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## **Digital Archives for Historic Research and International Understanding**

Kenichiro Hirano, Director General, Japan Center for Asian Historical Records

Summary: Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (JACAR) of the National Archives of Japan celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2011. This presentation examines JACAR's achievements over the past decade and discusses some challenges ahead. One such challenge is contributing to an international consensus on history despite divergent records housed across national archives. Yet even with disjunction, recognition of difference between archival holdings fosters collaborative discussion and advancement in research, for which digital archives are crucial. JACAR has built a database for Japanese official documents classified as "Asian historical records." Not only can these documents be accessed online for free, but the unprecedented number of digitized images stored in the database is now approximately at 25 million.

### **I. A Digital Archive Named Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (JACAR)**

Japan's first digital archives of government documents, Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (JACAR in abbreviation) was established in 2001, under the arm of the National Archives of Japan. Six years earlier, Mr. Murayama Tomiichi, then prime minister of Japan, proposed to establish JACAR as an institution to support Japanese efforts to face up to the history of wars with neighboring countries. A 2001 Cabinet decision set JACAR on a course to collect "Asian historical records" defined as "the nation's archival and other records important to relations between Japan and primarily nearby nations in modern times." Over the course of JACAR's establishment, it was decided that the institution provide records in digitalized form. Thus, JACAR's primary mission continues to be constructing a database of Asian historical documents and making them widely available across the world.

JACAR users have access to a continually growing number of approximately 25 million document images. Database images come from the National Archives of Japan, the Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, and the National Institute for Defense Studies of the Ministry of

Defense. In addition to making digitalized documents available online, JACAR carries out public relations activities in multiple languages and coordinates with institutions possessing historical records. JACAR also develops online historical exhibitions in order to make its files more accessible and to examine their background contexts. Through such activities, JACAR seeks to deepen the mutual understanding of history held by individuals and researchers, particularly of Asian nations.

I have an American friend who teaches modern Japanese history at the University of South Carolina. He frequently visits Tokyo for short and long periods to do historical research. Maybe ten years ago, he asked me if I had any means to identify a Japanese man named Mr. Moriya Koyu. According to my friend, Moriya-san appeared to be a Japanese army officer who had studied in the United States. My friend's great uncle Charles Fuller was a professor at MIT and his descendants keep a letter Moriya-san sent expressing gratitude for his mentorship. Fuller's family was curious to know more about the sender of the letter and a gift. My friend, a Japan specialist, was thus entrusted to find the man's identity. He asked for my help, but at that time I could do little.

Now, a decade later, this year, when my friend visited Tokyo, he asked me the same question again. Returning home from my meeting with him, I opened JACAR's homepage on my computer, placed Moriya's full name in the keyword search box and, saying "there is no harm in trying," clicked the button. No sooner than I finished clicking, to my great surprise and joy, I got clues to four documents related to Mr. Moriya. I read the documents and found that surely there was a Japanese artillery major named Moriya Koyu who in 1935 was sent to the United States to study for two years. The next year, while in the United States, he was directed to assist a group of Japanese army officers during an inspection tour. Six years later, Mr. Moriya, now a colonel, led the Japanese Army's investigation into a hundred shells captured on battle fields in the south. He apparently had come to be regarded as a leading officer in the artillery, probably thanks to his education at MIT. However, I learned in the last document I read, that the Army Minister ordered a bonus be paid to Major General Moriya, because he was in critical condition in June 1943.

I immediately reported my findings to my friend. I was very proud of JACAR and my association with it. My friend was excited and said he would circulate the news among his relatives. I hope this episode illustrates how well the JACAR database system works.

The JACAR database works because it has accumulated about 1.7 million original documents or about 25 million images from the three government archives mentioned above. JACAR's union cataloging and integrated search dictionary enable us to search a document across those three archives, without visiting any one of them. Two of the four original documents related to Moriya are stored in the archives of the Ministry of Defense, while the other two are in the National Archives. In addition to the dictionary, JACAR has developed a unique system of full-text indexing the first 300 words of every document to use them as an auxiliary. Even though Moriya is not registered in our dictionary since he was not a key player in the international arena, because his name appears in the first 300 words of several documents, JACAR's database search engine hit upon all the documents that include references to Moriya. Thus, thanks to JACAR's cross search function, I was able to find him.

In this episode, my American friend and I used JACAR for personal reasons, although professionally, the two of us are historians who use the JACAR database for work and research. Generally speaking, JACAR users are composed of two groups. They are professional historians and general users. Indeed, it is the goal of JACAR since its establishment to promote historical research by historians as well as historical understanding by the public. By these two means, we try to increase international understanding within Japan and also beyond Japanese borders.

From the twentieth century to the twenty-first century, we have faced a question of bridging different historical interpretations, or the so-called question of different historical recognitions. The problem is, in short, how to understand history vis-à-vis different national trajectories. And we are left wondering, even if we succeed to understand the plurality of national histories, will the problem of different historical recognitions disappear? In order to answer this question, first of all, we need to think about how

historical understanding is composed. I should say fundamentally that historical understanding is constructed on, first, facts that took place, second, records, and third, experiences and memories. Problematically, records, experiences and memories differ by nation as well as individual.

## II. To Promote Historical Understanding

Laymen interested in history may form opinions, construing them as fact, often from their personal experience and memory. Problematically, the experiences and memories of one individual may be quite different from that of another person. Then, it is natural that people have quite different recognitions of historical facts. It is the role of digital archives to help derive a better understanding of historical facts as individuals connect them to experience and memory. However, problematically the historical records themselves are more different than alike between countries. Archives, which are national institutions in many cases, store records that vary greatly by nation, so the fact that archives keep and make public historical records alone does not guarantee avoiding different recognitions of history.

In short, it is oversimplification to merely say that sharing common knowledge of historical facts will lead to a common historical recognition. After all, historical records which are considered to be the basis for establishing historical facts are very different, especially so when it comes to international history. (Here, I shun away from the philosophical question of whether it is even possible for us to reach historical facts as such.) Yet, I believe that by sharing historical records, we can get closer to the possibility of increasing international mutual understanding among peoples.

Archives disclose official records not only to professional historians but also to the general public. They do so beyond national borders. Historians have been engaged in international cross archival research for quite some time and they have brought much progress in historical understanding. Now, digital archives make it possible for a layman to enter other nations' archives, if he is willing. In fact, just knowing that other nations have their own historical records helps people understand that there are other historical records. And this increases the possibility of international historical understanding. Today, thanks to digital archives, it is far easier for ordinary

people to realize that other people have different historical records which in turn lead to different historical facts and different historical understanding.

Last year, Japan's national TV channel broadcast a serial of historical drama featuring the Russo-Japanese war. During and after the broadcasting of the series, user access to the JACAR database showed a conspicuous increase. TV historical programs stimulated people to look for historical records and historical facts. Some of those people might have found that stories told on TV were not the same as those recorded in the archives. By perusing original documents drafted and left by officials, people would ask, not in historical hindsight, why and how those officials in charge made this decision or that decision. Developing sympathy and empathy with historical figures, people built a deeper understanding of history based in historical records. Digital archives opened up a new horizon for understanding history, internationally.

### III. Digital Archives' Contributions for Historical Research

In Asia as in other regions, groups of historians have worked together for years to write a common history across national borders. I have little time to discuss the processes and results of their efforts. Generally speaking, it is difficult for historians, who have been in the past constrained to writing national histories, to write an internationally common history. However, historians who have taken on the challenge contributed much for sharing historical records and opening up the records of different countries.

A very rapid increase of accessibility to historical data through digital archives, needless to say, greatly eases historical research. Historians who favored original documents had concealed their use of digital archives until recently. Now historians do not hesitate to make public citations and references to JACAR data. JACAR is now even regarded by many historians as a kind of "international common good."

JACAR's most noteworthy contribution to historical research is probably its cross search database function. For example, a Japanese navy document believed to have been lost from the archives of the Ministry of Defense was recently discovered in the National Archives, all thanks to JACAR's cross search. Cross search and keyword search on the database lead us to discover

new historical facts hitherto buried in heaps of historical records. I believe the database will lead to opening new areas and directionalities for historical study.

Another contribution digital archives will make is the democratization of historical research. Instead of keeping primary documents in the hands of a select few, digital archives are opening everything to the public for browsing and consideration. This degree of transparency and access to government paperwork I hope will help citizens. The opening of easily accessible historical records for the public places historical documents close to everyone with computer access. Perhaps it is no coincidence that in Japan interest in history is broadening. Digital data makes it far easier for both professional historians and lay history lovers to access documents cited in historical studies. Anyone can read original documents if there is any doubt regarding a historian's interpretation.

In addition to democratizing history, digital archives will also make historical studies more scientific. Historians used to be aristocratic, monopolizing historical documents and thus the power of historical interpretation. Digital archives now prevent historians from holding such privileges. Thus broadened use by the public of digital archives and open reviewing by peer historians will make historical research not only more democratized but also more scientific. I would say this is the greatest contribution of digital archives today.

#### IV. In Conclusion, JACAR's Future Tasks

In its first ten years, JACAR has kept the position of a leading digital archive in Japan. Yet, entering its second decade, there are many tasks JACAR faces in order to play the role assigned to it. We must do our best to help people attain an improved, mutual historical and international understanding. For this purpose, JACAR aims to increase both its data and user base. Since the credibility of our database is dependent on how exhaustive its data is, JACAR must cooperate closely with data providers, namely, central and local government archives and other public archives. We must collaborate with many different kinds of organizations to arrange and digitize original data as fast, accurately, and extensively as possible. Also, to facilitate historical

searches and understanding, JACAR would very much like to participate in international networks of digital archives. For these two major tasks in particular, JACAR looks upon ICA for its guiding assistance.