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Researching the PRC in Municipal and Provincial Archives

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From a distance, the Chinese state apparatus appears to function as a unified—almost omniscient—entity. In reality, though, political power remains fragmented, including within China's various archival systems. In an era of increasingly restricted access, an awareness of the inconsistencies within China's byzantine archival bureaucracy is particularly valuable. This essay examines the current (circa 2017) nature of archival research at municipal and provincial archives in China. The first section analyzes the unique challenges researchers of PRC history face today and the second section offers strategies for circumventing these issues.

Challenges to Conducting Research on the PRC

It is common knowledge among historians of China, particularly for those researching the PRC, that archival access can be highly unpredictable. In anticipation of this challenge, during my dissertation research year I planned to visit a variety of archives in different provinces and regions of China, and this strategy proved fruitful. Whereas all state archives, at least as of 2017, require letters of introduction from an academic institution in China, some archives even have an unspoken mandate that the institution be local. For instance, in 2017, I travelled to Wuhan to conduct research at the city's municipal archives. Although I had successfully used the same letter of introduction at countless other archives, I was turned away from the Wuhan Municipal Archives on the grounds that my letter of introduction was not from a local institution. Although I was frustrated and disappointed, of the nine municipal and provincial archives I visited that year, Wuhan was the only one for which I was completely denied access.[1]

Even with access to the archival establishments themselves, the availability of sources can still vary dramatically because the regulatory framework that determines which materials researchers can access differs from place to place. Indeed, each archive has its own evolving ecosystem consisting of a unique visitor schedule, registration system, filing scheme, and research policies. While some archives have completely digitized their catalogs and holdings, others still rely on hand-written paper catalogs and have left their holdings in their original paper form. The digitization process—what is often simply an excuse to render large collections of archival materials inaccessible to the public for years at a time—has advantages and drawbacks. On the one hand, obtaining digital access to sources can expedite the research process. Rather than having to request specific boxes that then need to be located in the storeroom and sifted through, materials in a digital collection can be viewed with the click of a mouse. And some archives, such as the Tianjin Municipal Archives, post digital copies of selected archival materials on their websites. Such materials do not require registering at the archive or obtaining special permission to view the materials. Recently, the Shanghai Municipal Archives even made its index and more than 23,000 archival documents available online. On the other hand, in what seems to be a widespread trend, materials that used to be accessible in hard copies have now "disappeared" in the process of digitization. Of course, the materials have not actually vanished but have been surreptitiously removed from the public arena, as in the case of the majority of the documents at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives in Beijing (though some of those materials are available in the Wilson Center Digital Archive). In short, digitization is a double-edged sword.

In addition to digitization, another challenge with regard to archival access is the state's haphazard deployment of "ethics" as an excuse not to share files with researchers. For example, at the Hangzhou Municipal Archives, I was able to view a digitized catalog of archival holdings including the titles of court records and medical reports. However, when I requested to view those materials, I was told that they were off-limits because they pertained to individual people whose privacy rights needed to be protected. I was given a similar excuse at the Zhejiang Provincial Archives regarding access to personal medical histories, records that were listed in the catalog but then were withheld from view. I would support such a policy if implemented to protect the rights of living people whose records held incriminating or deeply personal information, yet I doubt this type of commitment undergirds state decisions to block access to certain materials. In fact, one might argue that the value to be gained from exposing historical state violence offsets the harm inflicted by violating individual privacy rights. In practice, the fact that state archives are so inconsistent in defining which types of archival materials are acceptable for use also makes the research process more complicated. In other words, it is never clear from the outset whether materials will be barred from the public for political reasons or if a generous archivist will grant access. For these reasons, constructing a research project that involves several different archives can be of great benefit (a preliminary trip to potential archives is also important for gauging each archive's level of openness, although this is subject to frequent change).

Making the Most of the Archival Bureaucracy

Despite obstacles to viewing certain materials, being armed with knowledge about the innerworkings of Chinese archives can be advantageous. Even without access to the full-text sources themselves, it is still possible to pick up on broader trends simply from viewing archival catalogs. Each time I visit a new archive, I get a better sense of what *potential* materials are available in state archives. To provide a concrete example, when I visited the Shanghai and Beijing Municipal Archives (before the PRC-era materials were excised from the latter collection), I was not able to locate court proceedings or records

of clinical medical trials even in the archival catalogs. At the Guangdong Provincial Archives, however, where the digital catalogs were organized according to a different logic, I could at least confirm that records of this type existed even if I could not actually look at them. With this knowledge, I expanded my search criteria at other archives to include terms that might lead me to relevant records that had somehow fallen through the cracks of the state bureaucracy.

Likewise, the same principles of (dis)organization that govern state archives also apply to state libraries. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that some of the exact same materials I was forbidden to view at the provincial and municipal archives were available for borrowing at the Shanghai Library and the National Library in Beijing. It is worth noting that the boundary between published media and archival materials is not always clear-cut because these two categories are not mutually exclusive. This fuzzy distinction, coupled with the fact that archives and libraries often do not have uniform system-wide polices, can actually work in the researcher's favor.

This brings me to my final point. Due to decades of limited archival access, historians of the PRC have a particular tendency to "fetishize" the archive as *the* source of knowledge about the past.[2] For this reason, researchers often gravitate toward projects that draw on obscure materials and virgin archival collections. Yet, using published materials—such as, medical guides, songbooks, and propaganda posters—either on their own or in combination with archival materials can be highly productive. Not only are published materials much easier to locate and access, but they can be used to interpret the fragments that emerge at the margins of the archive. Moreover, even within so-called official sources—sources that were produced by agents of the state, preserved in government archives, or published with state approval—a good deal of heterogeneity still exists.[3] As many scholars of gender, race, and colonialism have shown, it is only through reading against the grain that we can peel back the layers of power and access non-elite voices. The practice of reading against the grain, in turn, is only possible with a solid contextual foundation. In the case of PRC history, contextual information and narratives found in published sources can play an integral role in decoding the historically specific meanings embedded in official and unofficial documents.

To sum up, each archive or state-controlled knowledge repository has its own logic. While obtaining access to certain archival sources, or even to archives themselves, is increasingly difficult, certain strategies exist for negotiating state power. Most critically, no one state archive's policies should be treated as representative of the whole archival system. Furthermore, given the precarious nature of archival access, it is necessary to take full advantage of the sources available *outside* of state archives rather than simply fetishizing the archive's veiled secrets.

[1] Between 2016 and 2017, I visited the Beijing Municipal Archives, Guangzhou Municipal Archives, Guangdong Provincial Archives, Hangzhou Municipal Archives, Luoyang Municipal Archives, Qingdao Municipal Archives, Shanghai Municipal Archives, Tianjin Municipal Archives, and Zhejiang Provincial Archives.

[2] In her work on the history of sexuality in colonial India, Anjali Arondekar pushes back against this obsession with archives as the only source of truth; Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 6.

[3] Aminda Smith, *Thought Reform and China's Dangerous Classes* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 6.