

An analysis of the openness of historical archives: based on the 'Rekidai Hōan'

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Abstract

The significance of archives in historical research cannot be overstated. As primary sources, they offer invaluable insights into the past, shaping our collective memory and understanding of the world. Over time, many historical archives have been gradually opened and declassified, granting researchers access to historical truths that were previously inaccessible during the events themselves. However, while archives appear to be increasingly open and transparent, their accessibility remains a complex issue. With advancements in digital technology, archival materials can now be accessed remotely, seemingly providing unrestricted availability. Yet is the archive truly and fully open? Despite expanded access, archives do not necessarily offer a complete reconstruction of history, even for scholars. The historical record remains fragmented, and researchers must continually piece together evidence in pursuit of a more comprehensive understanding of the past. This article examines the openness of archives through an analysis of *Rekidai Hōan* (『歴代寶案』), focusing on the fundamental nature of archives, the impact of digital archiving, and a comparative study with oral historical sources.

Keywords: Openness of Archives, Digital Archiving, *Rekidai Hōan*, Memory Construction

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Introduction

Rekidai Hōan (Precious Documents of Successive Generations) is an official compilation of diplomatic documents by the Ryūkyū Kingdom's royal government. The Ryukyu Kingdom was located in the western Pacific Ocean, comprising a series of island groups situated between Taiwan and Kyushu (九州) Island. The pronunciation of "Ryukyu" comes from Chinese, but when the Japanese took over, they changed the name to Okinawa (沖縄). Currently, Okinawa has become famous for tourism.

Rekidai Hōan covered the period from 1424 to 1867, providing continuous documentation without interruption. It was divided into three main volumes. The first volume consists of diplomatic records from 1424 to 1696. The second and third volumes contain administrative documents arranged chronologically, separately collected records from 1697 to 1858 and from 1859 to 1867.

One important feature is that since Ryukyu as part of Japan, this archive has often thought of Japanese archive. But it is written in Classical Chinese and the years recorded follow the same timeline of China, using the Chinese emperors' reign names. (Figure 1)



Figure 1 Vol.1 Surface of *Rekidai Hōan*

(Source: Refer to *Rekidai Hōan* of National Taiwan University Library Version).

Content about the openness of Archive

The insights gained from an archive are contingent upon the specific content that is accessible within it. In the case of *Rekidai Hōan*, a comprehensive understanding of the archive's contents can be obtained, despite the inclusion of political material. The public disclosure of historical archives typically involves time constraints, with varying durations set by different countries. For instance, China employs a 25-year threshold for the public unveiling of historical archives, while the UK categorizes archives aged 30 years as "historical archives" that should be accessible to the public to a significant extent. Additionally, political considerations significantly influence this process. Certain specialized historical archives, such as state secrets, are exempt from temporal limitations and are either maintained as confidential or necessitate authorization for viewing. The Ryukyu government, which created the *Rekidai Hōan* over a century ago, no longer exists. Despite this, the question remains as to whether this archive has truly been made "opened" to the public.

The essence of the archives

Deconstruction gaining prominence in the late 1960s and continuing to influence scholarly discourse throughout the 1970s. Scholars in the field of deconstructionism, such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, are primarily concerned with investigating the fundamental nature of archives and engaging in the process of deconstructing them. In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Derrida starts from the etymology of the word "archive" to indicate that the word itself contains the meanings of "commencement" and "commandment", showing the inseparable relationship between archives and authority (Derrida 1996: 2-5). Michel Foucault introduces "archive" is shaped and reshaped by internal mechanisms of discourse, highlighting ruptures and multiplicity within historical narratives. Discourse comes from power, and we can perceive the existence of power from socio-economic status, occupation, education level, gender, ethnicity, and race (Foucault

1977, 1981, 2002). The production of archives is usually done by official institutions or authorities, which naturally gives them authoritative status. This is underpinned by the influential factor of Power. So, the historical narrative in the archives is believed to be accurate, true, and trustworthy by the public. But when historians are exposed to the essence of the archives, problems arise.

Content about the openness of the Archive is limited. Archives have historically been rooted in fulfilling the information requirements and cultural norms of various entities, such as rulers, governments, businesses, associations, and individuals responsible for their creation and upkeep. Over time, despite evolving record-keeping practices, shifting objectives, and the imperative to safeguard these records, archives have consistently been linked to notions of power (Schwartz and Cook 2002:3). The root of all these restrictions lies in the close connection between archives and power.

The power is demonstrated in different facets of the archives, including the individuals who create them, their preservation, and the societal context in which they exist. Following the *Rekidai Hōan*, this part analysis commences with an examination of the viewpoints presented by these three facets.

The creator serves as the representative advocating for the power. The creation of *Rekidai Hōan* is overseen by the royal family of Ryukyu and carried out by government officials. The content of the initial volume is based on the compilation of original diplomatic records, with limited access to contemporary diplomatic archives. The subsequent volumes contain documents from government institutions that encompass key aspects of the royal family and the governmental operations of the Ryukyu regime. During the production of *Rekidai Hōan's* archives, the selection of included material is finalized, resulting in curated and edited content available for review. This controlled approach to archiving content underscores the limitations of transparency, as it reflects the narrative that the Ryukyu royal family aims to convey to the world and future generations. It is important to highlight that the influence of imperial authority extends to the regulation of archive production rights, as evidenced by the individuals responsible for the final writing and compilation verification. These Ryukyu compilers bring their own social standing, educational background, and cognitive perspectives into the archives in their official capacities. The ability to write classical Chinese proficiently, access confidential archives, and assume responsibility for this task signifies a manifestation of power. Such capabilities and status were not universally held among the Ryukyuan populace.

The archival have undergone a preservation process that resulted in the loss of their contents, thereby impeding accessibility. The conservation efforts of *Rekidai Hōan* were characterized by notable disruptions. Originally stored in the main hall(正殿) of Shuri Castle(首里城) in the Ryukyu Kingdom (figure2), the documents encountered a turbulent destiny subsequent to the invasion of Ryukyu by the Satsuma Domain(薩摩藩) in 1609.



figure 2 The main hall of Shuri Castle
(Source: Site of the Seiden Main Hall.)

To protect the historical records from potential destruction, the Ryukyu royal family produced a significant number of duplicates. Following the establishment of the Meiji government in 1868, the Ryukyu Kingdom was dissolved and incorporated into Japanese territory. The original documents were transferred to the Home Ministry in Tokyo but were subsequently destroyed in a fire caused by the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake(関東). The duplicate copies were originally housed at the Okinawa Library. Despite being relocated to various sites, they were ultimately destroyed during the 1945 conflict between Japan and the United States. The loss of archival content during the preservation process was mainly attributed to factors such as warfare and natural calamities, which resulted in the materials becoming inaccessible. Fortunately, in the 1930s, a Japanese scholar, Kobata Atsushi (小葉田淳), expertise in Okinawa studies commissioned an individual to transcribe copies of *Rekidai Hōan* at the Okinawa Library and then transported them to Taiwan University. As a result, modern scholars could explore the historical narrative of the Ryukyu Kingdom.

The establishment of archives is a continuous process, and the environmental impacts of this procedure may lead to limited openness to archival materials. Notably, specific diplomatic engagements with Japan are missing from the *Rekidai Hōan*, along with any details concerning the Satsuma domain. Following the Satsuma's invasion of Ryukyu in 1609, Ryukyu came under the administration of three separate entities: Japan, the Satsuma domain, and the Qing China. The Satsuma domain operated as a feudal territory under the Japanese shogunate, whereas the Qing was acknowledged as a tribute state within China's tribute system that originated during the Ming Dynasty. (Figure 3)

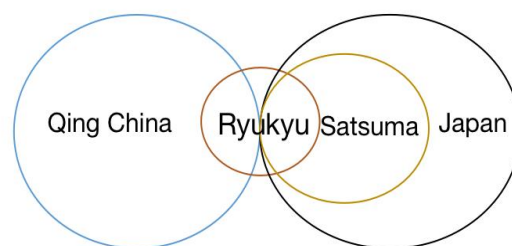


Figure 3 Relationship among China, Ryukyu, Satsuma and Japan
(Source: Made by Author.)

The first volume of *Rekidai Hōan* was completed in 1697. During this era, Ryukyu had been under the governance of Satsuma for nearly a century. In the pursuit of substantial economic benefits derived from Ryukyu's tribute trade relations with China, Satsuma coerced Ryukyu into concealing its subjugation by Satsuma from the Qing government. The incorporation of Ryukyu into the Chinese tribute system meant that any disturbances within a tributary state could lead to Chinese authorities intervening in diplomatic issues. As a result, Satsuma implemented comprehensive measures to prevent China from being informed about the situation. Satsuma notably imposed a restriction on the residents of Ryukyu, prohibiting them from developing proficiency in Japanese, while the Ryukyuan continued to be fluent in the Chinese. Moreover, the creation of *Rekidai Hōan* employed archaic Chinese to avoid unintentional information leaks, leading to the exclusion of any mentions of the relationships between the Ryukyu royal family, Satsuma, and the Japanese shogunate in *Rekidai Hōan*. The establishment of archives is influenced by changes in the control of the subjects involved in archive creation. While it may not be entirely accurate to categorize *Rekidai Hōan* as colonial archives, the relinquishment of the independent rights of the Ryukyu Kingdom has significantly impacted its content, despite not being directly authored by the Satsuma.

Visitors to the archives encounter a subjective experience marked by the diverse limitations linked to the openness of archival materials. This encounter creates a sense of having accessed the archives and connected with a bygone era that is no longer alive. Furthermore, the process of deciphering the archives and unveiling their contents, as well as the subsequent presentation and dissemination of this information, remains beyond the control of the visitors.

In conclusion, the openness of archival content is closely related to the creators of the archives, the preservation process, and the production environment. However, behind this, we discover the shadow of power, whether it comes from the state, royalty, or individual rights, all of which may lead to the demise of the content of the archives (in whole or in part). The creator of the record can rely on authority to delete memories; the ownership of the record is detached from the succession of rights controllers, leading to a growing distance between what is sought and what is discovered in the record, until it is eliminated. When records are created within varying social contexts, the authority they possess becomes diminished once their circumstances and origins are revealed. Consequently, certain information within these records may be permanently suppressed. The management of records can be likened to the management of history, where the concepts of death and rebirth can be manipulated like puppets.

Have digitization truly achieved open access to archives?

The digitization of historical archives is a growing trend, as archival institutions, encompassing both public and private archives, are broadening their digital initiatives.

The principal advantage of electronic records lies in their improved accessibility, as evidenced by an analysis of *Rekidai Hōan*. The electronic system of *Rekidai Hōan*, developed through “Context discovery system for LIDAIBAO’AN” and “Ryukyuan international relations and Sources for modern Okinawa history Digital Archives”.

(1) Initially removes identity constraints for its users. Users can log in to the website and access archive content without any identity constraints. Furthermore, all materials in *Rekidai Hōan*'s paper archives can be readily retrieved from both websites without any categorization, enabling researchers to freely access archive materials and promoting greater diversity and inclusivity in access. In the realm of academia, open electronic archives have enhanced the prominence of these repositories among interdisciplinary researchers, disrupted established professional hierarchies, and facilitated the conduct of interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary research.

(2) The electronic system of *Rekidai Hōan* has transcended temporal and spatial limitations by leveraging website services, thereby removing the need for physical visits to access materials. Previously, *Rekidai Hōan*'s files were stored exclusively in Taiwan and Okinawa, Japan, necessitating maintenance and management of these facilities, which limited the flexibility of access.

(3) The process of converting historical archives into digital formats has emerged as a crucial strategy for ensuring the long-term preservation of archives in various forms. Thorsten emphasizes the importance of digital archives in revealing the historical materiality present in native digital records (Thorsten 2022). Digitization serves as a sustainable approach and method that mitigates the vulnerability of original paper archives, such as *Rekidai Hōan*, to potential destruction caused by natural calamities like fires, thereby safeguarding the ongoing openness of archival materials. Furthermore, digitization proves beneficial for historical archives characterized by age or delicate components like paper or silk, as it minimizes the risk of damage. Beyond paper-based records, digital platforms enable the online examination and comprehension of other physical archives, including items such as ceramics.

(4) The process of digitization enhances the accessibility of archival collections and enables a more extensive dissemination of historical archival materials. This increased openness includes not only the broader access to historical archives but also the reorganization of their contents. Digital archive platforms enable researchers to collect and combine segments of historical data from different time periods, locations, collections, and contexts.

This signifies a significant shift in the methodology of historical research. According to the archive system, Context discovery system for LIDAIBAO’AN, visitors are presented with a chronological depiction of the development and evolution of *Rekidai Hōan*'s content. The graph illustrates that the number of contents related to the Qing Dynasty on the platform is significantly higher than the number of contents related to the Ming Dynasty, as depicted in Figure 4. This suggests an escalation in the frequency of interactions between Ryukyu and the Qing Dynasty. Electronic archives are quicker, leading to the same conclusion.

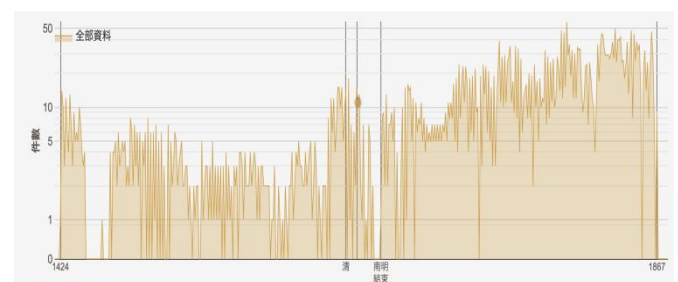


Figure 4 Normal view of Context discovery system for LIDAIBAO’AN
(Source: Refer to the website of the Context discovery system for LIDAIBAO’AN.)

But amidst it all, we find ourselves already knee-deep in the swamp of digital achieves. The issue regarding digitized archives remains unresolved due to their limited availability. The reason for this is that digitization is unable to alter the fundamental nature of records. The emergence of postmodernism has prompted academics to emphasize archival investigations. According to Manoff, an increasing number of scholars, regardless of their adherence to postmodernist principles, have begun to examine historical records sourced from libraries or archives. It is important to note that these historical records do not serve as impartial depictions of the past, and they do not offer immediate and unfiltered access to historical events (Manoff 2004:14). Electronic methods do not effectively address the fundamental issues of achieves and may exacerbate the lack of reliability. In the realm of digital storage, where a significant volume of data is maintained electronically, ensuring the reliability of records is of utmost importance. In the absence of reliable records, the digital landscape is vulnerable to misinformation, data tampering, and a decrease in confidence in digital platforms. In the contemporary digital landscape, the absence of physical original records and immutable fonds is notable. However, the implementation of metadata and security measures presents a significant opportunity. This emerging scenario poses a paramount challenge in the current era (Duranti 2022:11). For this purpose, the *Rekidai Hōan*'s electronic system, Ryukyuan international relations, and Sources for modern Okinawa history Digital Archives, provide PDF versions of the original materials, ensuring accuracy during archival searches. (see figure 5)

Figure 5 The Searching screen of *Ryukyuan international relations, and Sources for modern Okinawa history Digital Archives*

Furthermore, challenges and constraints exist in accessing archival language. For instance, the *Rekidai Hōan*, composed in ancient Chinese, presents difficulties for scholars well-versed in contemporary Chinese. Currently housed in Japanese archives, the *Rekidai Hōan* has been translated into modern Japanese by Japanese scholars who are proficient in ancient Chinese. This translation facilitates comprehension and utilization for Japanese-speaking researchers through electronic platforms. Conversely, the Context discovery system for LIDAIBAO'AN, is only available in a single classical Chinese script (see figure 6), which restricts access to scholars proficient in ancient Chinese, modern Chinese, and Japanese. Moreover, to ensure the accuracy of research materials, it is advisable for scholars proficient in the original language (ancient Chinese) to engage with this archive. Despite the utilization of artificial intelligence and other translation tools, accuracy remains uncertain. Notably, these two electronic archive systems lack translation capabilities for the original text of *Rekidai Hōan*.

Figure 6 The content of the Context discovery system for LIDAIBAO'AN
(Source: Refer to the website of the Context discovery system for LIDAIBAO'AN.)

features may remain undiscovered. The rationale behind the country-based arrangement and its potential reflection of the diplomatic relations with the Ryukyu Kingdom, whether indicative of closeness or distance, remains undisclosed.

Figure 7 The search box of *Ryukyuan international relations, and Sources for modern Okinawa history Digital Archives*
(Source: Refer to the website of Ryukyuan international relations, and Sources for modern Okinawa history Digital Archives)

From the perspective of digital archives, libraries or archival institutions that can create electronic archives receive support from well-funded governmental bodies and commercial partnerships. The maintenance of physical archives and the establishment of electronic archives require significant financial investments, with support from both public and commercial entities being essential for their implementation. Consequently, the accessibility of electronic archives is given precedence. Present regulations and business demands dictate the prioritization of certain archive materials for digitization, while others are deferred. Consequently, archives that have not undergone digitization are progressively to be marginalized. The electronic archive system, Ryukyuan international relations, and Sources for modern Okinawa history Digital Archives, developed by *Rekidai Hōan*, facilitates the

retrieval of *Rekidai Hōan*'s content as well as access to additional archive records related to Ryukyu available on the same platform. These records encompass not only Japanese archives but also physical artifacts and artworks. The comparison of *Rekidai Hōan* with other Okinawan archives, as illustrated in Figure 7, implies a competitive edge of *Rekidai Hōan* over other historical archives within a more inclusive open community. Fortunately, electronic data from other archives can still be found on this platform, including official records from Japan and China. But the existence and digitization status of other private relevant archives remain undisclosed within this system.

The real "past" in archives and oral history?

Oral history is a significant research approach that facilitates the understanding of personal experiences and the interpretation of historical events. This method is crucial for addressing information gaps that may arise due to the inaccessibility or absence of records. Moreover, oral history plays a crucial role in amplifying marginalized perspectives, shedding light on intricate social dynamics, and questioning dominant narratives (Oelofse and Bruyn 2005).

When the gates of historical archives swing open, a flood of historical treasures cascades into the public domain, shaping the very essence of how we remember and pass down collective past. When there are discrepancies between oral history and historical achievements, where will the public turn for answers?

The comparison between the information concerning Chinese immigrants in Ryukyu and the indigenous folklore of Okinawa and Fujian province reveals that disparities between historical records and oral traditions prompt the public to choose one of three responses: promptly rectifying the inconsistency, maintaining the original narrative without correction, or acknowledging the error while still adhering to the traditional account. An illustration of this phenomenon can be observed in *Rekidai Hōan*'s reference to the naturalization of Ruan Guo(阮国) and Mao Guoding(毛国鼎)from Fujian in Ryukyu. In contemporary Okinawa, some descendants of Chinese immigrants consider the surnames Ruan(阮)and Mao(毛)to be part of the group known as the "Thirty-six families from Min"(闽人三十六姓).This designation originates from the 36 surnames originating from Fujian province, which were authorized by the Ming Dynasty to be boatmen in Okinawa. This arrangement aimed to facilitate seamless tribute exchanges during the Ming Emperor's rule.

According to *Rekidai Hōan*, it is evident that the forebears of the Ruan and Mao surnames relocated to Ryukyu in the Ming Wanli era (明万历 35 年, 1607). While not all the "36 surnames" established themselves in Ryukyu from the period of the Ming Taizu(明太祖), they progressively migrated to the region over time. Nevertheless, there is a prevalent belief in Fujian, China, and the Kume Village(久美村) in Okinawa, which serves as a hub for Chinese immigrants, that the settlement of Chinese individuals in the Ryukyu Islands dates to the early Ming Dynasty, specifically the mid-to late 14th century. This belief includes the assertion that ancient families with the surnames Ruan and Mao were among the settlers. This perspective is supported not only by local accounts but also by Japanese scholars and annotations found in Ryukyu's electronic archives. Despite these sources(Lai 2016:161-169,Nahashi Kikaku-bu Shishihenshu-shitsu 1980:155), the misconception regarding the settlement's timeline persists.

It is noteworthy that discrepancies between archival records and oral histories persist despite efforts to acquire more precise information. In such cases, individuals tend to uphold the prevailing narrative and transmit it to others, although there are also those who identify and highlight inaccuracies. These dynamic underscores a recurring pattern of both the rectification and perpetuation of errors.

Conclusion

This article explores the concept of archival openness by examining both the fundamental nature of historical archives and the role of digital archives, while also juxtaposing them with oral history. It highlights the inherent limitations in the availability of archival content, emphasizing that digitization, despite its appearance of accessibility, remains a superficial manifestation of openness. Digitization does not fully address the subjective and linguistic constraints embedded in archival materials. Moreover, there is a risk that non-digitized archives may become marginalized, further complicating historical research. While the increasing accessibility of archives allows for comparisons with oral history, it does not facilitate a complete reconstruction of historical narratives or collective memory. As a result, multiple interpretations—both accurate and flawed—inevitably coexist. Recognizing and addressing the inherent limitations of historical archives is essential for constructing a more comprehensive and accurate representation of the past. Archives remain pivotal in shaping collective memory and historical knowledge. They are not merely repositories of the past but also instruments for understanding and shaping the future.

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