

Pre-modern Archives and their management in Japan¹

*Koichi Watanabe*²

Introduction

The basic perspective of this paper is as follows: (1) To explain the characteristic of the preservation of documents in traditional (early modern) Japanese society in two aspects, the 'family' and bureaucratic organisations; (2) To consider not only the preservation of original documents but also compilations through transcribing and classifying the originals, such as compilations of history (historical narratives). In other words, regarding archives as a form of information management, here, I discuss these documents and compilations together as information of the past. This point is owed to archival science in the post-custodial era³; (3) not merely to examine an issue of the management of information, but to touch upon its utilisation. This is part of the results of the large-scale project that I had done for four years until the last academic year.⁴

1. Management of the past information in ancient and medieval societies⁵

As Japan is located on the periphery of East Asia, it was not until between the seventh and eighth centuries that bureaucracy was eventually introduced there from China and Korea, and that the ministries and agencies of the central government and local government structures were established in order. In these offices, there were rules of making and preserving documents, which is known to us by exceptionally extant original documents. They were originally discarded documents from the central government agencies, being collected for the purpose of reusing their white backside for the transcription of Buddhist Holy Scriptures. It is because they miraculously survive in large quantities (the Shoso-in Imperial Treasury Documents in the Todaiji Temple amount to approximately 20000). In addition, following the custom of the Chinese and Korean dynasties, a compilation of official histories was conducted six times between eighth and ninth centuries. In this way, Japan had common ground

¹ Translated by Miu Sugahara (Birkbeck, University of London)

² Professor, PhD. National Institutes for the Humanities

³ The Record Management Society of Japan & The Japan Society for Archival Science ed., *Introduction to Archival Science: Memory and Records into the Future (An anthology of articles translated into Japanese)*, Tokyo, 2006.

⁴ 'A Comparative Study of Historical Archives among Several Nations', Grant-in-aid for Scientific Research of Japan Society for the Promotion Science, Scientific Research, 2004-2007(Reader Koichi Watanabe)

⁵ Kazuki Takahashi, *The Making, Keeping and Disposal of Documents under the State Administration in Medieval Japan, A Comparative Study of Historical Archives among Several Nations, Annual Report 2007*, Tokyo, 2008.

with China and Korea at this stage. The offices within the ancient bureaucracy systematically made and discarded documents along the regulations, and compiled state histories continuously.

However, in the ancient bureaucracy in Japan, which compromised with the conventional local order with old clans, the system of civil service examination (*kakyo*) was not adopted for recruiting bureaucrats. As a result, the *ritsuryo* system (system of the ancient government based on criminal and administrative codes) and its bureaucracy gradually changed as early as the tenth century, which meant its agencies and posts came to be occupied hereditarily by the particular court families. The family, as a matter of course, became responsible for accumulating information of the past that was not always preservation of original documents. For example, working knowledge, like that of ceremonies, was handed down to posterity by the people in charge through their keeping diaries from generation to generation. The families that hereditarily produced such officers and diaries are called 'diary families'⁶, and their diaries were important records for the maintenance of the governing structure of the state.

Around that time, the family was also established in the warrior rank that had borne a military function within the aristocratic government. Like the case of courtiers, warrior families inherited their documents and information. The warrior rank came to the fore during the course of civil wars caused by the internal divisions within the aristocratic government. It ended up with the advent of a warrior's government called the Kamakura bakufu in the end of twelfth century coexisting side by side with the aristocratic one. In the warrior government, similar to the latter equivalent, its offices were taken over by succession, which meant the past information was to be accumulated in respective warrior families. Although independent archives of the government were established after the late thirteenth century, management of documents was not wholly centralised in such archives. An example of judicial documents tells us an indispensable role of the houses of the officials in charge of the trials in preservation as well as utilisation of the documents⁷, which must be noted.

As to the compilation of state histories, it was completely stopped after 901 in the aristocratic government. Meanwhile, in the warrior government, though the compilation of histories was attempted by the Kamakura bakufu in the beginning of fourteenth century, its content was confined to history of their own government that cannot be regarded as a state history of the whole country. Furthermore, the Muromachi bakufu (1336-1573), the second warrior government, did not even design the project of compiling a history.

Thus, although bureaucracy was introduced from China and Korea, the lack of the system of civil service examination in Japan caused (1) the loss of substance of its bureaucracy and the dependence of its government on families; (2) its lack of the groups of intellectuals that led the establishment of the warrior government; both of which can be understood as its unorthodox nature within East Asia. On the other hand, certainly there was a desire of the Japanese countrywide government to compile a history following a custom in the Chinese cultural sphere, which suggests the similarity to other East Asian countries. This aspect might plant the seeds for variety of the ways of accumulating the past information other than preservation of original documents.

⁶ Hitoshi Matsuzono, *Nikki no Ie (Families of Diaries)*, Tokyo, 1997.

⁷ Kazuki Takahashi, *Chusei Shouen-sei to Kamakura bakufu (The Medieval Estate System and the Kamakura Bakufu)*, Tokyo, 2004.

2. Preservation and utilisation of information in the governing structure in early modern Japan

The governing structure of early modern Japan (the Edo period, 1603-1868) consisted of a central government called *bakufu* and local governments called *han*. Both sides, alike being feudal lords, formed quasi-kinship structures respectively. For instance, the head of *bakufu* was a shogun that was succeeded hereditarily. Members of *bakufu* (samurai) were retainers of the family of the shogunate (the Tokugawa family). Offices of the military as well as administrative agencies under *bakufu* were taken by patriarchs of the retainers' families. Although these offices were not succeeded hereditarily, the range of the available posts was roughly limited according to the status of the family. Such a multilayered and nested structure of families was a characteristic of the governing bodies in early modern Japan.

I suppose there were a couple of patterns of management of information and documents that were determined by this characteristic: (1) case of bureaucratic management (*Bakufu Kanjoshō*, the Finance Office, that was responsible for finance and administration of bakufu domains); (2) case of mainly bureaucratic management, but supplemented by families' (the office of the Edo city magistrate that was responsible for police, justice and administration of the capital); (3) case of families' playing a role of the management (*Bakufu Jisha Bugyō*⁸, the magistrate of temples and shrines, who was responsible for controlling temples and shrines in the whole country); (Note) Under the supervision of *roju* (senior councillors), these three offices comprised the supreme decision-making body of *bakufu* as well as the supreme court.

These patterns corresponded to the characteristics of each office and its staffs, that is, the relationship between the office and the premises of its head. The Finance Office was solely a bureau, which meant its head, *Kanjo Bugyō*, did not reside in the office but in their own premises. Staffs of the office (samurai) did not have direct lord-vassal ties with *Kanjo Bugyō*. In the second case, the office of the city magistrate included an official residence of the magistrate who lived there during his term of office <image 1>. The staffs (samurai) served the office hereditarily from generation to generation. It meant neither did they have direct lord-vassal ties with the magistrate though some of his own retainers were also engaged in the office's work. In the third case, by contrast, *Jisha Bugyō*, who was not supplied with an independent office nor an official residence, carried out his work in his own premises. All the business was executed not by exclusive staffs but by his retainers.

In this way, a couple of types of management can be assumed even within the central government. Among them, here, we will cast a further glance over the management of information in the office of the Edo city magistrate⁹. The management of information was done by a special bureau that had been established before the end of eighteenth century. In essence, emphasis of its way of management was on compilations through transcribing and classifying rather than on preservation of the original documents. Separately, the families of the former city magistrates also accumulated the information that was sometimes utilised by the then office. In addition, because the staffs of the office

⁸ Kazuo Ohtomo, *Edo Bakufu no Joho Kanri (Informational Management at Central Government in Early Modern Japan)*, Osaka, 2003.

⁹ Koichi Watanabe, The Sharing and Using of Accumulated Information among Various Social Groups under the Administration of the Capital (Edo) in Early Modern Japan, *A Comparative Study of Historical Archives among Several Nations, Annual Report 2007*, Tokyo, 2008.

were taken over by succession, the information was also kept in the staffs' families, which likewise benefited the office indispensably. These three, as a whole, provided the necessary information for the government of the capital.

In terms of chronological change, rationalisation of the management of information and documents was pursued by each office and bureau during the course of the two major political reforms in the 1730s and the 1790s. The principle was to intervene in the hitherto appropriation of information by the families concerning their offices in charge in order to facilitate the proper handover from predecessors to successors.¹⁰

How was accumulation of the past information done in general in relation to the said two ways, that is, preservation of original documents and compilations through transcription and classification? As both justice and administration were executed based on precedents since the eighteenth century, it was necessary for the government of *bakufu* and *han* alike to use the accumulated information of the past. In the agencies of *bakufu*, while the original documents were undoubtedly preserved, the compilations through transcription were basically used as a main reference. On that purpose, the collections of judicial and administrative precedents <image 2> were compiled systematically and continuously from the 1730s to the end of the shogunate government in 1868.¹¹

In regard to *han* governments, on the other hand, studies on their management of documents point out that the shift from compilations through transcription and classification to preservation of the original documents with references to search occurred in the bureau of civil administration whose business was very tight. It was led by the increase of the amount of documents (information), accompanied with the growing complexity of administration. Also, it has been suggested that the gradual shift in the form of information management from the family-centred and private one to the bureaucratic one.¹²

As for the compilation of histories, both *bakufu* and *han* did it actively throughout the Edo period, being always conscious of a tradition of compiling histories in East Asia. *Bakufu* intended to restore the official state history of Japan that had ceased since 901, and completed a chronicle of Japanese history from the ancient era to 1617 (*Honcho Tsugan*) in 1670. *Bakufu* also intended to compile a history of the Tokugawa shogunate family. They set up a special bureau for its edition in the beginning of nineteenth century and completed it in 1843 (*Tokugawa Jikki*). However, given that the editorial bureau did not continue to exist even for a century and this book was dedicated to the then shogun and the *Nikko Toshogu* shrine (where the founder of *bakufu* were worshipped as deities)¹³, the *bakufu*'s aim of handing down unbiased historical memories to the next generation seem to have been relatively low if

¹⁰ Minoru Takahashi, Kinsei ni okeru Monjo no Kanri to Hozon(Records and Archives Administration of Early Modern Period, Masahito Ando & Hideyuki Aoyama, *Kiroku shiryō no kanri to monjokan*(Archives Administration and Archival Institutions in Japan:their Past, Present, and Future), Sapporo, 1996. Manabu Oishi, Nihon Kinsei Kokka ni Okeru Koubunsho Kanri(Archival Management at Japanese Early Modern State)(Rekishi Jinruigakkai(Japan Society of Historical Anthropology) ed., *Kokumin Kokka to akaibuzu*(Nation States and Archives), Tokyo, 1999.

¹¹ Koichi Watanabe, 'The Sharing and Using', n. 7.

¹² Department of Archival Science, NIJL ed., *Hansei Akaibuzu no Kenkyū*(The Study of Archiving at Han(Local Governments and Feudal Lords) in Early Modern Japan), Tokyo, 2008.

we compare with *Sillok*(the Annals of the Joseon dynasty) in terms of the system of their compilation and preservation¹⁴. In short, while *Sillok* in the Joseon dynasty was the future-minded project, *Jikki* in the Tokugawa bakufu undoubtedly looked to the past.

3. Preservation and utilisation of information in the organisations of the ruled in early modern Japan

Next, we will outline the situation on the ruled side. In the last stage of the medieval period (the Sengoku era: 1467-1590), the central region of Japan (around Kyoto, Nara and Osaka) saw the establishment of families among the elite of village communities. After that, in the early modern period, formation of families became common even to ordinary peasants, tradespeople and artisans by the late seventeenth century, which, in geographical terms, expanded throughout all Japanese islands except Hokkaido.

The membership of *mura*, a communal organisation in rural areas, of *cho*, its urban equivalent, and of trade organisations of merchants and artisans were all confined to the head of families. Hence, although it is not rare for communal and trade organisations to have handed down their documents to the present, the majority of the early modern documents is extant in the form of the family records. What is the most typical case is that a village official was succeeded by a particular family hereditarily. In such a case, it is not uncommon for one family to hand down tens of thousands of documents. Added to this, according with their widened management scale, the family of urban merchants also created a huge variety and amount of business accounts through their exchanging deeds relating commerce and finance, and they systematically grouped the accounts under reasonable subjects. The largest example of these accounts is those of the Mitsui family that later developed into the conglomerate in the modern era. As many as 66000 of their documents by 1900 still exist now. Thus, the private sector of the society in early modern Japan created and preserved no less quantities of documents than the ruling class, which seems to have been unique from a global perspective.

Apart from the family, some studies suggest that the organisations of villages, towns and tradespeople respectively developed the system of managing documents¹⁵. Here, we take an example of

¹³ Kumiko Fujizane, Tokugawa-jikki no hensan nit tsuite(The Compilation of Tokugawa Shogunate Chronicle), *Shiryō-kan Kenkyū kiyō*(Bulletin of the department of Historical Documents, NIJL) 32, 2001.

¹⁴ Kim Hyun-Young, Documents, Records, and Hyuji(Wastepaper):Surviving Literature from the Joseon Period, The Research Project on Archival Resources with a central focus on East Asia, Department of Archival Science, NIJL ed., *Multilateral Comparative Study on Archives of Early Modern Times*, Tokyo, 2008.

¹⁵ Kazutoshi Tomizen, Kinsei Sonraku ni okeru monjo seiri to kanri ni tsuite(Records and Archives Management in an Early Modern Japanese Village), *Kiroku to Shiryō(Records and Archives)*, 2, 1991. Hosaka Hirooki, Murakata Sodo to Monjo Knari, Sakusei Shisutemu(Conflicts in a Village and the Systems of Creation and Management of Documents in Early Modern Japan), *Bulletin of the Gakushuin University Archives*, 6, 1992. Koichi Watanabe, Kinsei Toshi Takayma ni okeru 'Machikata' Monjo no Hokan Kozo(System of Record Keeping at an Early Modern Town), Shunsuke Takagi & Koichi Watanabe eds., *Nihon Kinsei Shiryō-gaku Kenkyū(Studies on Early-modern Documentary Sources in Japan)*, Sapporo, 2000. Reiji Iwabuchi, Tonya-nakama no knou, kousou to monjo sakusei, kanri(The function and organization of merchant guild from the viewpoint of record management), *Rekishi Hyoron*, 561, 1997.

the communal organisation called 'cho' in the early modern city¹⁶. <Image 3> is a catalogue of documents that was made by the *rokkaku-cho* organisation in Kyoto in the beginning of nineteenth century. As it shows, document numbers, dates of creation, document names and amounts were entered in the catalogue. As <image 4> indicates, the document numbers were tagged on the original documents. <Image 5> shows a storehouse where the parts for a parade float in the festival are put. In a corner, the documents are also stored. In the early nineteenth century, the only less-frequently-used ones were put in this storehouse that was built in the rear of the meeting place of the *cho*, as presented in <image 6>. In other words, the common documents of the communal organisation were preserved in the common facilities.

Such documents held by the organisation in the ruled ranks were not fragmentary but massive and organised. Each organisation had its own system of managing the documents, which meant various levels of the society from the top of the ruling structure to the bottom organisations in the ruled systematically accumulated the past information in early modern Japan.

This allowed the government to keep its governing principle that avoided one-sided coercion and considered opinions of the parties concerned unless they overstepped the ruling order. The opinions, which were supported by the systematically accumulated information of the past, can be considered to retain a certain amount of rationality.¹⁷

On the ground of the preserved documents, village and town organisations, guilds and merchants staked their own rights. Hence, they attached particular importance to probative documents for which they sometimes built special depositories. <Image 7> is one of such special depositories in Miki-machi, called 'Houzou' that literally means the treasury. It was built in the end of seventeenth century. <Image 8> is a ceremony, carried out in Miki-cho even today, of airing documents that were important as evidence in the early modern period. This ceremony, which started about the time when 'Houzou' was built, was not mere airing but the 'places of memory' where the people in the community recalled the past. This example tells us the documents were maintained even through ceremonial means.

At the same time, however, early modern Japanese people had irrationality, such as altering the probative documents for their claims' sake and intentionally consecrating, namely, hiding the probative documents while demanding the right that was not provided in the documents. If such irrationality was exercised in making a historical narrative, preposterous myths were sometimes invented and reproduced on an expanded scale.¹⁸

Early modern Japanese society, on the one hand, accepted the East Asian hermeneutics of ancient Chinese classics, which spread a rational and empirical approach even into the level of rural intellectuals, but on the other it did not lose overflowing imaginations towards the past by both oral and written means.

This latter characteristic in early modern Japan contrasts with the situation in the Huizhou villages in China whose compiling village histories, perhaps following the traditional way of compiling the official

¹⁶ Koichi Watanabe, *Nihon Kinsei no Kobetsu Cho ni okeru Bunsho Hōkan*(Record Keeping at a neighbourhood community in Early Modern Kyoto), *Bulletin of National Institute of Japanese Literature, the volume of Archival Studies*, 3, 2006.

¹⁷ Koichi Watanabe, 'The Sharing and Using', n. 7.

history by the dynasty, recorded routine matters and focused on citations of original documents, that is, presumably allowed no space to preposterous myths.¹⁹ Difference of the characteristics of the rural intellectuals determined by the existence or non-existence of civil service examination might also contribute to this divergence between the two. At any rate, it might be regarded as another sign of the heterodoxy and marginality of Japan within the East Asian context.

Coda

Finally, I would like to point out a prerequisite for the significance of the family in creating and managing documents in pre-modern Japan. The simple but crucial precondition was the fact that the family survived over the centuries. The reason why the family could continue over such the long term was that its succession did not absolutely require the blood relationship putting primary importance on its continuance itself in the traditional Japanese society. Of course, an utter stranger could not be an adopted successor, who, instead, came from the distantly-related families that had given wives and husbands conventionally. In an extreme case, the family sometimes adopted an able man as the successor from the distantly-related families over the head of the lineal descendants considering the advantage to its continuance.

It was such the family as a unit that comprised all organisations in the traditional Japanese society, where the family as well as the family-based organisations transmitted, accumulated and utilised the documents and information.

In this connection, one of the reasons for the massive existence of pre-modern documents in Japan despite its lack of the system of archives in the modern age is that the traditional family had thickly remained in the society until the period of high economic growth in the 1960s. However, such the family is now in the final stage of extinction.

¹⁸ Koichi Watanabe, *Machi no Kioku*(*Memory of a Japanese Early Modern Town: Record Keeping and Historical Narrative of Miki*), Osaka, 2004.

¹⁹ Zhen-Zhong WANG, Village Documents and the compiling of a village gazetteer: Cases from the Huizhou Province, China, '*Multilateral Comparative Study*', n. 12.