

Researching PRC History in the National Archives of Algeria and Morocco¹

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There are various challenges for a researcher who works on the early PRC's relations with North African countries, given that state archives on both sides yield relatively few relevant documents. Until the early 1980s, China's connections with North Africa were mostly limited to government-sponsored activities, be they in the domains of military support, technological cooperation, ideological propagation, or medical assistance. These activities presumably sought to promote the goals of China's Cold-War foreign policy, which revolved around principles of anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, anti-hegemonism, and support for national independence movements as a challenge to U.S. and Soviet dominance in the region. Chinese documents concerning such state-level activities are no longer accessible as a result of the *de facto* closing down of the Foreign Ministry Archives in Beijing as of fall 2013.² Furthermore, while the Central Archives of the CCP have long claimed to grant open access in theory, in practice even the best-connected historians in China find difficulties gaining entry.

Meanwhile, on the North African side, I spent six months from January to July 2016 conducting archival research in Algeria and Morocco, a task made all the more pressing by the unavailability of official documents in China. Unfortunately, the national archives in both countries appear to be little more promising in providing files relevant to their exchanges with the PRC. While the archives in China now grant access to documents up to the early 1980s (regardless of the comprehensiveness of the available documents), the national archives in both Algeria and Morocco hold collections merely until a few years into the post-colonial period in the 1960s. No particular reason is specified, but it is possible that these archives follow the fifty-year rule, which is strictly upheld in archives in Paris. There seems to be but little improvement of the situations on either side in the near future. Studies on Sino-Maghreb relations therefore cannot rely solely on archival findings, but rather must explore alternative resources and employ unconventional sources.

The Algerian National Archives (Algiers) does not have a website, so one cannot browse the indices in advance. Nor does it offer an on-site comprehensive database for search. One must fill out a form indicating her research topic, and the archivists will direct her to what they deem relevant. While this can be helpful due to the archivists' familiarity with the holdings, the opportunity is lost to search at one's own discretion or to make serendipitous discoveries outside or tangential to the immediate research topic. For instance, my research interests lie in Sino-Algerian relations, the Algerian healthcare system, and local medical practices, so I was told that all the documents concerning local medicine and public

health come from the French colonial collections. These collections use booklet-style catalogues. Two volumes are compiled on this subject and they consist of thematically organized document titles.

Another type of catalogue that differs in content is stored in standalone databases (powered by Microsoft Access) in a computer that has no connection to any network. This is where I found the only collection relevant to the PRC. The searchable database of the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic, 1958-1962 (GPRA)—a set of materials collected by the National Liberation Front leadership in exile, in Cairo and Tunis, and over the course of the revolution—contains approximately 280 documents concerning the PRC. Most of these are official correspondences between the two governments, and some are records of Algerian delegations to China. These documents date from 1957 to 1962. I found none relating to the period after Algeria's formal independence from France in July 1962.

Given the generic nature of the GPRA database, it serves as a good alternative to China's Foreign Ministry Archives with respect to foreign policies and negotiations between the two governments. Here are three example titles from the GPRA's China collection, and presumably China's Foreign Ministry Archives hold a copy of the first two.

[6G1/139/1/2] Protocole entre le gouvernement provisoire et le gouvernement de la république de chine sur l'aide économique accordée par la chine au GPRA (19/05/1960, 9p., Dactylographies, Français)

[6G1/141/2/32] copie d'une note manuscrite sur l'entretien entre le président Mao Tse Toung, et le président Mr. Ferhat Abbas (30/09/1960, 16p., Manuscrit, Français)

[6G1/6/12/1] Rapport de l'entretien de la délégation Algérienne avec les délégations de : - La Chine - Vietnam - U.R.S.S. (21/05/1960, 58p., Dactylographies, Français)

Files like these are useful for studies on China's foreign policy toward African countries, which was reoriented in 1958 from establishing a united front for international peace to one for anti-imperialist struggles. While Chinese historians tend to discuss Algeria as part of Sino-French relations, Algeria was in fact an important target of China's diplomacy in its own right. The PRC recognized the GPRA as an anti-imperialist

(especially anti-U.S.) partner, funneling it hundreds of tons of military, economic, and medical aid.³ Given Algeria's leading position in Arab liberation and decolonization globally, the exchanges between GPRA and China during Algeria's war of independence can help us grasp the early stage of China's support for armed revolutions in the Third World, which continued until the mid-1980s.

On the other hand, historians working on Algeria also tend to downplay China's role in decolonization, despite the judgment of France's representative in Rabat at the time that "it is China, yellow and Asian, that seduces Maghrebans longing for decolonization."⁴ China's involvement in the Algerian War (1954-1962) is another telling example of a depolarization of Cold War history. While Middle East "core" states like Egypt and Syria received much more material aid from the Soviet Union, Algeria followed a slightly different course for not being really crucial to either side, and thus left room for China to step in.⁵ The GPRA's China collection could shed some new light on China's overlooked position in the decolonization of Algeria, and furthermore, the African continent as a whole, not only in terms of ideological backup but also in material support.

To obtain access to these GPRA documents, however, takes time and often depends on the whim of the archivists. The new registration rules which came into effect in January 2016 require a cultural visa to Algeria, while visas of other types such as tourist would complicate the application procedure and delay one's entry. Even with a cultural visa in hand, which means one has already submitted application materials at an Algerian consulate or embassy, an average wait time of ten days is normal before one can lay hands on the catalogues.

No document is digitized yet in the national archives. To retrieve the documents, one must fill out an application form, and only ten documents are allowed per application. A certain advisory committee will meet and decide whether they want to release the requested documents, and one will learn of their decision after a week or so. I was permitted to read the first file mentioned above, but was denied access to the other two.

In comparison, the Moroccan National Archives (Rabat, opened in 2013) are more accessible and transparent, since a passport alone allows for immediate access and three entries in a year until you feel necessary to apply for a formal readership. The archives have a workstation to conduct keyword searches, but the database is very limited in scope, so one must consult the physical catalogues. Whatever you find in the catalogues is available for retrieval and will be delivered in less than ten minutes. Unlike the Algerian archives, which strictly forbid cameras, cellphones, and laptops in the reading room, the Moroccan archives allow photography at will.

Unfortunately, however, I have found few documents relevant to China in Morocco to date. The most recent files date back to 1968 when the PRC's connection with Morocco was still confined to small-scale trade and normal diplomatic

exchanges. The only file I found concerning the PRC was an agreement on trade in tea signed between the two governments in 1958. For an earlier period, in the collection of the French Protectorate (1909-1956), there are a few documents on establishing postal relations between China and Morocco in 1922, as well as a volume on China and Japan from a nineteenth-century French edition of Conrad Malte-Brun's *Universal Geography*.

If the post-colonial documents are still classified due to the fifty-year rule, what are some alternative places where one can find documents produced after the mid-1960s? Since my research deals with Chinese medical staff working in North African hospitals during the Cold War, I attempted to search archives in ministries of health, provincial bureaus, and local hospitals. Though I managed to enter some of those archives after getting around cumbersome bureaucracy, I could not locate documents older than a decade. I discovered some administrative records of Chinese medical missions at a Moroccan hospital since 1975, but those records contain no more than rosters of the Chinese teams, work periods, or sick leaves, lacking substantive information that would allow me to paint a more vivid picture of the lives the Chinese doctors lived there.

Several reasons might account for the meagerness of archival holdings from the 1960s onwards in both countries. First, the documents have been moved to the state archives and are yet to be declassified. Second, it is likely that many post-colonial documents are destroyed, missing, or misplaced. A former Algerian official from the Ministry of Health, who oversaw China's medical aid in the 1960s, asserted that the ministry no longer held relevant documents of the earlier years. The current head of the ministry's Department of International Cooperation suggested that the old files went missing as a result of either a physical move of offices or change of directors in charge. My own experience in ministerial and hospital archives in Morocco echoes the officials' comments on the Algerian archives. Even if documents exist, they are vulnerable to misplacement. In general, not much attention is paid to keeping archives in either country. Except for the national archives, the others in ministries, provincial bureaus, and local hospitals are not well organized by trained archivists. At times when I was fortunate enough to get into a local archives office, I always had to wait for the staff to look for and take out relevant documents from dusty piles of paper. Even the Ministerial departments commissioned to work with the Chinese medical teams do not have a separate collection ready for access. It always happened that a head of an office could not find me anything produced before his tenure. No one knows where the older files are. As a result, what I could retrieve was mostly very recent files, which in turn largely depended on how much if anything the persons in charge were willing to show me.

How can we study the history of the flow of ideas, people, and goods between the PRC and the Maghreb without archives? A comprehensive answer to this question is impossible in the short term, but what is clear is that we have

to take initiatives to explore all kinds of potential places, including specific ministries or institutions relevant to our research in these countries, and to reach out to local scholars for guidance. For example, I surveyed state and university libraries in Algeria and Morocco, and found the Franz Fanon Library in Algiers worth visiting for China-related references. It holds newspapers, journals, and books published between 1830 and 1995. There is also a large collection of the *Bulletin Quotidien* (in French) distributed by Xinhua News Agency's Algiers Bureau during the 1970s. In addition, I consulted centers of cinematic studies and TV channels for the inventories of their documentaries and news reels about the PRC, in particular Chinese medicine and medical service. Finally, interviews are a good alternative to explore the promise of a history without archival documents. Besides their verbal recollections, sometimes the interviewees may surprise you with the extent of their personal collections.

We may also try to incorporate ethnographic methods more robustly into historical research. For example, I went to acupuncture clinics and local hospitals regularly to observe how Chinese doctors treated local patients in the face of language barriers, cultural differences, outdated equipment, and possible suspicion of Chinese medicine. I usually wore a white coat and worked as a translator. I soon found myself participating in the daily activities of the clinics. I helped the doctors explain their advices to patients and sometimes I helped withdraw needles from their bodies after treatments were over. Present-day clinical practices and doctor-patient interactions illuminate many aspects of what the situation is likely to have been in earlier experiences, especially when I juxtapose my own observations and doctors' memoirs. Comparing what I see today with what I read about in the past, I have been able to discern how things have changed, and those observations of change in turn have prompted further questions to explore.

Finally, bureaucratic constraints, especially in Algeria, have proven considerably more cumbersome than in China, at least for a Chinese citizen (though one who knows Arabic and some French). Given the excessive bureaucratic procedures one is likely to encounter, one needs to be prepared for either a longer period of field research or a second or third visit to the relevant countries.

NOTES

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² China's provincial archives may have sporadic pieces of information of this kind. I found some in the Shanghai Municipal Archives and the Hubei Provincial Archives.

³ For the details of China's military aid to Algeria between 1958 and 1965, see Li Qianyu, "试论阿尔及利亚争取民族独立斗争期间的中阿关系, 1958-1962" [Sino-Algerian Relations during the Algerian Struggles for National Independence, 1958-1962], *Cold War International History Studies*, 9 (2013): 107-108.

⁴ Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002): 36.

⁵ My colleague John Chen at Columbia University explores Sino-Soviet competition for political influence over the Middle East during this period in an unpublished paper, "Sino-Soviet Competition amidst Arab Transformation: The 'Egyptian' Phase, ca. 1955-1962."