

Introduction

Steven Pieragastini¹

Researching the history of the People's Republic of China has never been easy. Archival access requires jumping bureaucratic hurdles and is inconsistent across time and space. Notably, in the course of the past ten years, access to and reproduction of documents on the post-1949 period has been considerably restricted, despite technological improvements and the digitization of many archival documents. But recent months and years have thrown up challenges that may leave researchers feeling truly despondent. With increasing political pressure from the mainland, including the kidnapping of booksellers and the implementation of a strict new National Security Law, even Hong Kong may become an unwelcoming research environment for scholars of the PRC, as the “restructuring” of the renowned Universities Service Centre for China Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong suggests.² Aside from new restrictions and a deepening animosity between the U.S. and China, which has already ensnared several academics, the COVID-19 pandemic has made in-person research nearly impossible.³ Nevertheless, this special issue aims to provide a degree of hope and guidance to scholars of PRC history everywhere. The contributors to this issue are all recent PhDs or current graduate students who have put together impressive research projects using a variety of methodologies, in spite of the prevailing difficulties. In addition to offering models of how to conduct research under current conditions, their experiences and insights compel us to consider fundamental methodological and ethical questions around source acquisition, preservation, and utilization.

In organizing this special issue, the contributors were asked to reflect on the following questions in their individual pieces: What is that state of the archives in mainland China today? How easily can one research the post-1949 period in state archives? From the documents available, how accurate a picture do we gain using a curtailed list of state-authored sources? How does the trend of digitization in databases both within and outside of the PRC affect the research process, as well as the conclusions drawn from such research? In the absence of archival documents, or as an addendum to them, what kinds of sources are available? What epistemological and ethical issues do they engender? What advice can we give to graduate students today who are seeking dissertation topics? What does the availability and nature of sources mean for the future of historiographical trends in PRC history?

Drawing on the pieces as a whole, we can venture some tentative conclusions. The first is that we should not fetishize the archive or official documents. A considerable body of scholarship has highlighted the problems inherent on relying on state-produced documents, even when they are fully accessible, and PRC history is no exception to these issues. Second, any alternatives to the archive such as grassroots sources or oral

history present problems of their own. Common standards of access and documentation need to be adopted so that information is not sequestered in private collections, only available for the owner's use. The retention or monopolization of sources by individual historians or institutions can lead to questionable interpretations, which only become apparent if the documents are later scrutinized by a wider body of scholars.⁴ Third, new technologies are tremendously helpful, especially during the pandemic, not only in locating information but also by revealing connections that would not be possible without computational methods and data visualization. That being said, they are not a replacement for “analog” research methods. Moreover, while digitization in theory ought to greatly expand access and availability of sources, it can and has led to the opposite, where formerly accessible documents, folders, or entire sections of archives are obscured to researchers upon digitization. The removal of documents can even be instantaneous; in a dramatic example, the excellent and extensive website www.archives.gov.cn suddenly went offline in the spring of 2020 and has not been revived since. Machine learning may provide the means for a new paradigm of information control, projecting the latest methods of surveillance and censorship back into the historical record.⁵ In sum, more than ever, historians of the PRC will have to be patient, creative, and diligent in finding information while critically analyzing their sources and being honest about their limitations.

A number of published pieces and scholarly gatherings have informed and inspired this special issue, including but not limited to a roundtable at the 2018 Meeting of the Historical Society for Twentieth Century China⁶, a workshop on “Revolutionary Routine: Grassroots Sources on Work, Family, and Private Life in Maoist China”⁷ at Columbia University in September 2019, a series of webinars on “Doing Chinese History in a New Era”⁸ in 2020-21 presented by the UC Irvine Long US-China Institute and the Council on East Asian Studies at Yale University, a workshop on “Chinese Archives in Crisis” organized at Stanford University in 2020, and two recent *PRC History Review* Roundtables on sources and methodology.⁹

There are far more promising young scholars than could be included in this special issue. Particularly in light of the pandemic, it is essential to build networks to share information and encourage those who are in the course of their doctoral studies, or completing their degrees in the face of a dire job market. Online venues and social media are a great means for developing scholarly networks while discussing sources and methodology, and highlighting the work of junior scholars. On a related note, it was our intention to include pieces by scholars currently based in the PRC, but we were unfortunately unable

to, as doing so in the current environment would potentially put these scholars' careers and livelihoods in jeopardy. This special issue is therefore dedicated to the principle that scholars, regardless of their nationality, should be allowed to conduct research, share their conclusions, collaborate with colleagues, and pursue a more accurate understanding of the past free from harassment or intimidation.

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² "Chinese University of Hong Kong to 'Restructure' China Study Center" (<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/hongkong-china-12242020163515.html>). For its part, the University released a statement denying the "rumors" and "misinformation" about the Centre's closure and guaranteeing future access to USC collections through the CUHK University Library system (<https://www.cpr.cuhk.edu.hk/en/press/open-letter-relating-to-the-universities-service-centre-for-china-studies-usc/>).

³ Though not entirely impossible; Jian Ren, "Dissertation Research Travel in China: Pandemic Version" (<https://rccs.rutgers.edu/blog-details/230-dissertation-research-travel-in-china-pandemic-version>)

⁴ As with an important recent debate on the translation and interpretation of phrases spoken by Mao Zedong during the Great Leap Forward. Adam Cathcart, "Mistranslating Mao in Chengdu, 1958" (<https://adamcathcart.com/2019/01/07/mistranslating-mao-in-chengdu-1958/>). See also the discussion of Mao's interjections during a March 1959 Party Plenum in

Shanghai on H-PRC (<https://networks.h-net.org/node/3544/discussions/99266/looking-great-leap-smoking-gun-document>) and a transcription of Mao's words from the Wilson Center's Digital Archive (<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/123036>).

⁵ Glenn D. Tiffert, "Peering down the Memory Hole: Censorship, Digitization, and the Fragility of Our Knowledge Base" *The American Historical Review*, Volume 124, Issue 2, April 2019, pp. 550–568

⁶ "Sources of/for the post-1949 History of China," 2018 Biennial Conference of the Historical Society for Twentieth Century China.

⁷ <http://archive.weai.columbia.edu/event/revolutionary-routine-grassroots-sources-on-work-family-and-private-life-in-maoist-china/>

⁸ Especially "Part 1: Digital Sources for Chinese History" (<https://youtu.be/s5BRRjP5Us0>) and "Part 3: Thinking Outside the Archive" (<https://youtu.be/K8mY7PGIXpc>)

⁹ "China from Without: Doing PRC History in Foreign Archives" <http://prchistory.org/review-june-2017/>; "New Perspectives in PRC History" <http://prchistory.org/review-october-2018/>