

Using Archives for Social and Cultural History*

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For several reasons I consider myself not to be the most suitable choice to deliver a keynote speech at the celebration of the 60th anniversary of Academia Historica, Taiwan's leading archive. First, I am not a historian who works primarily in archives, or at least not archives in the narrow sense. Like my teachers and colleagues in the so-called Historical Anthropology or Hua'nán school, I spend most of my time not in the archives but in the countryside, where I collect sources – such as genealogies, stone inscriptions, land deeds, oral legends and folklore – from ordinary people. So the main “archive” that I use for my research does not exist in any library or physical building that I can go to visit. In fact, the archive I use is literally created by doing fieldwork. Using this type of archive for historical research involves many questions and challenges that are different from a formal archives like the Academia Historica.¹

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¹ I discuss these questions in more detail in “Fieldwork for Ming Historians,” in Thomas DuBois and Jan Kiely, eds, *Out of the Archive: A Reader on Fieldwork Research on Modern Chinese History* (forthcoming).

Second, while I previously wrote a book, *Cold War Island*, that relied heavily on archives from Taiwan, including the Academia Historica, for the last ten years I have been working in the field of Ming history on the mainland and have not pursued new research related to Taiwan. The issues around using archives in the PRC are quite different from the issues around archives in Taiwan. In the PRC the challenges of using archives are growing, and archives are becoming less and less accessible; in Taiwan in general the situation is the opposite. Moreover, some important questions about archives in Taiwan, for example the role of state archives in the search for transitional justice, are simply not relevant on the mainland today.

Nonetheless, I could not decline the invitation of my old friend Director Wu Micha. In this short essay I describe two specific experiences I have had working with very different archives, and draw on these experiences to make some broader reflections on the use of archives for social and cultural history research. I will close with some comments on the significance of archives in Taiwan today.

A Case from the Ming Archives

My first case can be considered a very traditional example of a social historian using the archives to learn about life in a different time. Most people think of state archives as the place to find records about state leaders and government policies. In Taiwan, we naturally think of the Daxi archive comprising documents related to Chiang Kai-shek. As many historians now recognize, we can also use archives to write the history of ordinary people and everyday lives, that is, as a source for social history rather than political history and biography. This is the type of history I sought to write on the basis of one document from the Ming dynasty archives.

The specific document I explore here is known as a Guard Appointment

Register (衛選簿). These registers make up a substantial part of the total surviving Ming archive.² Only a tiny fragment of the Ming archive survives, and most of it has been published. (So my story is not really about archival research in the strictest sense, because it did not happen in an actual archive but rather uses a published archive).

As David Robinson has recently argued, military history has been neglected in Ming studies, though the situation is improving. Only if we study military institutions can we fully understand the true extent of the power of the Ming state. Studying the history of military institutions can help us put Ming history in a “broader, comparative, global light”.³ So although Guard Appointment Registers were produced by the Ming military institution, their historical significance goes well beyond the narrow field of military history.

Guard Appointment Registers are a typical archival source. They are a kind of administrative document, that was compiled and maintained in order to help the state operate smoothly. We can learn about the formal characteristics of this type of document in the *Ming Administrative Statutes* (大明會典) as well as in more specialized publications of regulations and precedents for the military, such as the multiple editions of military ordinances. The basic function of this genre of document is straightforward. Officer positions in the Ming were hereditary. The Guard Appointment Register was used to keep track of the households that were entitled to officer posts. A typical Guard Appointment Register consists of a series of entries for individual hereditary officer households. Each entry records how the founding ancestor came to be registered as a military household (軍戶);

² For a discussion, see Liang Zhisheng 梁志勝, *Mingdai weisuo wuguan zhidu yanjiu* 明代衛所武官世襲制度研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2012), pp. 13-30. Besides the registers that survive in the archive, some individual personnel registers have been copied into lineage genealogies and may be located there. But these sources obviously pose additional challenges of verification.

³ See David Robinson, “Why Military Institutions Matter for Ming History,” *Journal of Chinese History*, 1:2 (July 2017), pp. 297-327.

how he or his descendant became entitled to a hereditary officer position and in which garrison they held the position; which members of the family subsequently, held the position, and the process by which they were selected. We can think of each individual entry in a Guard Appointment Register as a kind of personnel file. Several thousand such files survive.

Among the surviving registers there is an entry for the Pu family of Fujian (Fig. 1). Pu Manu, a native of Jinjiang county, was first conscripted in 1383 and assigned to nearby Quanzhou. In 1388 he was transferred up the coast to Fuzhou. Later, in the early fifteenth century, he served on Zheng He's maritime voyages. When he returned he was promoted to the rank of company commander. The promotion was hereditary; with some conditions every subsequent member of the household who served in the military also held the rank of commander.

Pu Manu retired from active duty in 1425. By that time his eldest son had already died. So he was replaced by his grandson. The register continues for five more generations, through another of Manu's grandsons, who replaced his deceased brother and served for almost fifty years, through that man's own sons and grandsons, to the seventh-generation member of the lineage who took up his position in 1605. The updating of the records only lapsed after that time, in the waning decades of the Ming. The register in the archive is thus also a kind of genealogy, but one that records not the family line but rather the family's history of service to the Ming state.⁴

Using this source, what kind of history can we write? The historian reading this document can answer this question in several ways. The most obvious option is simply to extract the data – as I have just done – and tell the story of this one, not very important family. But it is not clear what the significance of a history based on this approach would be – is the story of the Pu family representative of

⁴ Michael Szonyi, *The Art of Being Governed: Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 31.

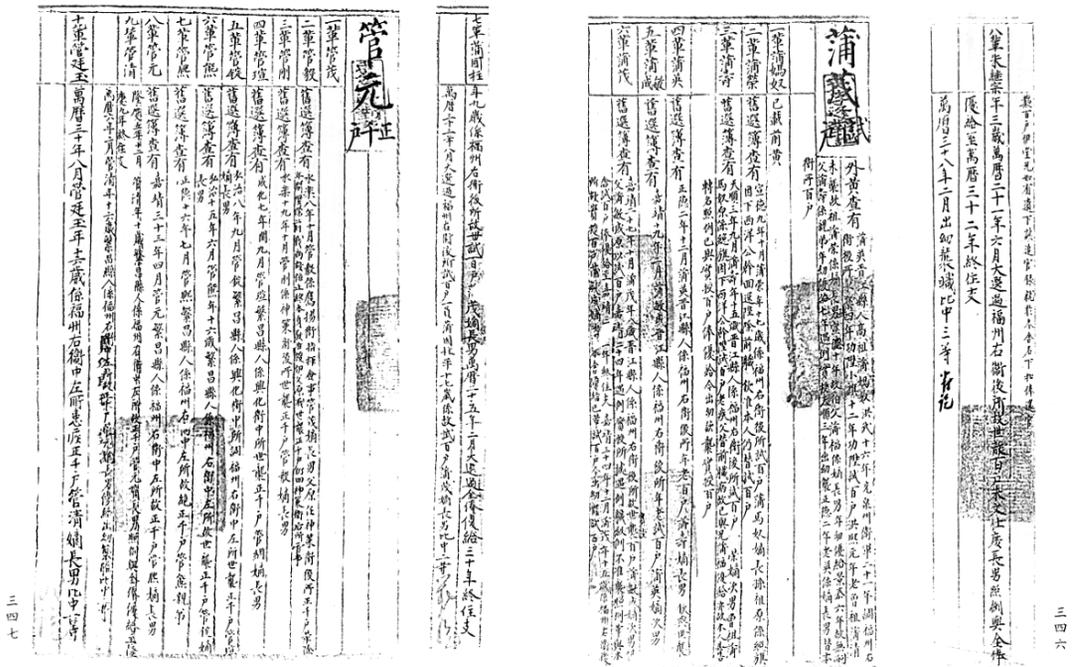


Fig. 1 Pu Manu's Archival Record

Source: Courtesy of the First Historical Archives, Beijing

many other families? Is it iconic of broader themes in Ming history? A second traditional approach would be to use the data to explore the Ming hereditary officer appointment system in theory and practice. For example, one could compare the administrative rules in the *Ming Administrative Statutes* with the actual facts of the family's service. Today we can take this approach a step further, by using new technology to digitize the data, and enter it into a database of all surviving Registers. This would allow us to compare theory and practice in a new and more persuasive way.

A fourth approach would be to compare the story as found in the Register to other documents, such as genealogies and oral history from the region. This was what I have tried to do with this document. This method is a kind of triangulation

approach to historical sources.

Unfortunately I could not find Pu Manu's genealogy. But I was able to collect the genealogies of many similar families. One interesting finding is that Pu's transfer in 1388 was not particular to the Pu family, but was part of a much larger policy of troop rotation, whereby troops assigned to one coastal region near their ancestral home were transferred to a more distant region. This policy is also recorded in the *Veritable Records of the Ming*: "The emperor ordered military forces stationed in the coastal regions of Zhejiang and Fujian be rotated. Previously the people living on the coast of Fujian and Zhejiang were much harmed by pirates. Commander Fang Qian suggested that walled [forts] be built and military guards be established along the coast, and that civilian [households] with many able-bodied males be conscripted to serve as soldiers to defend against them. But when the local people become soldiers they themselves cause harm in the villages. This led to calls to the court to order them to be transferred elsewhere. But since this would involve long distances and much hardship, each Military Command presently only rotates coastal garrisons that are nearby with one another."⁵ The policy seems to have been a response to problems that arose because in the early Ming troops in Fujian were stationed very close to their native villages. Many oral history and folklore accounts and genealogical records also describe the implementation of this policy. For example, many lineages of former soldiers and officers in the region maintain legends about how their ancestor was "transferred" to the place they currently live. The consistency between the oral tradition, the genealogical record, and the official archive is powerful confirmation that both genealogical records and oral history, at least on certain issues, should not be simply dismissed as fanciful. Understanding the policy of troop transfer helps us better understand how and why military households maintained ties to

⁵ *Ming Taizu shilu* 明太祖實錄 (Veritable Records of Emperor Ming Taizu) 27/6/26 (1394), in *Ming shilu* 明實錄, 233:3404-5, Academia Sinica, *Hanji quanwen ziliaoku* 漢籍全文資料庫 (Scripta Sinica database).

their family in their original place of registration.

In my recent book *The Art of Being Governed: Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China* I try to show how state policy – in this case the policy on recruitment of officers – affected the lives of ordinary people. For more than two centuries we know that members of this family were willing to accept the requirements of military service in exchange for certain benefits, including the possibility for one member of the family to earn an officer's salary. The family had to have been able to maintain internal coherence in order to be able to manage its responsibility to provide an officer. In other words, they had to organize themselves. Using the genealogies, we can better understand how families and lineages developed strategies to deal with this obligation.

We know that millions of soldiers deserted from the Ming army, and that this weakened the entire military guard system. As a result, the Ming was forced to hire large numbers of mercenaries, and the resulting fiscal pressures had something to do with the fall of the dynasty. The archive records the facts of desertion but does not tell us much about the motivations of the deserters. But we can make a guess on the basis of the Pu Manu archive. The Pu family was clearly willing to accept the cost-benefit constraints of continued military service. The advantages either to the individual officers or to the larger lineage out-weighed the disadvantages. Deserters must therefore have been people who were unwilling to accept the same set of cost-benefit constraints. We can thus use this very small case as a means to explore big historical questions, by placing the text in juxtaposition with other texts. In other words, we can triangulate it with other historical evidence in order to realize its potential significance.

A Case from Jinmen

The use of the Pu Manu archive as described above is an example of a straightforward and simple approach to using the archives for social history. Can we apply the same approach that I used to work with the Ming archive to study a contemporary document found in the Academia Historica? To answer this question, I turn now to my second case.

About ten years ago, when I was doing the research that led to *Cold War Island*, I spent some time in the Academia Historica. There I found many documents related to plague-prevention measures on Jinmen. Many documents discuss measures to eliminate rats on the island. In order to reduce the rat

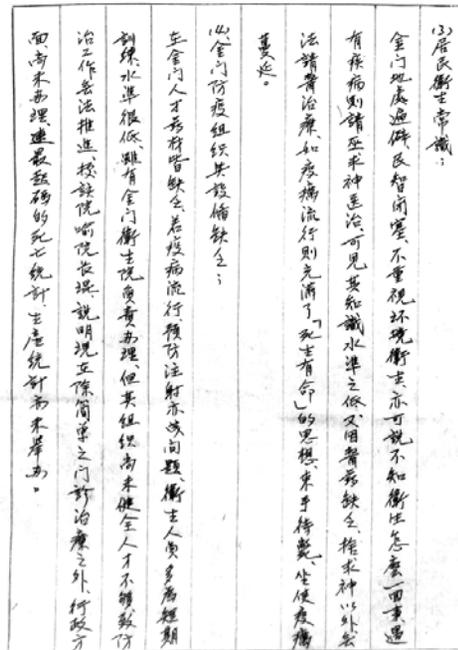


Fig. 2 Plague-prevention Measures on Jinmen, Fujian (March 1951)

Source: Records of Department of Health, Executive Yuan, Academia Historica, Taipei

population, beginning in the early 1950s and continuing for several decades, the authorities on Jinmen required civilian households to kill and turn in rats. Civilians needed to meet a rat-killing quota that eventually was set at one rat per person per month. Compliance was ensured by requiring households to hand in the tails of the dead rats. In the second quarter of 1954 civilians turned in over twenty-four thousand tails.⁶

The scholar working with these documents faces a similar set of choices about method to the scholar working on the Ming archive. She can first extract the specific data – this would yield a table summarizing the number of rats killed on Jinmen. Most people would say this was a very dull or trivial finding. Even if she collected all of the data for the entire period of the campaign and produced a table showing how the numbers changed over time, this would still not be very interesting. Third, she could extract from the archive the specific rules of the policy and compare this with the scientific knowledge about plague prevention. This might be more interesting, as a contribution to the history of medicine in Taiwan.

Just as I used the Ming archival document together with other documents, both national and local, the Academia Historica documents were most effective not in isolation but when used in relation to other sources, including published oral history and my own interviews. In this case, there was a second archive that I could add to the triangulation. Just at the time I was doing my research, my friend Jiang Bowei discovered a treasure trove of surviving village archives in the Lieyu township office.

Scholars often romanticize their experience in the archives; this is hard for me to avoid when discussing these local archives. These archives were stuffed

⁶ “Inspection Report of Plague-prevention Measures on Jinmen” (1943), Plague-prevention Measures on Jinmen, Records of Department of Health, Executive Yuan, Col. No.: 028000001979A, Academia Historica, Taipei.

into dozens of burlap and plastic sacks. In a dusty room in the township office Jiang Bowei, his students, and I had to carefully sort and catalogue the archives before they could be used. Because this was not a quiet library with other patrons working we could shout out to one another whenever we made an exciting discovery. Besides written texts, we found other artifacts as well - wooden hand grenades that were used for militia training, and pictures of PLA Air Force planes so that local children could identify the planes that flew over-head. Every scholar must learn about the classificatory structures and institutional histories of the collections with which they work; in this case we did so not by reading a printed catalog, but by pulling files out of the sacks into which they had been stuffed and trying to understand their relationship with other files and other sacks. This is a very satisfying memory.

The Lieyu archives show in meticulous detail how anti-rat campaigns were carried out. Whereas the national level archives simply say that there was a campaign, the local archive provides ledgers recording dates, names of households, and the number of rat tails submitted. To implement the policy, grassroots officials had to set up processes of mobilization, monitoring, documentation and punishment. The Lieyu archives include the complaints of village heads who were being asked to implement a policy that made no sense to them or to their fellow villagers, and minutes of mass meetings where officials tried to promote the campaign.

Both the Lieyu archive and oral history told me that the campaign did not work entirely as expected. As in any authoritarian society, the people of Jinmen used all manner of everyday resistance, what James Scott has called the “weapons of the weak”, to minimize the disruption caused by militarization and to maximize their own interests. To meet their quota of rat tails, they cut single tails into two; borrowed tails from their neighbors; treated a kind of local reed with chemicals to make a “false rat tail”. More concerned about being able to meet the quota than about eradicating rats, they practiced “catch and release” - capturing rats, cutting

off their tail, then letting them go - or killed only male rats and released females.

So through a process of triangulation of high-level archives, low-level archives, and oral history and popular memory, I was able to demonstrate that national level policies were carefully implemented at the local level, that this affected people's lives, but that they found ways to deal with the demands of the state. Even more interesting was that their methods sometimes actually undermined the very purposes of the campaign. If one could only avoid punishment by turning in rat's tails, then the last thing anyone wanted was for there to be no rats. So the people of Jinmen found ways to meet their formal requirements while ensuring that the population of rats did not disappear. This was the main argument I made concerning the anti-rat campaign in *Cold War Island*.

Reviewing these materials today, from a distance of a decade, I feel that these archives now contain much greater potential than I realized at the time. On reading recent work about archives such as Nicholas Dirks' *Autobiography of an Archive* and Anne Laura Stoler's *Along the Archival Grain*, I have been thinking more about how the archive itself can be the object of our study. The documents on the anti-rat campaign can be used not just to tell the background to a story about everyday life and ordinary people. They can also be used to tell a story of changing theory and practice of government. This involves not just extracting the content of the archival document but thinking about what is in the archive and what is not, what is mentioned in the documents and what is silent.

In the early years after 1950, Jinmen's military significance to the defense of the ROC was very great. Plague and other diseases threatened the military presence on the island, so it made good sense to use various technical measures to control plague. The early documents treat plague as a problem demanding technical solutions: inoculation, quarantine, and eradication of carriers. Other documents focus on civilian backwardness and poor hygiene. As one inspection team put it, "Jinmen's location is remote, and the people's minds are closed. They

don't emphasize hygiene; one could say they don't even know what hygiene is. When there is sickness, they hire sorcerers and ask the gods to cure them. This illustrates their low level of knowledge.”⁷

Over time, the technical problem of plague prevention was converted into a matter of civilian mobilization. Now the issue of controlling rats became the subject of a campaign. The campaign was important not just because eradicating rats was important. It was also important as part of the project of civilizing the local population. It was also important for its demonstration effect – as a form of propaganda showing the determination of the people of Jinmen in the face of military threat (In *Cold War Island*, I discuss how the targets of this propaganda included both the people on the mainland, the people on Taiwan, and the ROC's Cold War allies, especially the United States). It is a story about the state penetrating more deeply into the lives of its citizens, and for reasons that have little to do with improving their lives and more to do with a dream of modernity and the pressure of international geopolitics. This is in, other words, a story of how a militarized modernity is conceived, called into being, and then implemented.

I also noted in *Cold War Island* how the regime on the mainland, despite being ideologically opposed to the Republic of China, launched very similar campaigns. This research approach makes the parallels across the Taiwan Strait much easier to understand – despite their ideological differences, both ruling regimes were regimes committed to similar goals of mobilization and modernization. Despite all their differences, the logic of the campaign was similar in both regimes.

⁷ “Plague-prevention Measures on Jinmen, Fujian” (March 1951), Plague-prevention Measures on Jinmen, Records of Department of Health, Executive Yuan, Col. No.: 028000001974A, Academia Historica, Taipei.

Conclusions

In my first example, I explored the archive to try to find out what really happened. The results in and of themselves were not so interesting – a man was conscripted and later promoted, and his sons succeeded him. Only by triangulating the information in the archive with other historical materials did this story become meaningful and significant. It offered an entry into how state policies shaped everyday human experience. In the second example, I began with the same process – triangulating the material in the archive with other historical materials – and produced a similar result. The second case proved richer – it allowed us to explore issues such as the weapons of the weak and the historical issues around memory. But the true richness of the archive was revealed once I stopped looking at the archive as the answer and began to look at it as the question.

Rather than asking what happened in Jinmen during the period of martial law, we could shift the question to ask why the archive records certain things in certain language. What sorts of things were not recorded and why were they not recorded? What are the silences in the archival record? Ann Laura Stoler has written that there are three categories of information that are not spoken in the archives: common sense – what does not need to be recorded because everyone knows it; what cannot yet be articulated, and what must not be said.⁸ Another way of asking my question is: What constituted common-sense in Cold War and martial law era Jinmen? How did it change over time? What visions of the future, utopian or fearsome, structured the assembly of the archive?

By exploring these questions, we can begin to see a cultural history of the changing state. Technical solutions give way to problems of modernization, and these in turn give way to problems of propaganda and mobilization. Local

⁸ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 3.

solutions become less important than symbolic solutions. National security concerns penetrate deeper and deeper into governance, so that even the tail of a rat became militarized, and failing to catch rats, or failing to show significant enthusiasm for catching rats, could become a sign of being a pro-Communist traitor. If we turn our gaze from the content of the archive to the form, if we make the archive itself the subject of ethnographic analysis, a new kind of history becomes possible.

What exactly do I mean by making the archive the subject of ethnographic analysis? Here I would like to make a distinction between accessibility, transparency, and ethnography. Accessibility can refer on the one hand to the ease with which we can use an archives – Is the catalogue easy to use?; When is the archive open?; Can people regardless of their age or physical mobility get to the archives?; Are there suitable facilities to read or copy documents?; Is the staff helpful?, and so on. These are practical questions, though political considerations may lie behind them. Accessibility on the other hand also can also refer to more directly political questions: Who may access the archive?; Are all documents allowed to be viewed by everyone?; What restrictions limit access to the archive?

Unlike accessibility, which raises questions that are primarily practical and political, transparency raises questions that are scholarly and intellectual: What are the principles that produced the policies recorded in the documents, that produced the documents themselves, that led to their being archived? Why is the archive arranged the way it is? How did this change over time? Answering these questions is at the very heart of the scholar's encounter with the archive. For more than seventy years, my colleagues and I have led incoming PhD students in Chinese history in exploring such questions in a graduate seminar popularly known as “Qing Docs”. This course was first developed by John King Fairbank, then carried on by Philip Kuhn, Mark Elliott, and now by me.⁹ In this course, we teach students about

⁹ The history of the course is described in Tian Feiyu 田霏宇, “Yimen lishike de lishi” 一門歷史

the different types of documents in the Qing archive; how these documents relate to one another, and how to read them effectively. So this course is really about making the archive transparent.

But increasingly, we also attempt to train students in a certain ethnographic analysis of the archive. Stoler provides a clear introduction to the intellectual origins of “ethnography in the archival mode.” Carlo Ginzburg and Natalie Zemon Davis are two of the best-known practitioners of this approach. Their well-known work seeks to uncover how particular literary forms are deployed to support or argue against certain claims, and the underlying cultural histories that explain the selection of such forms.¹⁰ Another related intellectual approach is “reading against the grain”, recognizing that archival documents are biased sources and trying to uncover the workings of bias. But both “ethnography in the archival mode” and “reading against the grain” still treat the scholarship in the archives as an exercise in extraction of content, rather than analysis of form. An ethnography *of* the archive, rather than an ethnography *in* the archive, explores the relations of power and knowledge that shape how the archive itself is created, organized, rearranged, and preserved.¹¹ It places a focus on the politics of archival collection, preservation and curation. This means going beyond the goal of simply making the archive transparent, and moving in a new direction. For example, the structuring of the archive may tell us less about the world as it is actually is, and more about a future world that is imagined or feared by the various individuals and organizations that have produced the archive. The approach suggests that the very goal of making the archive transparent may actually be misleading, counter-productive, or impossible.

課的歷史 (History of a History Course), *Dushu* 讀書 (Reading), No. 9 of 2005 (Sept. 2005), pp. 111-115.

¹⁰ Carlo Ginzburg, John and Anne Tedeschi trans., *The Cheese and the Worms: the Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980); Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

¹¹ Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, pp. 44-45.

This ethnographic turn in archival studies is a relatively recent development. Questions of transparency and accessibility are perennial and universal. Scholars and bureaucrats and politicians have a different stake in the archives. For scholars, the accessibility issue is easy. All scholars want more accessibility. But to simply say that accessibility should never be limited by political considerations or security considerations is to be escapist and naive. This is true in every country. In my opinion, the issue of accessibility of archives for Taiwan has a distinctive element. I remember very well that the last time I used the Academia Historica, I had just come from the National Archives of my own country, Canada. There I had hoped to use some immigration records from the 1930s. For some long-forgotten reason, these were labeled as secret some time long ago. I spent a long frustrating day at the Canadian archives, filling out “freedom of information” forms. The real problem was not security – these files had never been about national secrets and the people involved were long dead - but bureaucratism. The staff had no real incentive to give me a good impression of the archives. Then I flew to Taiwan, took a taxi to Xindian, and within a few minutes was looking at material from the 1940s. It was an amazing contrast.

In 2016, Taiwan was ranked at the top of 121 countries in the Global Open Data Index – it tied with Australia as the country with the most open data in the world. The open.gov policy has led the Academia Historica to digitize and make available online vast quantities - numbering in the tens of millions of pages – of valuable historical records. Taiwan’s openness is wonderful propaganda for Taiwan, for the healthy open democratic society that the people of Taiwan have created. In my opinion, the openness of Taiwan’s society, culture, and politics is something to be celebrated, even as it applies to dusty archives. This makes the accessibility debate in Taiwan especially significant. There may be political or security reasons to limit access to your archives. But there are also very strong political reasons to continue to make your archives the most accessible in the world.