Ming-Qing Archives

Míng-Qīng dàng’ànguǎn 明清档案馆

The archives of the Ming and Qing, probably fifteen to twenty million items, offer an invaluable source of information about China’s final two dynasties. Nearly all documents in all collections have been sorted and catalogued. Most are housed in Beijing or Taipei, Taiwan, a number in other Chinese localities, fewer overseas—and some are available online.

The Ming-Qing Archives, a world-class cultural property, are a valuable inheritance from China’s last two dynasties, the Ming (1368–1643) and the Qing (1644–1912). Scattered across several Chinese-language areas, the small number of Ming survivals and the large number of Qing survivals are found principally in Beijing and Taipei, Taiwan, but also in local installations all across the country. Smaller holdings exist overseas, principally in Japan, the United States, Great Britain, and Russia. These archives are of vast size, estimated to number 15–20 million items, with new discoveries coming to light from time to time. The Ming portion is small, possibly seven thousand items, while the remainder derive from the Qing. They constitute one of the largest premodern archives in the world.

The Ming holdings differ significantly from the Qing in that they offer a range of topics, variety of languages (Manchu, Mongolian, Tibetan, Uygur, and others, in addition to Chinese), and sufficient serial runs to allow serious research. Most items are paper documents, many on rag-content paper so acid-free that it holds up after hundreds of years. A few were written on fine, patterned silk and sometimes wrapped in envelopes of silk glued to paper. Some items are wooden: audience tallies (green-headed sticks) that allowed a man into the imperial presence for a formal audience, wooden boxes for dispatching memorials (provincial reports), and boards covered in expensive silk to safeguard important imperial edicts in transit. Some documents have great beauty, decorated with borders of the imperial dragon motifs or embroidered on fine silk woven with imperial symbols such as the five-clawed dragon and the dragon’s symbols of clouds, waves, and fiery pearls. Reports destined for the emperor’s eyes bore clear, well-formed characters, but file copies were often scribbled in scrawls now difficult to decipher. Although most documents arrived on paper of a nondescript buff color, auspicious news often received the special treatment of a yellow background (yellow being the imperial color), and funeral matters were inscribed on stark white.

For the most part these were government, not private or commercial, documents. Their topics reflect government concerns, but much was covered under that rubric. Narratives of war and rebellion can be researched in the meticulous detail that their original authors used to plot military campaigns from grand strategy and troop deployments down to purchases of transport camels and carts, with food provisions calculated for both the army’s “big eaters” and those of normal size and appetites. Political life from court to county may be traced here. The archives preserve evidence of official interest in the civil service examinations, thousands of which survive, as well as records of imperial audiences, promotions, demotions,
punishments, and retirements. The files bring to life court cases of the dispossessed, the down-and-out, the landless, and the uneducated. It is possible to examine the economy through reports on taxation, customs dues, harvests, and weather all across the realm. The purely chronological assemblages of memorials were found so unwieldy that they could not be retained in that order and instead in Beijing today are filed in eighteen principal and more than a hundred subcategories, the eighteen being Domestic Administration, Military Affairs, Finance, Agriculture, Industry, Law, Foreign Relations, Natural Phenomena, Imperialist Aggression against China, Water Conservancy, Popular Movements, Minority Peoples, Literary and Cultural Matters, Communications, Commercial Activities, Public Works, Religion, and a final capacious category for everything else, Miscellaneous; the Taipei palace memorial holdings are filed chronologically but indexed under 80 subject-headings. These categories will supply a clue to the research munificence of these documents, which led one enthusiast to exclaim: “There is nothing [these archives] do not have!”

Archives Not Complete

Nonetheless, these government archives lack a great deal, most of which cannot be located elsewhere in China. First, China’s earlier archives have not survived well. Original government documents from before the Ming dynasty are rare, but many were copied in full or excerpted for historical writing, and new finds occasionally turn up, especially in ancient tomb burials and the dry desert climate of China’s west. Fire, from both the lanterns used to read the documents at night and the end-of-dynasty warfare, was an ever-present threat. To avoid conflagration, one ancient archive was built with a surrounding moat, and the dry desert climate of China’s west. Fire, from both the lanterns used to read the documents at night and the end-of-dynasty warfare, was an ever-present threat. To avoid conflagration, one ancient archive was built with a surrounding moat, and the dry desert climate of China’s west. 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of which (with a few exceptions, for military campaigns or other important subjects, for instance) were also filed chronologically. In addition to incoming reports and court responses recorded directly on the reports, there were record books of copied documents, some arranged according to type of document—a record of high-level deliberations, *Yifu dang*, for example—and others by subject (chiefly military campaigns). Lest this description create an aura of thorough and orderly competence, however, a reminder of the incipient chaos that prevailed in some quarters exists in the form of an eighteenth-century observation of the situation in one of the outer-court storage vaults: “One could reach one’s arm into the dust at random,” the observer wrote, “and pull out a treasure.”

**Finding-List Centers**

In recent years large finding-list centers (*Quanguo lishi dang'an ziliao mulu zhongxin*) have been developed for some holdings. Three, for instance, are concerned with what are known as “Historical Archives” (*lishi dang'an*), that is, those before 1949: Ming-Qing (1368–1912), the Republic (1912–1949), and the history of the Communist Revolution (up to only 1949). So far the Ming-Qing list seems to be the most advanced and when completed will provide a finding-list for both central and local government files. Uniform file categories and other consistent methods of archiving will assist this project. At present the Ming-Qing finding-list appears to be available only on-site in China. Some other finding-lists are available both online and on-site, with indexes of both open and closed files at fond, case, and document level. Some discrepancies have been found between the online and in-situ versions.

**Beatrice S. BARTLETT**

**Further Reading**


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