

Fifteen Years of JACAR: Achievements, Challenges and Prospects



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Summary

Established as Japan's largest digital archive, the Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (JACAR) will soon celebrate its 15th anniversary. This report looks back on the progress made by JACAR and discusses its achievements along with challenges and future prospects. The report highlights our basic approach to building the JACAR database. We also discuss other core tasks, such as enhancing search functions and catalog data for the purpose of promoting awareness among an expanding group of users. Moreover, we touch upon initiatives for increasing the scope of materials we provide, our responses to technical challenges, and our public relations activities in Japan and overseas.

JACAR's achievements include making it easier for documents to be accessed by historians and other researchers. With enriched search functions, we facilitate diverse research for materials across multiple providers in a cross-sectional manner. We also provide easy access and more ways to use historical materials for non-specialists. An issue often brought up by users has been expanding the scope of information provided. JACAR seeks to meet that challenge while providing information to a wider audience and promoting greater use abroad. In Japan we aim to be used as an educational resource for social studies classes at the secondary school level. As for the future outlook of JACAR, this presentation raises the importance of accessing overseas materials relating to Japan.

Biography

From April 2014, Sumio Hatano has been working as the director-general of JACAR and until recently he was a Professor of International History at the University of Tsukuba. His publications include many books and articles on the Second World War and history of Japanese foreign policy in Japanese and English. Hatano has been far longer involved in matters of history project at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, such as the Committee for compilation of declassified documents on Japanese foreign policy, the Japan-China Joint History Research Committee.

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Introduction

The Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (JACAR) is Japan's largest digital archive of public records. It was established as a facility attached to the National Archives of Japan, based on a motto of "anytime, anywhere, at no charge." With almost 15 years having passed since establishing JACAR, I will present a brief report on the past achievements and challenges, as well as our prospects for the future.

In Japanese, we refer to the Center as "*Aji Reki*" for short; and in English we use the acronym "JACAR" for the Japan Center for Asian Historical Records. Today, I will say "JACAR."

1. Background and Developments Leading to the Establishment of JACAR

The establishment of JACAR was prompted by the announcement of the "Peace, Friendship, and Exchange Initiative" made by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama at the end of August 1994 to deepen the "mutual understanding and confidence" between the people of Japan and the peoples of neighboring Asia. One part of this initiative consisted of support for historical research to "enable everyone to face squarely to the facts of history," and it included establishment of an "Asian Historical Document Center."

An advisory committee placed under the supervision of the Chief Cabinet Secretary was commissioned to give shape to the organization. Based on its findings from observing and studying the historical archives of various other countries, the advisory committee offered two recommendations on how such an organization should be. First, it should collect a wide variety of materials and information on modern and current history of Japan, neighboring Asian countries and other countries, and should provide access to these to the general public. Second,

the organization should perform the role of a hub for the various related facilities in these regions. A project team comprised of government officials was subsequently launched, and led by the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE); it proceeded to further examine the study of related materials as well as how the facility ought to be. Midway through this examination, there was a major shift in the way materials would be provided. That is, although the initial plan was for the construction of a large-scale physical archive, in light of the dramatic advances made in information technology, the direction was changed to one of extensive online provision with a database of historical materials accumulated in the form of bits and bytes.

Following this groundwork, a decision for the establishment of JACAR was made by the Cabinet in November 1999; and two years later in November 2001, JACAR was founded as part of the National Archives of Japan.

2. Description of JACAR's Missions

JACAR's core task is making available the digital data from three institutions, namely: the National Archives of Japan, the Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Center for War History of The National Institute for Defense Studies of the Ministry of Defense. We arrange catalog information and image data, before loading this onto the database and making it available to the public. The materials provided to JACAR by the three institutions are primarily the historical materials (historical public records and archives) held by each institution, which were prepared or obtained sometime between the Meiji Restoration and the end of the Second World War, and which pertain to Japan's relationship with neighboring Asian countries.

In addition to building the JACAR database, which is part of our core mission, we have also put effort into enhancing search functions and into public relations activities for the purpose of expanding our user base and promoting awareness. I will now briefly introduce each of these in turn.

(1) Building the JACAR database

In building a database based on the digital data provided by aforementioned three institutions,

our tasks are based on the following three fundamental principles.

First, ensure the reliability and authenticity of data.

With regard to materials provided, they are made available to the public without reediting, revising or otherwise amending their content.

Second, enable users to feel as if they were using the actual material.

By keeping the category of a document as well as its registered name and other details the same as at the relevant historical material provider, users are able to easily identify the original work, thereby facilitating their understanding of the historical context and other background information on the material.

Third, ensure the comprehensiveness and inclusiveness of data.

All materials provided are made available to the public without screening or filtering. However, given the public nature of the Internet, personal information is handled with prudence.

Since the JACAR database has been built with strict adherence to the fundamental principles outlined above, I am confident that it allows for the provision of information that is extremely reliable.

(2) Enhancing search functions

The development of fine-tuned catalogs and the enhancement of search functions are of immense assistance to users attempting to access certain materials. Therefore, at JACAR, with respect to digital data provided by the three institutions, before making it available to the public, we convert about the first 300 characters of the main body of the material into text so that it can be used as search data. The effect obtained by converting the first 300 characters of the main body of the material into text is a considerable increase in search results, that is, an improvement in the accuracy of searches.

Furthermore, for searching materials on the JACAR website, we have developed a dictionary function, enabling searches to include synonyms, and we have developed a thesaurus that accommodates variations in notation.

Furthermore, so that searches can also be conducted in English, the titles of the materials as well as the names of authors and other matters are being translated into English, and they are gradually getting registered in our the database. Going forward, in addition to enhancing the dictionary function, we will also advance other efforts, such as adding search functions tailored to the needs of users.

(3) Public relations activities

(i) Enrichment of website content

The materials provided by JACAR are widely recognized and used by historians and other researchers. But we also seek to facilitate understanding among a wider range of people and have tried a number of ideas to expand our user base. Such ideas include making our website available in multiple languages, holding special web exhibitions with JACAR materials, distributing an English email newsletter, and distributing materials lists to secondary schools for aid social studies instruction.

We also periodically put new exhibitions about history online. The exhibition “Disasters and Resiliency” dealt with materials relating to past disasters and reconstruction work. Moreover, last year’s exhibition “The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895” was prepared in collaboration with the British Library, which holds a collection of colored woodblock prints, and an English version of this exhibition was opened to the public at the same time as the Japanese one. This year, marking the 70th anniversary since the end of the Second World War, we have taken up the subject of the war’s end and Demobilization in a new exhibition.

(ii) Public relations activities in Japan and overseas

In terms of public relation activities within Japan, in 2011, we conducted an opinion survey with the aim of expanding users. Armed with the results of that survey, the following year we participated in 74 meetings and other events attended by the staff of libraries and museums across Japan, where we delivered presentations on JACAR.

In view of JACAR’s founding purpose, I believe that it is important to appeal to researchers and educators overseas. For this reason, every year, we attend four or five international conferences and visit with those at public archives abroad. We exchange information, make

presentations on JACAR and give demonstrations.

3. Interim Assessment of 15 Years of Achievements

JACAR is still on track for further growth as a digital archive, but as a provisional self-assessment, I believe we have had significance in the following four areas.

- (i) There has been a remarkable improvement in convenience for researchers, who make up the majority of users, through the elimination of space and time constraints.
- (ii) It is now easier for users living overseas in particular to access materials held by our three collaborative institutions in Japan through JACAR. In fact, JACAR is now held in high regard by Japanese researchers resident in various foreign countries.
- (iii) More in-depth and diverse research is now possible, through more substantial search functions and through users being able to search and use material from multiple providers in a cross-sectional manner. For example, it is now possible to perform a search about a single historical event in relevant materials held by three institutions, and I often hear about how multi-faceted research is now possible.
- (iv) There is easier access and more ways to use historical materials for general, non-researcher users, and as a result, there has been an increase in the use of historical materials across media via the JACAR system.

JACAR's significance (particularly (ii) above) has also been recognized in a report (August 2015) prepared by the Advisory Panel on the History of the 20th Century and on Japan's Role and the World Order in the 21st Century, an advisory panel established within the Abe Cabinet.

4. Challenges and Responses

JACAR is equal to the best in the world when it comes to database storage capacity, building capacity and ease of access, and I believe it satisfies demands of researchers and ordinary users.

However, given the technological environment surrounding JACAR, user demands and other factors, I believe that we need to tackle the following issues. First, I will discuss the technical challenges and provisional countermeasures.

(1) Technical challenges and associated countermeasures

(i) Ensuring the long-term preservation of digital data

Apart from data that is published, JACAR holds information on three types of media for backup. Even though CDs and DVDs are stored in special lockers, the longevity of these media forms is pretty limited and some of them are already nearing their end. Consequently, measures are needed for their long-term preservation. Particularly in light of the lessons learned from the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011, JACAR began preserving materials on magnetic tapes with an aim for more reliable preservation. As a precaution against earthquakes and other types of large-scale disaster, the magnetic tape is also kept at the Tsukuba Annex of the National Archives, which is located approximately 70km away from JACAR in the city of Tsukuba.

It should be noted though, that, in the 14 years since first providing information, data has never once been corrupted and needed to be restored either intentionally or for any other reason such as carelessness, malfunctions or disasters. Even during the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011, the JACAR system functioned normally in the affected Tohoku region.

(ii) Converting the format of image data (from DjVu to PDF)

Ever since it began providing services, JACAR has used the DjVu format for the preservation and provision of image data. In 2001, when JACAR launched its services, there was a big advantage in adopting DjVu which enabled high image compression. However, with the development of new technologies, the DjVu format lost versatility. Also, given the changes in the environment in which digital data is used, coinciding with a system update in October next year, it was decided to switch the format in which data is preserved and viewed to PDF. There are also plans to integrate the database equipment with the main National Archives of Japan, and to relocate the equipment to data centers. In preparation for this, work is currently underway to convert the master data from the DjVu format to PDF.

(2) Expanding our user base

Although the number of total users is increasing little by little, the number of overseas users remains pretty steady. We are working to cultivate new interest abroad with publicity at overseas institutions for Japanese research and language education as well as at relevant international conferences. Moreover, to increase our user base in Japan, we also need to encourage the use of JACAR as a social studies educational resource at middle and high schools in Japan.

(3) Initiatives to expand provision of information

As I explained earlier, materials provided by JACAR are limited to those received from the three aforementioned institutions. Furthermore, most of this material was prepared during the time between the Meiji Restoration and the end of the Second World War. Yet this scope is not satisfactory for some of our users. There has been a strong call for the scope of materials to be expanded. As part of this initiative, in 2013, JACAR began providing information on the collection of materials held by the University of the Ryukyus Library in Okinawa Prefecture. Only catalog information on the material has been registered in the JACAR system, so users were able to view image information via a link to the database at the University of the Ryukyus Library.

By adopting this “link” method in conjunction with our existing method, we are committed to advancing efforts enabling users to search and use a wider range of material than ever before.

The idea of expanding the materials handled by JACAR to include the post-World War II period has also been raised a number of times at meetings of the JACAR Advisory Committee. This idea was also raised as a “measure for promoting appreciation of modern and current history” in Projects in the 70 Post-War Years: Contribution Measures for a New 21st Century Asia, which is based on a report issued this August by the Advisory Panel on the History of the 20th Century and on Japan’s Role and the World Order in the 21st Century (mentioned above). Progress is being made in preparation for this.

5. A Peek into the Future

(1) Accessing materials located overseas

The number of images made publicly available by JACAR will soon reach 30 million. This figure of 30 million roughly equates to all of the materials held by the aforementioned three institutions, which record Japan's relationship with Asia, and which were prepared or obtained sometime between the Meiji Restoration and the end of the Second World War in 1945. It is the number first estimated when JACAR was founded. However, it has been explicitly confirmed that materials relating to Japan during this period are also held in archives and other institutions in Korea, Taiwan, China and other places in Asia outside of Japan.

Although collecting and digitizing these materials relating to Japan which lie scattered overseas do not necessarily form part of the current mission of JACAR, it is an issue that ought to be tackled as an important pillar of Japan's archival policies. And so in the future, it is expected that JACAR will play a part in this.

(2) Role as a “hub” of historical materials

As described above, the advisory committee that pioneered the establishment of JACAR recommended that JACAR perform the role of a central hub in Asia. Although there is still a fair way to go, if historical materials in China, Korea, Taiwan and the United States can be digitized and archived similar to JACAR, then there is no doubt that this would lead to a deeper recognition of each other's history, and this would be a big step toward mutual understanding on an international scale. In order for JACAR to develop enough that it can play a leading role in this kind of “digital archive network,” not surprisingly, still further understanding and cooperation of users is essential. To this end, I sincerely ask for your tremendous support.

(3) Significance of sharing historical materials internationally

The first director-general of JACAR, Professor Yoneo Ishii, repeatedly said, “Even if it might be impossible to share the same exact understanding of history all over the world, it is possible to work together on sharing historical documents.” In this sense, it seems that ensuring that all historical materials preserved in Japan can be shared internationally, by making them publicly available in an open and candid manner, is a sound and effective way to eliminate misunderstandings and biases. We want to work collaboratively to foster peace, mutual

understanding, and confidence amongst countries of East Asia. It is therefore my firm belief that JACAR's mission is a significant one.

This concludes my report on the achievements and future prospects for the Japan Center for Asian Historical Records. Thank you for your attention.