

Garbage Gleanings: Collected Knowledge of PRC History

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A few years ago, I began my dissertation research with an odd goal. At a time when scholars of PRC history scoured marketplaces such as Panjiayuan or Kongfz.com for primary sources, I was more interested in the story of these “garbage materials”: Where do they come from, what can they tell us about the bureaucracy that produced (and discarded) them, and how do they shape our knowledge of the Mao era?

Archives are a barometer of politics, and it is easy to say that Chinese archives are in a state of crisis.¹ The first issue involves access: since start of the Xi Jinping era, Chinese archives – post-1949 collections in particular – are increasingly closed to researchers. While access is already tenuous for Chinese nationals, foreign scholars, who already faced tougher restrictions before the Covid-19 pandemic, must now face the prospect of writing history without official archives.² Any visits to China will remain difficult until at least after the 2022 Beijing Olympics. Even then, amid deteriorating US-China relations, the Chinese government is likely to impose on foreign readers even stricter visa rules and restrictions on access to libraries and archives.

But the crisis in Chinese archives is not limited to access. Despite – or rather because of – tightening control in official collections, a secondary market for primary sources has emerged. From bidding platforms (such as Kongfz.com) to unofficial compendia (e.g. *Collection of Important CCP Historical Documents* 中共重要历史文献资料汇编), rampant commercialization of Chinese archives over the past few decades has fueled a multi-million dollar industry and spawned a new landscape of publishing ventures and grassroots collections.

A majority of grassroots archives came from work units that became defunct after the Mao era. Instead of transferring the records for permanent retention according to China’s archival laws, many offices sold them as waste paper during a period of rapid urbanization. At first sight, this lapse in archival custody confirms our popular impression of official corruption and malfeasance. Indeed, both the sellers and collectors of grassroots sources are quick to defend their trade as an act of resistance to official amnesia. “We are saving history from the dustbin,” many dealers would tell me during my ethnographic fieldwork. In their accounts, the Chinese government looms as the real villain: not only does it suppress popular memories of sensitive historical events such as the Cultural Revolution, it is also an irresponsible custodian of the nation’s documentary heritage.

But the Chinese state is not a monolith. A simple morality tale – of freedom vs. censorship, memory vs. forgetting – does not hold when we look more closely at actual flows of paper and

money: just as low-level bureaucrats sell Mao-era records for profit, the country’s education ministry has paid millions to institutions such as the Contemporary China Social Life Data and Research Center at Fudan University (复旦大学当代中国社会生活资料中心) to re-accession these displaced records.³ The privatization of official archives might be illegal on paper, but it cannot be blamed on individual greed or official graft alone. If anything, its popularity — and profitability — attest to the resilience of the informal economy in contemporary China. There, cultural entrepreneurs, grassroots intellectuals, and local officials alike have carved a small, yet significant, sphere formerly monopolized by the archival system: the supply of historical documentation.

To be sure, this gray market of archives is neither new nor unique to contemporary China. As a distinctive channel of political communication, the used paper market has long reassembled scraps of information from the pinnacle of power for street consumption. From official anthologies of Liulichang⁴ to the Grand Secretariat archives in the 1920s,⁵ what some call “sinological garbology”⁶ today is but the latest episode in China’s long history of archival displacement.

Historians grieve to see archives in the dump, but the market is sadly no savior of history; the need for profit dictates their afterlife. Thin on profit but high on bulk, archives are purchased by a small but loyal group of collectors. As market trends shift constantly, few dealers specialize in archives alone; instead, most supplement their income with lucrative trades in rare books, antiques, and other curiosities. But while archives are only one asset in their “portfolio,” they occupy a singular place: as a symbol of truth, they confer an aura of authenticity unmatched by any other object. In Shenyang, for example, a merchant proudly showed me a hand-written letter from his collection; it was a from the wife of Bo Xilai (薄熙来), who was once tipped for supreme power. “Just imagine,” his face lit up with glee. “It would have been a letter by the first lady!”

Had Bo remained in power, the letter would have fetched a good price – such was the dealer’s lament. From waste pickers to wholesale dealers to retail merchants and scholarly collectors, money casts a long shadow on both human sociability and archival conditions. In this bazaar economy, buying is not only an economic transaction, but also an elaborate ritual. At a time when information about the items on sale — from provenance to authenticity — is poor and unequal, buying signals interest and establishes trust; it is an essential part of sociability. Many collectors tell me that they would make small purchases just to stay on good terms with the seller; otherwise, the next “scoop” might go to another bidder. In the reverse direction, constant bargaining is important to dealers, too. Not only does it

introduce them to the latest trends in collecting, it also helps connect them to the most serious buyers.

These days, however, due to the illicit nature of the gray market, few dealers put their collection on display; both their physical and online store fronts are but an entry to — and camouflage of — the real offerings. Here, the clandestine nature of the trade not only adds to the allure of archives; it also changes their physical constitution. Secrecy sells. To increase revenue, top secret documents or specific key records are often extracted from the rest of the file; the original context and provenance — the hallmark of archives — are destroyed.

More than their contents, archives are thus valued for their materiality and sold like rare books or manuscripts, with additional premiums placed on rare seal designs, signatures of famous politicians, and more. Preservation standards vary among the dealers: while some continue to arrange the files by the official business for which they were created, others re-arrange them using new subject headings and remove more profitable items.

Here, the point is not to decry the "amateurism" of these collectors.⁷ After all, archival concepts and institutions have their own histories, and their reception in twentieth-century China had a complicated past. For too long, professional standards — of appraisal, description, and access — have also excluded marginal knowledge and memory of the past. For many dealers, garbology is a physical record of their life. Almost exclusively men of the Cultural Revolution generation, many of them rank among the most marginalized members in society and embody the grim face of China's urban growth. The world may choose to praise their ingenuity or blame their bootlegging, but one thing is clear: their archival practice is not just reselling but transformative work, one that reconstitutes both the physical record and their epistemic meaning.

And herein lies the irony. While the grassroots archives have endowed these merchants with cultural capital and collective identity, they enact new forms of violence. Compared to the injury to the physical record, far less invisible is the harm to human privacy and dignity. Many people whose personal records are on sale remain alive; they never consented to be personal collectibles or academic footnotes.⁸

Historians play a unique role in this trade. Private collectors such as Fan Jianchuan (樊建川) or Gao Xiaosong (高晓松) might have amassed enormous collections with their wealth, but professional historians provide luster and cachet.⁹ From conference invitations to book forewords to exhibition opportunities, the trade has created new sociabilities between academic and grassroots historians.¹⁰ Even though the former frequently accuse the dealers of monopolistic control and price-gouging, many have no recourse but to cash in their social capital. Unable to afford the materials, one scholar I met gained access by striking up an unusual deal with the merchant: together, the pair would edit a documentary compilation, which would open with the collector's introduction and personal profile.

Scholars who do not patronize Kongfz.com or the flea markets may think they are immune from this ethical conundrum. In reality, garbology casts a long shadow over the origin and trajectory of our field. Some of the most popular sources on PRC history — ranging from Song Yongyi's Databases of Contemporary Chinese Political Campaigns (中国当代政治运动史数据库) to the famous *Tiananmen Papers*¹¹ — came from leaks, and their provenance is still shrouded in obscurity.

On a deeper level, garbology as a method of intelligence could be traced to the Cold War, when the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies, with funding from the Ford Foundation, sponsored the creation of China studies. Among the key early issues of our field was the collection and dissemination of mainland materials in Hong Kong. Though not without contention and reform, the knowledge infrastructure of the American national security state remains.

Showing the underbelly to our field is not meant to indict any specific collection or institution, nor do I issue any blanket call to boycott garbology. If anything, its history highlights the connections among politics and knowledge production. Archives, in the past as today, are instruments of power. For this reason, as much as we must speak out against archival redactions and censorship in China, let us not forget over-classification, reclassification, and chronic under-funding of archives in the United States.¹² To do so is not to engage in *tu quoque* arguments, but to recognize how archival access, often elevated to the level of national security, remains a transnational issue. As tensions between the world's two largest powers deepen, our access to archives is more precarious than ever.

In the meantime, murderous remains of the Mao era have been let loose. As they transitioned from state secrets to street commodities to scholarly resources, every physical journey of the archives entails rich epistemic changes.¹³ We will never be able to reconstitute the archives "as they existed," but we can trace the meanings they lost and made. To compensate for the lack of provenance, grassroots archives have hastened to digitize their collections. While large holdings, such as those at Fudan, have tried to preserve the original grouping as much as possible, smaller collections, such as the **Maoist Legacy Project** at the University of Freiburg, re-arranged materials more fluidly by size and subject. Indeed, the new archival landscape we face today is a jungle of databases, each with its system for description, arrangement and storage. We urgently need shared standards for interoperability.¹⁴

In the meantime, many scholars are looking further afield to collect materials from foreign archives. Most active among them are Chinese scholars. Recognizing limitations of archival access at home, professors such as Shen Zhihua at East China Normal University are dispatching entire teams to purchase archives from around the world.¹⁵ Bankrolled in part by the Chinese government, these ambitious initiatives seek to not only "tell China's stories well," but also build the knowledge infrastructure for a new generation of area studies.

Archives are the stuff of history, but they do not set our questions and paradigms. We do. As much as we lament our dwindling access to official stacks, let us not forget that published collections, rather than original documents, are still the primary means of archival opening in China. We have only begun to study their history;¹⁶ we have yet to apply new digital methods to re-examine these old sources. One urgent task, I believe, is to create a meta-data archive of sorts, one that pools information from Chinese archives, published sources, and private collections to improve the discoverability of materials we can already access.¹⁷ The creation of such a database will empower new computational study of PRC history, which could further reveal the potential and limits of our current sources.

For example, while it is tedious and time-consuming for human readers to compare different editions, a machine could easily and quickly reveal textual discrepancies, thereby shedding light on the CCP's methods and logic of textual censorship.¹⁸ In the future, natural language processing technologies will permit us to extract named entities (individuals, places, organizations), explore topic models, and visualize information networks within the bureaucracy.¹⁹ These new digital archives will not only enlarge our source base at a time when access to Chinese collections becomes increasingly restrictive. While computational methods could never replace close reading of primary sources, they offer new forensic tools and yield fresh perspectives on a perennial question: how do we know what we know about China?

¹ This was the title of a recent conference at Stanford: <https://networks.hnet.org/node/22055/discussions/5856649/cfp-chinese-archives-crisis-international-workshop-stanford>.

² On a recent discussion of access conditions to Chinese archives, see Charles Kraus, "Researching the History of the People's Republic of China," *The CWIHP Working Paper Series*, 2016.

³ On the history of the collection, see Letian Zhang, "Preserving Collective and Individual Memories: The Contemporary China Social Life Data and Research Center at Fudan University," *Journal of Modern Chinese History* 10 (January 1, 2016): 87–97.

⁴ On the commerce of information at Liulichang, see Emily Mokros, "Reading the Guides, Directories, Manuals, and Anthologies of Liulichang," *East Asian Publishing and Society* 7, no. 2 (October 25, 2017): 127–66.

⁵ Shana J. Brown, "Archives at the Margins: Luo Zhenyu's Qing Documents and Nationalism in Republican China," *The Politics of Historical Production in Late Qing and Republican China*, August 13, 2007, 247–70.

⁶ See Jeremy Brown, "Finding and Using Grassroots Historical Sources from the Mao Era" (Chinese History Dissertation Reviews, December 15, 2010), <https://dissertationreviews.wordpress.com/2010/12/15/finding-and-using-grassroots-historical-sources-from-the-mao-era-by-jeremy-brown/>.

⁷ For a rich discussion on the meaning of connoisseurship, see Laurence Coderre, "The Curator, the Investor, and the Dupe: Consumer Desire and Chinese Cultural Revolution Memorabilia," *Journal of Material Culture* 21, no. 4 (December 1, 2016): 429–47.

⁸ Jie Li and Enhua Zhang, eds., *Red Legacies in China: Cultural Afterlives of the Communist Revolution* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2016).

⁹ On Fan and his museum town, see Denise Y. Ho and Jie Li, "From Landlord Manor to Red Memorabilia: Reincarnations of a Chinese Museum Town," *Modern China* 42, no. 1 (January 1, 2016): 3–37.

¹⁰ On grassroots historians, see Sebastian Veg, *Minjian: The Rise of China's Grassroots Intellectuals* (Columbia University Press, 2019).

¹¹ 新世紀出版社, ed., 最後的秘密: 中國十三屆四中全會"六四"結論文檔. *The Last Secret: The Final Documents from the June Fourth Crackdown* (新世紀出版社, 2019).

¹² Matthew Connelly, "State Secrecy, Archival Negligence, and the End of History as We Know It" (Knight First Amendment Institute, September 2018), <https://knightcolumbia.org/content/state-secrecy-archival-negligence-and-end-history-we-know-it>.

¹³ Kuisong Yang, *Eight Outcasts: Social and Political Marginalization in China Under Mao* (University of California Press, 2019).

¹⁴ A noteworthy initiative is currently underway at the Maoist Legacy Project, which has entered a formal agreement with CrossAsia to index their collection. The team has also adopted the open-source platform Omeka for front-end access, Dublin core standards for metadata, and Apache Solr for indexing. The platform is free to the public with registration. This essay was revised on September 30, 2021 to clarify the Maoist Legacy Project's data management practice.

¹⁵ Professor Shen Zhihua's project, "The Collection, Organization, and Research of Eastern European Countries during the Cold War 东欧各国冷战时期档案收集、整理与研究," was funded by the National Social Science Fund of China 国家社会科学基金, and has recently published Shen Zhihua 沈志华, *Catalogue of Documents on the Transformation of Social Systems in Eastern Europe* 东欧各国社会制度转型档案文献编目 (社会科学文献出版社, 2019).

¹⁶ Martin T. Fromm, *Borderland Memories: Searching for Historical Identity in Post-Mao China* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

¹⁷ A good example is the CrossAsia Integrated Text Repository (<https://crossasia.org/>), which, in addition to robust search functions across hundreds of Chinese-language documents, supports digital humanities analysis.

¹⁸ For a recent example, see Cheng Yinhong 程映虹, "毛澤東的「階級分析」, 原版有「數據支持」? 後來刪掉了什麼? Was Mao Zedong's original class analysis backed up by data? What was deleted?" (端傳媒 Initium Media, July 25, 2021), <https://theinitium.com/article/20210725-opinion-mao-theory-data/>.

¹⁹ For example, see the Contemporary Chinese Village Data Project (<http://www.chinesevillagedata.library.pitt.edu>) at the East Asian Library of the University of Pittsburgh: Yuanziyi Zhang, "China's Rural Statistics: The Contemporary Chinese Village Gazetteer Data Project," *Journal of East Asian Libraries*, no. 171 (2020): 8.