

Understanding the Cultural Revolution through Documents of Life

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Documents of life are life stories encompassing many diverse genres, ranging from oral histories, memoirs, biographies, autobiographies and other retrospective accounts, to songs, poems, diaries, letters, photographs and other material objects produced by historical subjects in the past (Plummer, 2001). They are essential for understanding the subjective meanings of historical experiences and the motivations of historical subjects.

I have taught both undergraduate and graduate seminars on the Chinese Cultural Revolution and still regularly teach an undergraduate course on contemporary China which usually starts with the end of the Cultural Revolution. Given the abundance of popular English-language memoirs of the Cultural Revolution, they may seem to be natural choices for teaching. In fact, whether to use memoirs of the Cultural Revolution, and which ones to use, is not a matter of easy decision.

Memoirs and oral histories of the Cultural Revolution come in a great variety. They are written by persecuted intellectuals, by high-level party leaders, by ordinary individuals, by the English-writing Chinese diaspora, by former Red Guard leaders, or by former sent-down youth. These memoirs present different images and different aspects of the Cultural Revolution depending on the authors' experiences and the audiences targeted. I can imagine devoting an entire seminar to the analysis of memoirs, but we usually don't have such a luxury in our teaching. It is more common to use one or two memoirs even in a specialized seminar on the Cultural Revolution. This would necessarily prioritize some perspectives and experiences over others.

Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* is a case in point. It offers a captivating story of three generations of women from the same family and is written in readable English prose. But like many others of the same genre, it has been subject to much scholarly criticism. Peter Zarrow calls the genre "memoirs of exile" and argues that they offer a narrative teleology from victimization to freedom in the West, which "deflects readers' consideration away from any sociopolitical forces and refocuses fixedly on the individual's achievement of normative, enlightened status." Shuyu Kong (1999, p. 242) finds that *Wild Swans* is characterized by a "lack of self-reflection and constant self-justification." While "Jung Chang tends to remember her past self as quite detached from the chaos and violence around her, in other words, as little different from her present self," Kong (1999, p. 246) finds that Rae Yang's *Spider Eaters* is self-consciously reflexive, critical, and not self-flattering. As Kong (1999, pp. 242-243) puts it, "Unlike Jung Chang, Yang describes occasions when she is the one doing the violence and being a blind follower, such as beating enemies of the people and actively devoting herself to the revolutionary cause. In other words, she makes it clear that she was both a victim and a victimizer."

This is not to say that oral histories and memoirs are not important. They can be extremely valuable, especially when used in combination with historical sources. For example, in my research on Red Guard factionalism in the city of Chongqing, I relied heavily on the Red Guard press produced in Chongqing. One of the main Red Guard newspapers in Chongqing was called *August 15 Battle News*. While poring over the *August 15 Battle News*, I came across the story of a Li Shengpin, who died on July 29, 1967 in an accident while training high school students to use self-made hand-grenades for factional battles. In memory of Li, the *August 15 Battle News* published excerpts of Li's diaries, as well as a "letter to a friend" he wrote shortly before his death expressing his determination to carry on the Cultural Revolution even at the cost of his life. I would not have known that the letter was addressed to his fiancé, if I had not by chance read the memoir of the newspaper's former editor Zhou Ziren, where Zhou discloses this piece of information. Knowing that the letter was addressed to his fiancé and not an ordinary friend deepens my understanding of the poignancy of the political experiences of the Red Guard generation.

For a long time, the story of the Red Guard movement, a central component of the Cultural Revolution, is told mostly by those on the periphery, not at the center, of the movement. Such is the case with the most popular English-language memoirs. Helpful as they are in understanding their authors' personal experiences, they provide little information about the intricacies of factional organizing and conflicts and the constantly shifting political alignments in various localities. Luckily, starting in 2004 and 2005, numerous Chinese-language memoirs by former Red Guard leaders (they would call themselves rebels, or *zaofanpai*, instead of Red Guards) began to be published in Hong Kong, the United States, and sometimes first online. These include memoirs by Nie Yuanzi and Kuai Dafu from Beijing, Lu Li'an and Xu Hailiang from Wuhan, Gao Shuhua from Inner Mongolia, Fan Zhengmei from Harbin, Shen Fuxiang and Hong Ou from Shanghai, and many more. Published in 2006, Zhou Ziren's memoir of his experience as the editor of *August 15 Battle News* comes from this crop of Chinese-language memoirs. For anyone teaching and researching factionalism in the Chinese Cultural Revolution, these memoirs should provide many valuable insights. Unfortunately, none of them has been translated into English.

In addition to oral histories and memoirs, the Red Guard generation (including sent-down youth) produced significant numbers of poems, songs, letters, and diaries throughout the Cultural Revolution decade. Some of these were already circulated in manuscript form among circles of friends before the Cultural Revolution ended. Others are published in the post-CR period. More keep becoming available in print or on the internet. For about a decade, two electronic publications,

Yesterday edited by He Shu and *Remembrance* edited by Qi Zhi, have been dedicated to the collection of Cultural Revolution-related materials. They contain large amounts of documents of life. Again, very few of these documents are available in English, although some poems, such as those by Bei Dao and Huang Xiang, are. A carefully edited anthology of these documents in English translation would be an invaluable contribution to the field.

One excellent historical document I have used in teaching is the transcript of Mao's meeting with Red Guard leaders on July 28, 1968, entitled "**Dialogues with Responsible Persons of Capital Red Guard Congress.**" The meeting was essentially Mao's effort to end the Red Guard turmoil. All the CCP leaders, including Lin Biao, Zhou Enlai and Mao's wife Jiang Qing, were present with Mao. The Red Guard leaders who were called to the meeting included all the so-called "five big Red Guard leaders"—Nie Yuanzi, Kuai Dafu, Han Aijing, Tan Houlan, and Wang Dabin. The transcript revealed many different aspects about the politics and styles of the Cultural Revolution, especially Mao's personal style and his relations with other CCP leaders. For the Red Guard leaders present, especially Kuai Dafu, who arrived late because he was in the middle of factional warfare on the campus of Tsinghua University, the meeting was a moment of disillusionment because it was at this meeting that Mao explicitly withdrew his support of them. For the class assignment, I asked students to enact the entire meeting by impersonating the various characters in a dramatic performance. The transcript is very long and students had to first turn it into a manageable script for their performance. This in itself was a good exercise in writing and editing, and the quality of the script would reflect their level of understanding of the Cultural Revolution. Students would then have to memorize their own scripts, study the characters they would perform, and schedule rehearsals. The final performance was both instructive and entertaining. It turned out to be a wonderful way of wrapping up the course.

Finally, let me turn to interviews. There are many interviews available in different formats, although many of them are not available in English. Wu Wenguang has a documentary film on Red Guards, which contains interviews with former Red Guards. I would definitely show it in a class on the Cultural Revolution if I could find it. Laifang Leung's *Morning Sun: Interviews with Chinese Writers of the Lost Generation* (1994) is an early collection of interviews.

The most useful kind of interviews I have used in teaching is interviews generated by students. In an undergraduate seminar on the Cultural Revolution I taught in the past, I asked students to interview a person who had personal experiences in the Cultural Revolution and turn in a transcript of the interview as their term project. To do well in this assignment, students must first have a good understanding of the history and politics of the Cultural Revolution, which are covered in course readings and discussions. This preparation will help them to ask more meaningful questions in their interviews. Finding an interviewee is not always an easy job. Students of Chinese heritage can turn to their own families and relatives for help. Other students could seek help from fellow students or their teachers. Interviewees may be identified from among the Chinese immigrant population in

the US. Even if they reside in China, it is relatively easy to conduct interviews nowadays via instant messaging services.

Another challenging part of the interview assignment is that potential interviewees may be reluctant to talk about their experiences or are willing to share some experiences but not others. In these cases, students must respect their interviewees' choices. If interviewees choose to talk about part of their experiences but omit others, a knowledgeable interviewer may still be able to learn quite a bit from what is shared.

Interviewing is a good way of getting some personal perspectives on the Cultural Revolution, since people in different parts of the country may have different experiences. It is also a useful way of discovering new knowledge. Some interviewees who experienced the Cultural Revolution may reveal that they were never so deeply involved, or that they did not join any factional organizations but were instead "*xiaoyao pai*"—idlers. The scholarship on the Cultural Revolution has focused so exclusively on zealots and committed activists that we still know very little about those who idled away their time during even the most tumultuous periods.

Some interviews conducted by students in my class were so rich and detailed that they contribute important new knowledge about the Cultural Revolution. One student turned in an interview transcript with her parents of over 70 pages, which traced in great detail her parents' personal trajectories as Red Guards. I encouraged her to do more work on it with the goal of publishing it. I do not know whether she later had the time to continue working on it, but I did get her permission to cite from her interview in my book on the Red Guard generation. This is a good example of how teaching is also beneficial to research.

For students of Chinese heritage, the interviewing project gave them an opportunity to connect with family members in very special ways. Chinese parents of the Cultural Revolution generation do not usually engage their children in conversations about their past. The past can be difficult to talk about and people have many excuses not to touch it. But when a college-age child requests an interview for a class project, no parent can turn the child away. One student in my class conducted a five-hour telephone interview with her uncle in Guangzhou. She had hardly talked with her uncle before. They were both excited about the interview, and it turned out to be more than a conversation about the Cultural Revolution, but also a remarkable moment of human connection.

Since students would be interviewing different people with different experiences, it is important for students to share their interviews in class – both their experiences in doing the interviews and what they learned about the Cultural Revolution through the interviews. This almost inevitably helps students to see connections of their own interviewees' stories with other people's stories. It helps to put together a broader picture of the Cultural Revolution than just one single interview can ever do.