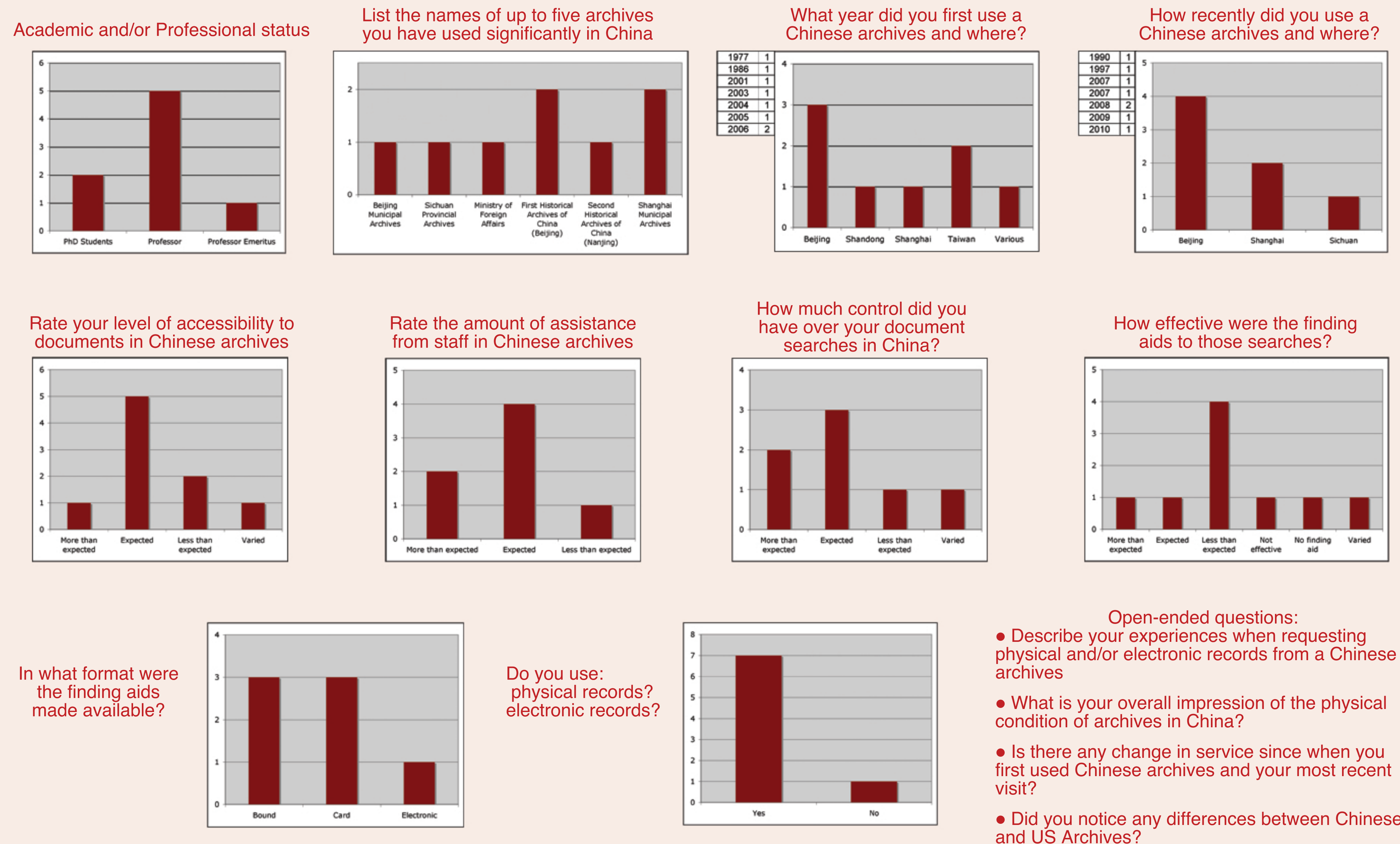
- Levels of archives: National, Regional, Municipal
- Components: Archives management bureau, Custodial institution, Repository*
- Content classes: Archives (records created by agencies)
Reference materials (other records)
- Arrangement: Provenance, then Chronology
- Finding aids are typically written files or card catalogs
- Centralized and unified management
- All significant records must be maintained by the state on behalf of the people
- Records disposal determined by the government
- Citizens are required to donate any relevant papers
- Strict laws regarding the preservation and arrangement of records before release
- Specific holding periods for records based on content type

ISSUES

Although archives access for foreigners has improved in China, historians professionally based in the United States still have trouble with viewing materials or sometimes even entering the country. They are still required to present letters of reference before being permitted to view records, still restricted to certain time periods for their research, and not all historians are prepared for what to expect while using the archives aside from peer advice.

HISTORIAN RESPONSES AND RESULTS

A series of anecdotal responses to various questions was anonymously collected from nine American-based historians during March to May 2010. The questions and responses are below:



ANALYSIS

While experiences were generally varied, the following commonalities (amongst others) were noted in the open-ended answers:

- Larger archives such as the ones in Beijing and Shanghai are more modernized and effective
- Despite the existence of the SAB, not all level of archives can maintain the same standard
- Digitization was greatly appreciated by historians and well-executed in larger archives
- Historians would like more accessibility and better interactions with archivists

FUTURE STUDIES

The common statements amongst the historians mirror similar issues that are being dealt with in the United States. Yet it seems that the United States-based historians perceive the issues more strongly within Chinese archives. It is possible that while the issues are present in both nations, each country handles the solutions differently.

The next step would be to survey Chinese archivists for their feedback on their relationships with United States-based historians. Whether the government would permit this activity is uncertain.