

How Mainland China's Archival Policy Challenges Western Policy

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Abstract

China's influence around the globe is growing significantly. This will likely occur through something called the Belt and Road Initiative, which will provide infrastructure and economy boosts to poorer neighboring countries as far as Africa (PBS NewsHour, 2019). While the prospect of providing free infrastructure and economy boosts sounds nice, it does mean those countries will be subjected to the Chinese State Government's regulations and cultural norms. More importantly, these norms will include the way that data is retained, monitored, and cycled through these countries. That threatens the objective and standards that we have introduced in our format of archival and professional work. Many of China's policies often contradict our own and most of the time it is often on purpose. To prove this, I will discuss three points of interest that often come up in comparisons between the United States' and China's standards of recordkeeping. The first point of interest is how each culture utilizes context of a collection of records differently. The second point is the way each culture views the profession of recordkeeping itself; each culture has its own image of what a recordkeeper is responsible for. The final point is the comparison between American-style archives with China's archives, because it is these two nations that are competing in the information race we have today. With these three points in mind, we can begin to talk about why mainland China's information gathering and retention policies are in direct competition with and constitute a potential threat to the United States' policy.

Context is defined by the Society of American Archivists as: "The organizational, functional, and operational circumstances surrounding materials' creation, receipt, storage, or use, and its relationship to other materials" (Pearce-Moses, 2005, p. 90). Context is what makes a collection viable or desirable and a record without context will not draw the attention of its viewers. One of the most valuable ways to understand the context and use of a given record can

be found on one of the most valuable possessions of human interaction: The Internet. The Internet is viewed differently in each country and I remember this being discussed as the internet grew in popularity. One side said that the Internet would generate more democracies and would tear down dictatorships because of the freely accessible information that the internet provides. That side that is shared in Jiang Ying's reading, *Cyber Nationalism in China: Challenging Western media portrayals of internet censorship in China*. They talk about the democratizing potential that can be used to rally against governments that are indeed lacking a democracy. At the same time, the Internet can be used as a monitoring tool to control the masses and tell them what they should and should not do (Jiang, Y. 2012). They did mention that there were successful uses of using the Internet to bring down corrupt regimes, specifically the corrupt Indonesian leader, Suharto (Jiang, Y. 2012). So, if a corrupt regime could be taken down by the Internet, why has China not fallen in the same way? That is because China took route two and used the platform as a monitoring technique.

According to Jiang, "Chinese cyberspace operates in the mixed climate of authoritarianism and libertarianism, with the Chinese government sustaining a difficult, twofold strategy: encouraging liberalism on the Internet but minimizing the political risks to the government by maintaining control. These two strategies appear contradictory, because increasingly unimpeded use of the Internet necessitates decentralization, while the minimization of the political risks reinforces centralization" (Jiang, Y. 2012). The Chinese State government seems to be able to illustrate the illusion of choice to its citizens with Internet that is regulated by state government censors. China wants its citizens to see their government and the worldview in a very specific way. That is why there is a strong need for a well-crafted form of censorship on the Internet and a controlling of context. At the same time, they also must make an environment

that generates a sense of control. Initially looking into this scenario, I had thought that Chinese civilians had wanted to be liberated from their government. However, after reading this passage, I was proven wrong. “So far, as I have argued, there is no evidence that the majority of Chinese people want, or are ready for, radical political changes, which are what a move to a democratic society would mean for China” (Jiang, Y. 2012). While this may be the case for now, I suspect that recent political uprisings in Hong Kong would indicate otherwise. A player known as “Blitzchung” was suspended from Hearthstone play because he voiced his support for the Liberation of the Hong Kong movement and created a rift between Blizzard Entertainment and its player base (Zialcita, 2019). If China were not so keen on its censorship module, then they would not have pressured Blizzard Entertainment to suspend the individual for his speech.

Speaking of the censorship model, we must address it before moving on to point two, because it is the model that alters the context in which information is sent to the populace in China. Although individuals have not made a radical effort to change their government (except for Hong Kong), the information channeled and given to them has altered their thinking patterns, so they can only operate with the context of the government of China. The censorship model has been cleverly crafted to show a sense of progression in human rights, but only to a level the state government allows. It is a well-crafted system that solely relies on the microblogging experience to help fuel the citizen’s patriotic desires. It is through this microblogging process that citizens are able to experience what previous generations of China have not been able to. “Although the Chinese government has constructed an extensive firewall to control the flow of information, that system has sufficient holes, so that the Chinese people have been able to experience at least some enjoyment from blogging” (Jiang, Y. 2012). China’s system of censorship is also cleverly crafted to allow participation in investigative journalism among citizens (Lorentzen, P, 2014). Instead of

censoring all information about corruption occurring in the government, the government chooses to expose information about lower level officials and places this in the spotlight instead. There are many reasons for doing this. The primary reason is to give the citizens a sense of duty to report individuals of a corrupt nature to the higher authority. Individuals who are being monitored and put on the spot have to ensure that their behavior is favorable to the populace that they are serving as well, because any misstep they commit affects their position in office. This model of pseudo-investigative journalism is a clear example of how context is used and has to manipulate a mass of individuals into thinking that their individual actions are helpful to their government. Information is released to the masses and is used as a method for dealing with corrupt individuals. This information is carefully gathered for citizens and used in a game the government has created for its citizens to focus on lower officials that the higher government wants its citizens to deal with, rather than real issues. This system only cracks the surface as to why individuals in China are not looking for a significant change in their government. Even with the context manipulated against them, there is a much bigger issue at heart here. “The government has in part created the environment for current political freedoms and is deliberately allowing limited degrees of personal autonomy as an indirect means of maintaining people’s loyalty to the state. The Chinese people, particularly the young generation, have been ready to accept this balance of freedom and power because they acknowledge that they have considerably more freedoms than earlier generations. That is why the Chinese government has not needed direct Internet censorship when Western media have criticized China’s human rights practices. Rather than agreeing, Chinese bloggers have perceived such criticism as an attack on China’s reputation” (Jiang, Y, 2012). The younger generation has been given more influence than its

predecessors, and that in turn has somewhat tricked them into accepting the context presented to them.

Much in the way that we enjoy Twitter and Facebook for our social media consumption, the citizens of China enjoy their social media through platforms such as Weibo, which has over 331 million users. While we can examine the culture of a group of individuals by looking at Twitter Posts or Facebook posts, the microblogging system in China unfortunately limited what can be seen on the platform, due to China's system for censoring material on the web (Lian, Z. 2015). It also does not help that very little effort or critical analysis has been offered by scholars of Chinese microblogging.

While there is no official state label given by the government, we do have an idea of what the archival culture is like and that can be based on Hofstede's five dimensions of Chinese national culture. "According to Hofstede, the five dimensions of Chinese national culture are high power distance, collectivism, weak uncertainty-avoidance, masculinity, and long-term orientation. Four of Hofstede's dimensions of Chinese culture were proposed in the 1970s; the fifth, long-term orientation, was added in the 1980s" (Lian, Z. 2015). These five dimensions provide an accurate layout of what to expect on the Chinese web.

First, in Lian's assessment of Hofstede's dimensions she states: "Power distance refers to the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (Lian, Z. 2015). This much is true as we stated earlier in another text that most of the population in China is okay with turning over its power to the government. We also did mention that the government has enabled them to participate in political journalism regarding officials of lesser power.

Next in line is the policy of collectivism, which is basically the idea of an entire group representing a culture or political idea rather than it being an individual agenda. China has a long history of collectivist ideology. Many of its dynasties have been run by collectivist policy despite having a central figure or emperor. Most of the time the emperor was being run either by the court eunuchs or the Literati that existed in the emperor's courts. The people of China often rely on their leaders to ensure their prosperity rather than make a significant effort to alter their prosperity. That would never fly in an archive here. We constantly involve our peers with our archives as it has proven to be very effective when we do. Every time I go to the Lambda Archives there is always feedback asked about the archive and participation from the citizens required in order to ensure its survival. Whether it is through donations or just informing other citizens about the archive, it is not a system that can survive on passive behavior. China's policy is stated as: "Moreover, influenced by this national culture, the relationship between archives and their patrons also is not equal, which make Chinese archives agency-centered rather than user-centered organizations. The leadership and staff of archives are not accustomed to interacting with the public directly or learning their needs and publishing information for them".

The next point in Hofstede's argument is that China suffers from a Weak Uncertainty-Avoidance. Basically, the population tolerates a chaotic environment where information can easily be misinterpreted, damaged, and/or mishandled. Their life cycle of records is unpredictable. They seem to have a retention policy just to ensure that information damaging the state government's reputation does not leak out. This is mentioned in Moss' brief analysis on Chinese archival practice in law. He states: "Documents of historical value must go into state-operated archives; none may be kept in private hands. Conversely, nothing that has not been explicitly appraised as archival and scheduled for retention is to go into an archive (Moss, W,

1991). This does fall in line with the SAA definition of the retention period which is defined as: “The length of time records should be kept in a certain location or form for administrative, legal, fiscal, historical, or other purposes” (Pearce-Moses, 2005, p. 346). When it comes to the long-term vs. the short-term storage of information and record management, the economic reform in China always leans towards the short-term plan (Lian, Z, 2015). One of the bigger problems when it comes to China’s recordkeeping policies is that despite their desire to obtain archival discipline and knowledge, they do lack experience in their field. “A common weakness of China’s higher education programs is an emphasis on imparting theoretical knowledge while ignoring the hands-on training of practical skills. In-class teaching takes up much of the time, leaving little time and opportunity for students to obtain knowledge through practicum or internship” (Qiuhui, X, Xiaojuan, Z, and Ju, Q, 2011). One of the required courses in this master’s program requires us to work with an internship and constantly reminds us to get internship experience. You could make the argument that every field of study in the United States begs its students to get some level of internships for their given field. I know this because throughout the whole year I have been looking for work in a museum with my undergraduate degree in history; the job requirements always include at least two years of museum experience or using a software that I have never heard of. China also has this issue with its students as they state: “Some courses, like archives management and archival documents publication, require students to undergo systematic practical training to equip them with hands-on experience in basic archival procedures (arrangement, classification, appraisal, cataloging, description, preservation, access, and advocacy). However, most in-class practica fail to achieve the desired goals because they lack effective guidance, enough numbers of hours, suitable work sites, and necessary preparation. Internships are usually in an organization away from school, such as archives of

governments, businesses, or universities” (Qiuhui, X, Xiaojuan, Z, and Ju, Q, 2011). It’s not a good sign when your archivists have little to no archivist hands-on experience and I imagine it could also be demotivating. Keep in mind that these individuals are not left in charge of smaller or individual archives. Often the archives managed are larger archives held by the state government. They may not prioritize archival practices as stated above and usually focus on ensuring that the information that is publicly listed on forums is not harmful to the state government. Even though microblogging is quite popular among Chinese citizens, the government of China does not have a specific interest in or a budget to produce a microblog for its archives not only for security reasons, but also because they do not see the long-term benefits.

There is one more point in Hofstede’s analysis to address, and that is the masculinity vs feminine model. Before we discuss this, it should be noted that China is a patriarchal society with ideologies such as Confucianism which preach gender roles. According to China’s current model of feminine values, they are stated as: “modest, conservative, and less ambitious” (Lian, Z, 2015). The record keeper in China is considered a feminine profession and that can have negative implications on the profession itself. It’s a good assumption to make that if a profession is labeled feminine that it is often not prioritized in the Chinese government if not ignored entirely. Microblogging is often used by the citizens of China to promote themselves or the organizations that they are affiliated with. Microblogging with archives, however, works entirely differently. Many of the archives that are microblogged often come with significant complications. For a start, administration does not want to go through the effort of maintaining a microblog. There is a significant amount of risks involved when managing a microblog that administration does not have the patience for. Since China is trying to keep a tight lid on certain archival material, making a microblog about certain archives can create a security risk for the

information that is covered. Social media in China may be regulated, but like any social media platform, it can leak out to state news platforms and journalists from other countries. They know this to be true as they have stated: “Furthermore, in the archives of this culture, the leadership and staff are used to dodging risks, including the possible risks brought about by the disclosure of archives’ holdings on microblogging platforms. After all, third-party companies operate the current microblogging platforms; once information is published on these platforms, it is difficult for archives to control it” (Lian, Z, 2015). It is through these third parties that we have the information we know about China’s microblogging activities. We have additional information about this subject because they also stated: “Short-term orientation results in archives microblogs that are “displays” containing scant information, brief introductory posts, or news about the archives work that is not classified or sensitive. Such microblogs might even contain information unrelated to archives. These archives microblogs do not attract the public’s attention, so their followers are very few” (Lian, Z, 2015). It can be hard to want to maintain a microblog that may contain irrelevant and vague information and serve only private viewing. Collectivist culture can also make this hard for other reasons. “Because no full-time staff are dedicated to overseeing archives microblogs in Chinese archives, staff in charge of archives microblogs must also fulfill their other job duties. Spending extra time or energy microblogging inevitably adds to their workloads, and, because in the collectivist organization performance is reason for neither dismissal nor promotion, staff may be reluctant to spend extra time and effort” (Lian, Z, 2015). While I am unsure of what other duties they are referring to, not wanting to do the extra work in a power economy like China’s is understandable. In a fast-paced working environment, there is little to no motivation to do any extra work if there is no incentive for it. There is also very little participation in these microblogs when it comes to the archives themselves and that alone makes

the investment a dead one. We discussed earlier that citizens do participate in government affairs, specifically journalism on corrupt lower ranking individuals, but there is sparse participation in microblogs affiliated with archives.

Before we discuss the final point of our paper, we should analyze a country's archival work that is in the same continent: South Korea. Suffice it to say, the archival process did not go well after WWII. There was a drastic conflict that took place between 1948 to 1993. Even though the citizens themselves had just freed themselves from Japanese colonial rule and were asking for a democracy, they fell into an authoritarian military regime instead (Lee, K, 2006). This resulted in a cataclysmic change of pace as is stated by Lee: "The retrogressive military regimes severely damaged freedom of the press and prevented the growth of a democratic culture of discussion and criticism of the wrongful acts of the authorities. Under such political conditions, the systematic management of presidential records for public access can hardly be expected. During these years, presidential records were managed only by ordinance, as an executive guide to carrying out office work, not by a comprehensive archival law" (Lee, K, 2006). This was not really a positive re-start for a democratic nation in developing its archival practice. Fortunately, they were able to get around that roadblock and they fixed their issue. "Kim Young-sam, a presidential candidate in 1992, included legislation legalizing information disclosure in his election platform. It was not until 1996, however, three years after Kim was inaugurated as the first civilian president, that the ADIPA was enacted" (Lee, K, 2006). The Act on Disclosure of Information by Public Agencies made it possible for archival work to be accessible to the citizens of the Republic of Korea. The most essential element that significantly boosted South Korea's ability to democratize itself was ironically the element that China has been using to suppress the masses: The Internet. "Current president Roh Moo-hyun is the first leader to be fully in tune with

the Internet, and he is “the world’s first president to be elected with the broad support of the online generation. To a degree, the Web is already shaping the national policy of President Roh. His image is one of being technically flexible and open to the Internet, and he was mainly elected by the younger generation, who have tasted democracy and speak out about what they feel” (Lee, K, 2006). We mentioned earlier that the Internet has different opportunities for dealing with the subject of democratization. China uses the technology to subjugate and monitor its citizens through a well-crafted platform. South Korea on the other hand had a youthful generation yearning for democracy and already knew what they wanted for their country’s future. It did not come without struggle. Many times, during the archival reform and democratic reformation of South Korea, there was legislation that had passed that made archival work incredibly difficult because of security concerns that worried the federal government. (Lee, K, 2006). There were moments that, even with the regime being downplayed and the citizens having a voice, other forces in play manipulated the flow of archival records. “The old authoritarian regimes that functioned by reliance on such means of control as the National Security Law and “crony capitalism” (the Chaebol system of family-run monopolies) had no interest in “public records.” Under these miserable conditions, it is quite natural that the repressive regime removed documents when a president retired from office and even destroyed them for its own political ends” (Lee, K, 2006). Oligarchies have a history of interfering with the democratic process. When a rich family decides politics over the overwhelming lower-class masses, it does so with a response lacking subtlety. Whether it be a regime that wants to control its citizens or an oligarchy’s attempt to take over, citizen participation and outcry force the government and the archives to become one of participatory involvement. This is an example of a people who have

pushed their agenda for the improvement of not only their country, but their standards in proper recordkeeping practices.

We now compare the United State's level of archival work with the Chinese standards. China has a much longer history than United States and has many years of development under its belt versus the much younger United States. With that in mind, you would think that China had the upper hand in its knowledge of archival practice and history, right? Unfortunately, that is not the case and the reason is quite simple. "Although China has a long history, most records kept in Chinese archives were created in the twentieth century. Ancient records and archives occupy only a small part of our archival holdings. This resulted mainly from disruptions stemming from changes in feudal dynasties, civil wars, natural calamities, and foreign invasions. When Emperor Qin (221-207 B.C.) first unified China, he killed more than 1,000 intellectuals and burned all manuscripts and books from opponents to his rule in a bid to achieve unified thinking" (Yuqing, X, 1991). Spoliation is a reoccurring theme in Chinese history and because of this, information can be significantly hard to retain. When progress was made in the Chinese archives, it occurred as recently as the 20th century. The earliest information that was officially retained included records from "Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368-1911). The Second Historical Archives of China, which hold mainly the records of the Koumingtang Government (1911-49), were created in 1925 and 1951 respectively" (Yuqing, X, 1991). One of my favorite pieces of historical fiction, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, comes from the Ming Dynasty period and was recovered. In the case of the United States, there were many factors that protected the records of the United States early on. Firstly, there was not a significant government change that took place every century and government progressed significantly quicker allowing policies such as recordkeeping to be uninterrupted. Secondly, with the establishment of government documents

such as the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and The Declaration of Independence, certain rights were available to citizens that allowed them the privilege to set up organizations of their own (Xuqing, X, 1991). There are many archival organizations in the United States that represent archival practices and theories. We have the Society of American Archivists, National Archives and Records Administration, American Archivist, and many more.

Despite all these organizations and representatives in the United States, we do suffer from a massive problem in local archival maintenance. Although there are significant national archives in the United States, local archives suffer because of a lack of budgeting and acknowledgement (Xuqing, X, 1991). In the case of China's archival budgeting, their system is more centralized and many of the districts in China often end up reporting to the State Archives Bureau. Essentially, all districts in China that have an archive are automatically set up to report to the SAB and the records acquired are all supposed to be sent to the State government for examination and security purposes. Record acquisition between both cultures are different too. China's record acquisition focuses merely on scientific and technical records since their government is looking for ways to improve its economy and its security. Personal records are not a priority for their administration if they do not benefit their businesses which often are in league with their government (Xuqing, X, 1991). The United States, on the other hand, has issues with collecting records other than personal or university-based records (Xuqing, X, 1991). The issue stems from the fact that private companies in the United States do not often keep records of scientific or technical records unless necessary. In addition to this neglect, the records are often not publicly accessible and that can be detrimental because they cannot be recovered if the records missing turn out to be necessary records. Local record collection is handled much better in China because of its centralized system; individuals working in local record buildings must

report their records to the SAB for security purposes and retention policies. In contrast, the United States suffers in this field because there is little to no federal oversight of proper record collection or retention regarding local districts. Even when there is an effort made, politics in certain districts can often intervene with survey data or census-related work, and many local archive repositories are funded by a university or by donations from locals in the area.

Another example of strong support for national archives is noted during a tour of China's archival development. William W. Moss had this to say about the microfilming station in Guangdong Provincial Archives: "In the microfilming area we were shown the most modern and most sophisticated piece of equipment of the whole tour, a Kodak microfilm camera processor-reader-printer system with the capability of computerized identification numerals for each frame. The equipment was obtained from the Kodak outlet in Hong Kong, and we were told that the Guangdong archives has a service that a member contract with Kodak and of the archives staff had gone to Hong Kong for training in the operation and maintenance of the equipment in order for the archives to have an in-house capability for troubleshooting the machinery" (Moss, W, 1982). It seems like China had begun gaining the upper hand in its development of recordkeeping potential over the United States in many ways. They focused their record-gathering abilities on records that helped improve their economy, they advanced their technology of elements that helped improve their quality of records, they made mandates that made recordkeeping in the local districts a requirement, and they successfully managed to have staff available even when the staff was either over- or underqualified. With all these points made, why should we be concerned about China's recent archival practices and policies?

The most important element right now in the global market is the use of the Internet. We established early on that China has a giant consumer market and most of that market is on the

web. China has had moments where it has successfully used the web to control its citizens, but it also has had moments where it failed. “For instance, during the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003, the government-controlled media organizations could only tamely follow the orders issued by the government, but the proliferation of the Internet and other new high-tech information sources provided the public with new channels of communication. The leaking of information via the Internet and great social anxiety caused by rampant rumors forced the central government to readjust its strategy in handling the SARS crisis” (Zhao, J, 2009). Inevitably, global crises are increasing and China’s attempt to control and censor its citizens will begin to fade. China may have a superior record-keeping system which enables its ability to manipulate the context to follow the agenda of the State government media, but that tactic can only last for so long. Citizens may be content with their government, but many leaks like this one can change their minds quickly. Their collectivist method of recordkeeping only works if the government can maintain its current economic pace. If the economy were to suffer and the government stability eroded, the whole model of Chinese recordkeeping would fall apart. That is what economists and historians have predicted for many years now and China still prevails despite what critics have stated about it. China’s archival policy is a threat to America’s standards of archival practice and theory, because despite its lack of educated individuals working the system, despite its foundations of manipulated context that benefit the state government, the recordkeeping system of China serves China’s purposes. The system has helped China progress on many levels, most importantly the Belt and Road Initiative, designed to spread influence and control across the globe at alarming rate. Given China’s size and population, this does pose a threat to the rest of the world and we should be paying close attention.

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