

# From National Register to Memory of the World: The Construction and Experience of China's Nomination System for Archival Documentary Heritage

—An Institutional Analysis Based on the Measures for the Declaration and Administration of the China Register of Archival Documentary Heritage

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## Abstract

Enforced on January 1, 2026, the Measures for the Declaration and Administration of the China Register of Archival Documentary Heritage (hereinafter referred to as the “Measures”) establishes, for the first time in the form of a departmental regulation, the legal status of the China Register of Archival Documentary Heritage as the “national reserve project database” for the Memory of the World Register. This marks a new stage in the institutionalization and standardization of China's nomination work for archival documentary heritage. From the perspective of the modernization of the archival governance system, this paper systematically combs the evolutionary process of China's participation in the Memory of the World Programme, elaborates on the core essentials and institutional innovations of the Measures, and analyzes the linkage mechanism of the four-level register system: provincial, national, Asia-Pacific, and international. On this basis, combined with typical nomination cases, it summarizes China's practical experience in the value excavation, text construction, and resource integration of archival documentary heritage, aiming to provide theoretical support and practical directions for the protection, inheritance, and international communication of archival documentary heritage in the new era.

## Keywords

Archival Documentary Heritage, Memory of the World Register, Nomination and Selection Mechanism, Archival Governance

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## 1. Introduction

Enforced on January 1, 2026, the Measures for the Declaration and Administration of the China Register of Archival Documentary Heritage ([National Archives Administration of China, 2026](#)) (hereinafter referred to as the “Measures”) provides specific implementation paths and operational norms for the nomination from the China Archival Documentary Heritage Project to the Memory of the World Programme from the perspective of institutional supply. In March 2026, the Outline of the 15th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of [The People’s Republic of China \(2026\)](#) Outline of the 15th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People’s Republic of China adopted at the Fourth Session of the 14th National People’s Congress, for the first time, incorporated “strengthening the protection of archival documentary heritage” into the national strategic level, further strengthening the core position of archival documentary heritage in the construction of a cultural power.

Article 3 of the Measures clearly stipulates: “In accordance with the General Guidelines of the Memory of the World Programme, the National Archives Administration of China shall establish the China Register of Archival Documentary Heritage as the national register of the Memory of the World, which collects archival documentary heritage of national or even international significance and serves as a reserve for nominations to the Asia-Pacific Register and the International Register of the Memory of the World.” This clause, in the form of a normative document, clarifies for the first time the “reserve-nomination” logical relationship between the China Register of Archival Documentary Heritage and the Memory of the World Register. This institutional design not only establishes China’s national register status in the Memory of the World Programme but also constructs a model mechanism that realizes the institutionalized linkage between domestic and international registers. Wang Hongmin argues that China’s established national-level inventory system has played a leading role in the field of documentary heritage preservation and has become a core achievement and flagship project in this regard ([Wang, 2024](#)).

From the perspective of cultural memory theory, Huang Yujing and Zhu Tong propose that a systematic promotion strategy should be constructed from four dimensions: time, medium, power, and function, so as to effectively solve deep-seated problems in the joint nomination process, such as intergenerational memory discontinuity and ownership disputes ([Huang & Zhu, 2026](#)). Ma Anni et al. point out that “a strong country in archives”, as an institutional strategy at the national level, provides clear direction and a complete institutional support for the World Heritage nomination of documentary heritage ([Ma et al., 2023](#)). Zhang Jin stresses that institutionalized measures such as unified national training, professional guidance, and quota coordination can systematically improve the quality of nominations and promote more precious documentary heritage to enter the international arena in an orderly manner ([Zhang, 2024](#)).

Since China successfully submitted its first nomination to the Memory of the

World Register in 1997, a total of 18 archival documentary heritage items have been inscribed on the International Register. This achievement benefits from the four-level progressive nomination system formed by China through more than 20 years of exploration: provincial, national, Asia-Pacific, and international registers. Jeannette Bastian emphasizes that the identification of archival documentary heritage is essentially a process of constructing collective memory, which requires institutional guidance at the national level to ensure continuity and authenticity (Bastian & Alexander, 2009). The linkage and coordinated development between the China Archival Documentary Heritage Project and the Memory of the World Programme is not only an inevitable choice to respond to global multicultural exchanges but also a key measure to promote the construction of a socialist cultural system with Chinese characteristics and the transformation of the archival cause from physical management to knowledge management (Feng, 2022). Taking the promulgation and implementation of the Measures as an opportunity, this paper systematically interprets its institutional connotation from the perspective of the archival governance system, analyzes the collaborative mechanism of the four-level register system, and refines the universal experience of China's practice, so as to provide academic reference for the deepening of archival documentary heritage work in the future.

## **2. Promulgation and Interpretation of the Measures for the Declaration and Administration of the China Register of Archival Documentary Heritage**

### **2.1. Historical Evolution and Register Linkage of the China Archival Documentary Heritage Project**

In 1992, UNESCO launched the Memory of the World Programme, aiming to rescue and protect the gradually aging, damaged, and disappearing documentary records worldwide and to complete human memory. In 1993, the China National Commission for UNESCO established the National Committee of the Memory of the World Programme in China, marking China's official participation in this international programme.

In 1995, the National Archives Administration of China established the National Committee of the Memory of the World Programme in China, further clarifying the dominant position of the archival system in the protection of documentary heritage. In 1997, the Traditional Music Sound Archives of China was successfully inscribed on the Memory of the World Register, becoming China's first Memory of the World heritage project. Since then, Secret Archives of the Qing Dynasty's Grand Secretariat, Naxi Dongba Ancient Manuscripts, The Grand Golden List of the Qing Dynasty Imperial Examinations and others have been successively inscribed, and China's influence on the international stage has gradually increased.

In 2000, following the idea of the Memory of the World Programme, the National Archives Administration of China officially launched the China Archival

Documentary Heritage Project and established and evaluated the China Register of Archival Documentary Heritage. This initiative made China one of the first countries in the world to establish a national register for the Memory of the World Programme, reflecting China's forward-looking understanding of the protection of archival documentary heritage. The so-called "China Archival Documentary Heritage Project" refers to a systematic project implemented by the National Archives Administration of China, which aims to include valuable archival documentary heritage in the national register through surveys, evaluations, nominations, protection and other links, and to promote more projects to the international stage on this basis.

By 2025, the National Archives Administration of China has organized six batches of nomination and evaluation work, with a total of 250 archival documentary heritage items inscribed. In the sixth batch of lists announced in 2025, 52 archival documentary heritage items stood out from 109 nominated projects, with an elimination rate of over 50%. Strict evaluation standards ensure the authority and representativeness of the national register.

The linkage mechanism between the China Register of Archival Documentary Heritage and the Memory of the World Register has undergone a gradual clarification process. In the early stage of work, the national register was more regarded as an honorary recognition of precious domestic archival documentary heritage, with little connection to international nominations. With the deepening of practice, the Chinese-style nomination path of "local-national-regional-global" has been clarified, forming a four-level progressive system: provincial, national, Asia-Pacific, and international registers.

## **2.2. Core Content: A Whole-Process Management System Spanning Nomination, Evaluation, Utilization, and Promotion**

Comprising six chapters and twenty-six articles, the Measures establish a comprehensive institutional framework covering General Provisions, Nomination, Evaluation, Management, the Candidate List, and Supplementary Provisions.

### **2.2.1. Nomination Criteria and Dimensions of Value**

Article 7 of the Measures establishes the core value orientation for nominated projects, requiring them to possess "national or world significance". It further refines the criteria for value assessment from multiple perspectives, including historical, cultural, artistic, scientific, and social dimensions. Article 8 sets forth clear requirements for the completeness of nomination materials, covering key elements such as the physical condition of the archival documents, interpretation of their value, preservation environment and management plans, thereby ensuring the standardization of the nomination process.

### **2.2.2. Nomination Procedures and Joint Nomination Mechanisms**

Articles 9 through 12 outline a standardized process, progressing from announcement issuance, preliminary material review, and expert evaluation to final design-

nation. Of particular note, Article 11 explicitly encourages joint nominations involving multiple institutions and regions. This provision aims to break down administrative barriers, consolidate dispersed resources, and create synergy in the nomination process, reflecting a concept of integrated governance.

### **2.2.3. Evaluation Mechanisms and Professional Support**

Article 14 stipulates the establishment of a “National Advisory Committee for the China Archives Documentary Heritage Project” composed of multidisciplinary experts in archival studies, history, philology, and cultural relics conservation. This diverse composition of experts ensures the professionalism, objectivity, and authority of the evaluation process.

### **2.2.4. Dynamic Management and De-Registration Mechanism**

To address the long-standing issue in documentary heritage work of placing excessive emphasis on nomination while neglecting management, Article 17 of the Measures introduces a dynamic monitoring and de-registration mechanism. For projects that suffer severe damage due to inadequate preservation or no longer meet the inclusion criteria, the National Archives Administration has the authority to revoke their designation and publicly announce such decisions. This institutional design strengthens the accountability of the designated institutions, effecting a transition from a “lifetime tenure” model to a “dynamic management” model.

### **2.2.5. Candidate List for Future Nomination and Regularized Nomination Process**

Article 22 of the Measures authorizes the National Advisory Committee to conduct a secondary evaluation of projects on the National Register, selecting outstanding ones for inclusion in the Candidate List for the Memory of the World (MOW) Programme. Article 24 further specifies the number of nominations and the cycle: three projects are to be recommended every two years for the MOW Regional Register (Asia-Pacific), and two projects for the MOW International Register, with no limit on the number of transnational joint nominations. This arrangement signifies a shift in China’s documentary heritage nomination efforts—from an ad hoc to a systematic and predictable process—thereby ensuring the quality of international nominations.

## **2.3. Institutional Features and Enhanced Governance Effectiveness**

The promulgation and implementation of the Measures have achieved institutional innovations across the following four dimensions:

First, establishing a “pyramid”-style candidate list mechanism. By creating a candidate list, a process of secondary selection and targeted cultivation is implemented on the basis of the National Register, thereby forming a stable pipeline of international nomination projects. This “selecting the best from the best” mechanism, combined with expert guidance throughout the process, will improve the

success rate of international nominations.

Second, instituting a regularized nomination cycle and quota management. Clear nomination quotas and cycles enable nominating institutions at various levels to engage in long-term systematic planning and resource preparation. Simultaneously, it facilitates the National Archives Administration in coordinating overall efforts and implementing targeted cultivation. The policy advantage of having no quota restrictions for transnational joint nominations further provides institutional space for deepening international cultural exchange and cooperation.

Third, strengthening dynamic oversight across the entire lifecycle. The introduction of a de-registration mechanism fills the institutional gap in post-nomination supervision. This not only serves as a constraint on inscribed projects but also acts as a positive incentive, which is expected to prompt preserving institutions to continuously optimize preservation conditions and ensure the authenticity and integrity of the heritage.

Fourth, expanding the scope of diverse nominating entities. Article 2 of the Measures defines nominating entities as “including but not limited to archives, libraries, museums, etc.”, significantly broadening the resource landscape. In fact, the principle of expanding nomination entities had already been put into practice before the Measures were issued. Data shows that the proportion of projects nominated by non-archival institutions has been increasing: it rose from approximately 10% in the first four batches to around 30% in the fifth and sixth batches. Among the projects inscribed in the sixth batch are various types, including bronze inscriptions from museum collections, scientific and technological archives from research institutes, and corporate construction archives. This fully demonstrates the openness and inclusiveness of the Measures in terms of resource integration. The boundaries of archival heritage are continuously expanding, and cross-institutional collaboration is an essential pathway for addressing the complexities of heritage preservation (Ketelaar, 2017).

### **3. Hierarchical Connectivity and Collaborative Mechanisms of the Four-Tier Documentary Heritage System**

Through long-term practical exploration, China has established a four-tier, progressively advancing nomination and selection system consisting of “Provincial Registers—National Register—MOWCAP Regional Register—MOW International Register”. Article 3 of the Measures explicitly states that “provincial archival authorities are encouraged and supported to establish provincial-level archival documentary heritage registers”, thereby solidifying this vertically integrated governance structure at the regulatory level.

#### **3.1. Provincial Registers: Resource Survey and Foundational Cultivation**

Provincial registers constitute the foundational tier of the entire system. At present, regions such as Zhejiang, Hubei, Shandong, and Fujian have taken the lead

in establishing regional archival documentary heritage projects. The functional positioning of provincial registers is primarily reflected in three aspects: first, resource assessment, which involves comprehensively surveying the quantity and distribution of precious archival documents within the region; second, project incubation, which provides preliminary value recognition and nomination practice for potential projects; and third, social mobilization, which stimulates participation enthusiasm among grassroots archival institutions and social organizations. Some provinces have also established provincial-level candidate pools to implement tiered and categorized cultivation. For instance, Yunnan Province, through its Yunnan Memory Register selection process, has built a distinctive resource matrix centered on “Red Memory” and encompassing themes such as “Anti-Japanese War Historical Materials”, “Ethnic Culture”, and “Ecological Wisdom”, thereby providing a high-quality source of projects for the National Register (Yunnan Provincial Archives Administration, 2025).

### 3.2. National Register: Value Selection and Strategic Reserves

As the core hub of the system, the National Register undertakes the dual functions of value identification and international nomination reserve. Article 3 of the Measures emphasizes the inclusion of heritage possessing “national significance or even world significance”, implying that inscription on the National Register is not merely an honorary recognition but also serves as a “passport” for eligibility for international nomination. The elimination rate of over 50% in the sixth batch of nominations reflects a rigorous selection mechanism, ensuring that projects entering the national purview possess the potential to compete for international registers. Inscribed projects subsequently enter the candidate list, where they receive targeted guidance from national-level experts, completing the transformation from “domestic excellence” to “international candidate”.

### 3.3. MOWCAP Regional Register and MOW International Register: Phased Advancement and Global Recognition

The Memory of the World (MOW) Regional Register for Asia-Pacific and the MOW International Register constitute two tiers of international recognition. The nomination quotas set by the Measures (three nominations for the Asia-Pacific region and two nominations for the International register every two years) reflect a strategic consideration of “phased advancement”: the MOWCAP Register serves both as an independent recognition of regional value and as a prerequisite for testing the international competitiveness of projects and accumulating nomination experience.

## 4. China’s Practice: Lessons and Insights from Memory of the World Nominations

As a key participant in UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register, China has gained extensive practical experience throughout the nomination process. A sys-

tematic review of China's nomination cases will not only offer methodological guidance for other States Parties but also demonstrate how universal human memories can be distilled from local documentary heritage.

#### **4.1. Emphasizing the Reconstruction and In-Depth Exploration of Archival Documentary Content Value**

The core of archival documentary heritage nomination lies in the discovery and reconstruction of value (Edmondson, 2015). Successful value exploration requires grounding in the points of convergence between the common values of humanity and China's outstanding traditional culture. Nomination efforts should not stop at the enumeration of archival forms (form resemblance) but should instead delve deeply into the human memory, civilizational evolution, and unique wisdom they embody (spiritual resemblance). Only when the distinctive value of archival documents is precisely distilled and imbued with contemporary significance can nominated projects achieve cross-cultural resonance. For instance, during the evaluation of the sixth batch, in response to issues such as the homogenization of certain projects (concentrated in areas like engineering, finance, and land deeds) and "bundled" nominations (lacking distillation of core highlights), evaluation experts proposed improvement strategies centered on "focusing on typical examples and revealing the significant through the small" (Zheng, 2025).

#### **4.2. Enhancing the Quality and Detail Standards of Nomination Dossiers through Oversight**

The nomination dossier is the sole medium through which evaluation experts understand a project, and its quality directly affects the success or failure of the nomination. Article 15 of the Measures emphasizes the standardization and transparency of nomination materials. Starting from the sixth batch, the nomination dossiers of inscribed projects are made publicly available on the official website, subject to social oversight. Evaluation expert Wang Hongmin noted that high-quality nomination dossiers should adhere to the following principles: titles should be accurate and specific, free of embellishment; summaries should be concise, directly addressing the characteristics of the archival objects; and value statements should be closely tied to the archival content, adhering to the principle that "arguments stem from historical sources and evidence from archival records." Only by meticulously managing these details can the professional standards and academic rigor of the nomination process be demonstrated (Wang, 2025).

#### **4.3. Resource Integration Enhances the Persuasiveness and Influence of Projects across Cultural Dimensions**

Joint nomination represents an effective pathway for addressing the challenge of dispersed resources and enhancing project competitiveness. Article 11 of the Measures provides explicit policy support for this approach. Taking the "Fish Scale Land Registers" (Yulin Tuce) as an example, these documents are dispersed

across Jinhua and Lanxi in Zhejiang Province and Xiuning in Anhui Province. During the fifth batch nomination, the archives in these three localities overcame administrative divisions to form a joint working group, systematically analyzing the chronological sequences and content complementarity of their respective collections, and collaboratively drafting the nomination dossier. Ultimately, by presenting the evolution and regional variations of the Fish Scale Land Registers from the Ming to the Qing dynasties in an integrated manner, the dispersed archival resources were reconstructed into a coherent chain of evidence and value system, leading to the successful inscription of the project.

#### **4.4. Transcending Archival Institutions to Construct Cross-System Activation and Utilization of Archival Documentary Resources**

The Measures' open definition of nominating entities has expanded the resource landscape for archival documentary heritage. Among the projects inscribed in the sixth batch, the "Five Groups of Zhou-Period Inscribed Bronze Vessels, Including He Zun" are preserved at the Baoji Bronze Ware Museum, the "Yinqueshan Han Tomb Bamboo Slips" at the Shandong Museum, the "China Historical Earthquake Data Cards" at the China Earthquake Administration, and the "1950s Sichuan-Tibet Highway Construction Archives" at the China Communications Construction Company Second Highway Consultants Co., Ltd. These cases demonstrate that precious archival documentary heritage is widely distributed across various institutions, including cultural heritage, scientific research, and corporate sectors. The nomination and selection of archival documentary heritage cannot be confined to archival institutions alone. Only by strengthening communication and collaboration with related systems can cross-sectoral resources be integrated and the strength of the whole society be mobilized.

Regarding the activation and utilization of documentary heritage, several Chinese cases have explored diverse presentation methods (Zhang, 2026). The "Seventh Archives Room" immersive interactive education project on documentary heritage, developed by the Suzhou China Silk Archives, won the "Award of Excellence" in the Global Awards for World Heritage Education Innovative Cases. Through digital technologies, interactive exhibitions, and public participation, archival documentary heritage can be vividly presented, stimulating cultural identity and national pride, and offering practical references for transforming the contemporary value of archival documents.

### **5. Conclusion**

From the launch of the China Archival Documentary Heritage Project in 2000 to the official enforcement of the Measures for the Declaration and Administration of the China Register of Archival Documentary Heritage in 2026, China has built a logically rigorous and efficient nomination system for archival documentary heritage over more than 20 years. Centered on the national register, the system

connects international standards upward and radiates local resources downward, forming a clear path of “provincial cultivation-national reserve-international nomination”. The promulgation of the Measures marks the transformation of this system from experience-driven to institution-driven.

Although the promulgation of the Measures has strengthened the development of the four-level inventory system, the operation of this system still faces several practical challenges. First, there are considerable disparities in the progress of establishing provincial inventories among different provinces. Some central and western regions are constrained by shortages of professional personnel and funding, resulting in relatively weak basic cultivation capacity. Second, while cross-regional joint nominations are encouraged by policy, their practical implementation involves coordination of powers, responsibilities and interest distribution among different administrative levels and institutional systems, leading to high coordination costs. Third, the dynamic supervision and withdrawal mechanism for inscribed items is still in its initial stage. Further refinement of supporting measures is needed to ensure the authenticity of monitoring data and to impose effective restraints on entities that fail to fulfill their protection obligations. Addressing these issues will remain a persistent difficulty for China’s governance system of archival documentary heritage in the future.

Overall, the establishment of the reserve project database mechanism, the normalized nomination cycle, the dynamic supervision system, and the joint nomination orientation are not only a systematic summary of past practical experience but also a clear action guide for future work. China’s protection of archival documentary heritage is transforming towards a holistic, systematic, and collaborative direction (Wang, 2025).

Up to now, 18 treasures are inscribed on the International Register of the Memory of the World, 250 rare books are in the national register, and the vigorous development of provincial register projects has jointly built the documentary foundation of “China’s Memory”. Wang Shaozhong, Director of the National Archives Administration of China, emphasized that it is necessary to strengthen top-level design, promote more archival documentary heritage representative of Chinese culture to be inscribed on the International Register of the Memory of the World, and make “China’s Memory” become “World Memory” (Su, 2025). Standing at a new historical starting point, we have reason to expect that more archival documents carrying the genes of Chinese civilization will cross national borders and become spiritual wealth jointly guarded by all mankind.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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