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Problematizing the "Personal Collection": the Politics and Implications of How Historians Cite Sources

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Several years ago, graduate students at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) were asked to consider the defining features of our modern Chinese history program. For better or for worse, answers generally coalesced around UCSD's reputation for studies investigating the "lived experiences" of everyday people in the People's Republic of China (PRC). UCSD is not alone in this pursuing this scholarly direction; a growing group of universities across the world are home to Chinese history scholars who use a variety of paper-based sources – many not housed in official Chinese archives – to write the histories of social movements, the economy, agriculture, class, gender, and a host of other aspects of the Mao-era. These materials, often sourced from flea markets, bookstores, online booksellers, and dealers, include official documents, personnel files, pamphlets, handbooks, locally-produced documentary collections, leaflets, diaries, tickets, identity cards, and all the other ephemera of everyday life. This brand of scholarship goes by several slightly fluid umbrella terms, with "garbology" (which I will use here) and "grassroots history" being two of the most popular in English. The fantastic studies drawing from these sources continue to overturn the grand narratives of modern Chinese historical studies. While access to official archives in the PRC remains difficult and heavily mediated by the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) desire to control historical scholarship, the turn toward using alternative sources of information like garbology materials is unlikely to disappear.

Rather than speaking to the many merits of this school of scholarship, however, this piece draws attention to how garbology can – and does – lead to deeply problematic practices concerning the citation of non-archival materials. At the center of this malaise is the notion of the "personal collection." So far, the scholars who collect these garbological materials have tended to keep hold of them, making references to "personal collections," "author collections" and items being "in the author's possession" more and more common in the footnotes of scholarly writing. The growth of this practice, largely unquestioned, is exemplified in the work *Maoism at the Grassroots*, the 2015 edited volume overseen by Jeremy Brown and Matthew Johnson. Arguably representing the high tide of the first wave of garbological scholarship, the work makes reference to personally-held materials across several chapters. In other chapters, relatively obscure materials have no clear provenance, and in the absence of a more in-depth citation it seems fair to assume that at least some of these are being held by the authors. Overall, *Maoism at the Grassroots* typifies the broader ease with which historians have felt comfortable citing materials that they personally hold. In the paragraphs that follow, I will lay out the reasons why I think this practice poses practical and ethical challenges for the field. I will also lay-out alternatives for future garbology research so that we can avoid some of the mistakes of the past.

Problematizing the Use of Garbological Sources

Because it is an instructive case, I will stay with the example of *Maoism at the Grassroots* and examine its citation practices more closely. In 2016, I pored over the book's endnotes and bibliography to get a sense of how many citations referred to material either in the collection of the chapter's author or not ascribed to any collection at all. Among the contributors, there exists a very clear split between those who provided accessible routes to their cited source material and those who did not. Stand-out examples of the former include Cao Shuji, Matthew Johnson and Xiaoxuan Wang, who all draw on documents housed in municipal and county archives. While access to these repositories is far from guaranteed in today's research climate, it is nonetheless theoretically possible for an historian to access these sources independent of their author.

When it comes to the garbologists employing materials not found in state archives, their citations are markedly less helpful to the scholarly reader. Yang Kuisong draws heavily on a "Xuchang XX factory hooligan dossier—Zang Qiren" which is not attributed to any collection, whether personal or institutional. Daniel Leese's excellent study of "Revising Political Verdicts in Post-Mao China" uses documents from a Beijing court which remain unattributed, while Jeremy Brown and Sha Qingqing cite a diary of unknown provenance. In the absence of proper citation and attribution, I suspect that all these materials come from the authors' own collections. In addition, Wang Haiguang relies heavily on material attributed to his own collections and, throughout the book's notes, sporadic references to documents in various authors' collections reaffirms the importance of privately collected material to garbological scholarship. While I do not have the space here to provide an exhaustive list of all scholarship that contains similar types of citation, it suffices to say that this practice is common and posed as legitimate to junior scholars looking to make their initial forays into the field.

Anybody who has braved a cold morning to go to a book market, or spent hours trawling online websites for materials, knows the effort required to collect garbological sources. In some ways, these experiences might even generate a strong level of attachment between the historian and the fruits of their labors. For my own dissertation project, for example, I collected hundreds of books related to the Criticize Lin, Criticize Confucius campaign (1974-1976) and will freely confess to being very invested in them and their research value.

Extrapolating from my own experience, I believe this attachment in part drives the practice whereby garbologists maintain possession of their own collections of material *even when they have cited them in public-facing research*.

When historians use materials from their own collections and cite them as such, they are not fulfilling one side of the academic bargain. Ideally, the academic prestige, scholarly capital, and career advancement authors gain from publishing an article or monograph stems partly from their willingness to open up their ideas to the scrutiny of others, contribute to the broad sweep of scholarly knowledge, and risk push-back and engagement from others. When citations cannot be followed-up and material cannot be independently scrutinized, this harms the further development of the field by creating a situation where academic scrutiny depends on the author themselves mediating access to their source materials.

Besides the obvious intellectual benefits that accrue from other scholars following-up on references and scrutinizing how the garbologists analyze their source material, the practice of citing the "personal collection" has deeper political implications and consequences. In citing materials remaining only in their possession, garbologists create informal networks of access to information as a substitute for formal structures. When a personal collection is cited, other scholars wishing to scrutinize such scholarship and obtain the cited sources must approach the original author. This introduces interpersonal dynamics – which in academia are often subject to a complex network of power relations – into access to scholarly knowledge. If garbologist A and scholar B do not get along, how might this affect A's willingness to share materials with B? If A is a tenured professor and B a first-year graduate student, how comfortable will B feel emailing A to request access to every "author's collection" source used in A's recent article? How might race, gender, and class further mediate the contact between A and B? I strongly subscribe to the opinion that Open Access is a necessary precondition to making academia as inclusive as possible, and I suggest here that the notion of the "personal collection" works against this goal. Jeremy Brown and Matthew Johnson highlight in their introduction to *Maoism at the Grassroots* that archives "are produced by institutions of state power" (5). I want to highlight here how the personal collection is likewise connected to and produced by questions of power and privilege.

If access to materials is mediated through the dynamics of peer-to-peer relationships, this also risks a situation where those with the best networking ability stay at the head of the field in the cut-throat academic job market. I have been in enough conference settings and talks to know that sources are often shared as a result of serendipity, where individuals that "get on" and have overlapping research interests proceed to exchange sources. I myself have benefited from just such an arrangement. People are, of course, free to dispose of what they privately collected in any way they wish, but the institutionalization of *cited* material as a matter of course is one way in which the field can collectively sidestep the need for some of these personal connections. Those without the social capital to form them, or the financial capital to travel to these all-important conference events, should not lose out as a result.

I need to make something clear here: I do not subscribe to the belief that archives, archivists, and librarians are neutral custodians, outside the bounds of the politicization and regulation of knowledge. Recent coverage of "archiving while black" had made this once again abundantly clear. Digital repositories, likewise, privilege those with access to particular technology and other resources, and like the physical archive they present material in ways that shape analytical narratives. An abundance of archival studies scholarship exists to question and complicate these institutions and their dynamics, and these have had a big influence on my thinking.

But accepting that there will never be a "perfect" solution to the question of how the historical archive is organized and preserved, I do believe that institutionalizing materials marks a step forward from the practices I have critiqued above. Compared to historians without formal training in archive science, expert librarians and other data management professionals in the Chinese studies field are in my view better placed to consider how to overcome the limitations of the archive. Besides this conservation benefit, long after the historian has moved on to the next research project, institutions will continue to confront and be confronted with the politics and power behind their archival practices. By making garbological materials a part of the public archival record, this would open the door to the kind of critical examination that is rarely found in the scholarship of garbology's practitioners. Weighing the choice between having material in institutions or tucked away in private office drawers, I find that the former not only widens access and increases the longevity of materials, but also opens up the door to future interrogation of the sources and archives underpinning historical research.

The above paragraph allows me to propose an alternative to the personal collection: transferring materials just *ahead of an article or book's final publication* to the care of institutions and away from the offices of individuals. If materials are transferred once research is completed and an article or book is in its finalized form, this protects the intellectual research of the original collecting scholar while respecting the broader interests of the community. For my part, I did exactly this with my own extensive collection of Chinese propaganda materials –much of which is scarce or contains idiosyncratic bibliographic features not found in other copies – ahead of publishing my dissertation in 2021. These materials now live in the library at UCSD, and future scholars who wish to analyze my use of sources, or use them for their own work, will always be able to do so without recourse to me. They will never need to pay registration fees and fly to a conference to network with me, they will never have to write me an awkward email, and they will not need to navigate the intricacies of our peer-to-peer relationship. For a scholar wishing to study the structure of the archives underpinning scholarship on the history of modern Chinese propaganda, institutionalization has made this more possible.

At this juncture, I want to recognize that some prominent garbologists have recently taken retrospective steps to widen

access to their materials. Jeremy Brown, for example, now runs a website called "PRC Source Transparency" holding digital scans of all of the garbology material cited in his scholarly work (with the exception of material with personal information requiring possible redacting). Michael Schoenhals' materials are now housed at the Lund University Library and the collection is available online. These recent solutions address some of the issues regarding access covered in this piece and thus represent a positive step forward. At the same time, they possess limitations that institutionalizing material ahead of publication would avoid. In both cases, these online depositories are not connected to the citations in their scholarship, leaving the readers to join the dots after publication. Scans are also not a surrogate for physical copies because they preclude analysis of a source's materiality. In the case of Brown, the materials remain in his possession and access to the physical copy appears to remain through him.

As already suggested, transferring material to institutional care has the added benefit of preserving materials for future use. Given the low quality of much of the paper used during the Mao era, storage of materials under proper archival conditions will prolong their life and prevent vital information from wasting away. In transferring materials to the care of librarians and archivists, we can call upon their expertise in preserving sources and balancing the needs of users with the concerns of conservation, while institutionalization makes the politics underlining these choices more explicit and more accessible. The concept of the "personal collection" tacitly implies that the historian, and not the professional archivist, knows what is best for sources. Meanwhile, the physically fragile documentary record collected so painstakingly on research trips and cited so judiciously in scholarship sits in offices, cupboards and drawers, rapidly degrading and literally fading away. Archivists are not historians, and neither should historians pretend to be archivists.

Garbology's source practices and "personal collections" also generate a whole host of legal and ethical dilemmas. For one, the provenance of sources like documents, personnel files, and diaries is rarely clear when they are purchased, leaving open the possibility that these are stolen or obtained in an underhand manner for resale into the secondhand market. Given the amount of money these materials can now command in the marketplace, with big institutions inside and outside of China looking to make acquisitions, it seems unlikely that all these garbology materials are just dug out of the trash. In China, taking documents outside of the country is illegal and, while these restrictions are often viewed as a way for the state to control scholarship, we must also recognize that they help prevent the circulation and sale of files and documents in dubious circumstances. These laws also exist to protect privacy. Many garbologists rightly change the names of individuals named in personnel files to protect their identity, but this sidesteps ethical questions concerning whether historians have any right to personally own large swathes of an individual's personal information without their express consent. I do not imagine that the individuals mentioned in personnel files or bureaucratic documents would be too reassured to know that they now sit in an academic's office. I, for one, would not want my grandparents' medical records or work performance files in the private, unregulated hands of a dealer, bookseller, or scholar. Institutionalizing materials does not eliminate these ethical dilemmas, but once again I argue that institutions are better placed than individuals to navigate these ethical implications and ensure that privacy is protected at all costs. Archivists and librarians deal with these questions on an almost daily basis, and historians should again acknowledge their expertise.

Considering that garbology and grassroots history resists many of the hegemonic narratives of PRC history, it is also ironic that the commodification of sources 'owned' in personal collections strips these sources of much of their counter-narrative agency. As I argued above, personal collections create hierarchies of access to knowledge and information, and these in some ways replicate those introduced by the CCP. In the 1950s and 1960s, only a privileged few enjoyed access to internal information, and these individuals exerted significant social and political influence as a result. In *Maoism at the Grassroots*, Michael Schoenhals shows in his piece on China's "Great Proletarian Information Revolution" that the Red Guard movement was partly an attempt to disrupt strangleholds over information. Red Guard factions used situation reports, telephone codes and bureaucracies spreading across China to assert control over the narrative of the Cultural Revolution, prompting the authorities to respond with policies of "enforced dissolution" (253). In the act of citing sources in his personal collection, however, Schoenhals ironically turned these materials into privately held commodities available only to a limited, elite academic audience. When materials sit in personal collections after they have been cited, their collectors have taken away much of these materials' potential to mount further challenges to existing ideas by restricting their circulation. Sources become a commodity to be 'possessed' and shared informally among the collector and their friends or colleagues. When materials are purchased either with public money or fellowship funding rather than private funds, this is another reason to open them up for the common good. With funding for the humanities disappearing amidst an unfolding economic downturn, sharing the fruits of research trips (once their collector has made use of sources in their scholarship) will help ensure that those without the means to make expensive trips to China can continue their research.

One final critique of the "personal collection" pertains to their long-term future and the current absence of any plan for repatriation of materials. Some garbologists working in the West legitimize the transferring of two types of garbological source – government documents and personnel files – out of China by citing the Chinese state's attempts to suppress these histories, push its politicized narratives of modern Chinese history, and (in some cases) destroy these materials. Official documents and personnel files, however, cannot be like many of the antiquities in Western museums, plundered from their original context and never to return. When we buy documents and files in book markets, irrespective of whether they end up in personal collections or institutions abroad, we take possession of the documentary record of the Chinese state and its citizens. Therefore, we must do so with the hope that we can

eventually transfer them back to their home context. This hope already sounds loaded with colonial baggage – are scholars in the West now deciding when a state can be trusted with its own archives? – and this is one of the reasons why collecting documents and files is arguably best avoided in the first place. But, given that so many materials have already been taken out of China, institutions are better placed to evaluate these processes, take the lead in returning them to their proper context, and undergo outside scrutiny concerning these questions. In the absence of stated concrete plans from garbologists regarding the long-term future of collected sources, moving private collections to libraries and other depositories ensures a more stable future for these materials and will facilitate their eventual repatriation.

Concluding Thoughts and Future Directions

The aim of this piece is to advance discussion about the practice of citing and keeping personal collections of material. It is not the final word, nor the only word, but an attempt to problematize a practice that has lain uncritiqued in print for too long. I would like to suggest to younger scholars like myself that we can follow a different path to the first generation of garbologists. For one, we can institutionalize the materials we cite to promote open access to information, remove some of the power dynamics of academic life, and aid the work of future historians. Institutionalizing materials will also advance the responsible custodianship of our sources by those better placed than us to evaluate the many dilemmas these materials engender. In short, I would like to propose an alternative set of principles for us to follow:

1. That materials cited in scholarly work should be available for other academics to consult.
2. That these materials should be housed in institutions – archives, libraries, and research centers – to ensure historians do not become archivists and gatekeepers to the source material they cite.
3. That historians should do everything in their power to guarantee the usefulness of their citations for subsequent generations of scholars, including not referring to "personal collections" in their citations.

These guidelines are not perfect, nor do they successfully resolve many of the political considerations tied up in grassroots research on PRC history. I can also foresee a range of scenarios in which applying them might cause personal problems for scholars working in sensitive academic environments. As for institutions, we must also reckon with the fact that many do not have the space, money, or inclination to absorb large donations of materials, and these problems will likely worsen under the long-term impact of budget cutting at universities. My remarks here are trying to underscore that citation and archival practices are an essential and undervalued part of ethically producing and revising scholarly knowledge. The garbologists themselves have recognized this in their critiques of other scholars.[1] Strong citations and community-oriented approaches to materials facilitate research into important histories, encourage scrutiny of scholarly arguments and archives, and advance understanding of how to ethically practice the historian's craft. Given that access to sources at Chinese archives is rapidly diminishing, questions over how we should handle garbology materials become ever more urgent.

[1] For example, see footnote 37 on page 10 of Michael Schoenhals' *Spying for the People: Mao's Secret Agents, 1949–1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).