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Doing Research on Pre-1949 Land Reform in China

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I did dissertation research in China from 2015 to 2016, visiting the National Library in Beijing, as well as provincial and some local-level archives and libraries in Shandong, Hebei, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Shanghai, Sichuan, and Chongqing. Nowadays, fellow graduate students tell me I was lucky to catch the last stage of the "good times" of PRC archival access. For historians of the PRC, I am not sure if there ever was a "good time" to examine archives. If so, perhaps the golden age was before I went to college in 2005. In my experience, the openness of PRC archives has been gradually shrinking. After the new leader began emphasizing ideological work, access to national, provincial, and local level archives has been increasingly difficult. As China-US relations deteriorated during Trump's presidency, growing nationalistic sentiments led to everything being blamed on "foreign powers" (jingwai shili 境外势力), which has made it more difficult for scholars to do research in China. Meanwhile, digitization of historical materials in the PRC has developed fast, allowing researchers to conduct research remotely.

In the course of my research, barriers to searching for written materials in archives led me to adjust my dissertation topic to focus primarily on rural women in pre-1949 Land Reform in North China. The nature of archival research varies by location. Generally speaking, services in the Yangzi Delta region were better than in other regions. The Shanghai Municipal Archives is still the most open facility in mainland China.

It is essential to establish effective communication and maintain good relationships with the archives' staff because they are the people who make decisions regarding the accessibility of the documents. I am most familiar with the archives in Shandong province. The Shandong Provincial Archives (in Jinan) digitized and reorganized their collections over several years. The younger staff did not seem to know much about their collections and did not have much experience dealing with researchers. Having worked first in the Shandong archives, I was surprised by the professionalism and knowledgeability of the staff in the Jiangsu and Shanghai archives and libraries.

Many years ago, if a scholar had effective networks (*guanxi* 关系), he/she might be able to access restricted archives. However, staff in most archives are now cautious and suspicious of researchers, particularly non-Chinese scholars. In one provincial archive, I quickly gained the director's favor by acknowledging that we were from the same town, and he asked me to help him do some background research on every visitor during my stay. They included a scholar who claimed that the Great Famine was actually only a "grand rumor" and criticized other scholars' high estimates of famine mortality. The director suspected that this scholar was "spying on something" because he asked for archives about the Great Famine. Although most historians do not respect his research, this scholar has received official endorsements, such as from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Of course, I never said anything negative about the other visitors, and I did not witness the director sabotage any visitor because of my words. I ran into a worse situation at the Sichuan Provincial Library. A staff member suspected that I had ulterior motives when I asked for documents about female Communist spies in the late 1940s. She searched all my notes and laptop, then forced me to leave. Obviously, documents from the late 1940s should be open to the public according to the archives law. I believe that the staff member just wanted to show off her power and make a scene to entertain herself on a dull day, because the other staff members were happy to show me this file during my next visit. In any event, this kind of distrust between archivists and researchers is widespread.

Another issue that limits access is the phenomenon of monopolies over archives. Some universities cooperate with archives under the auspices of social science foundation projects and monopolize the use of these archives. For instance, a research project sponsored by one university has sole access to the vast collection of legal cases from the Republican era housed in one provincial archive. The goodhearted director told me about the existence of these documents and showed me some volumes. But he warned me again and again that I could not take any notes or use any of those cases in my research. The benefit of these projects is that there will be published or digitized archives in the future. But scholars not directly involved with these projects, meaning most scholars, will have to wait a long time.

Unlike the suspicious archive staff, most professors at Chinese universities are friendly and willing to help outside scholars. One professor said, "it is very difficult for me to publish articles in Chinese. Overseas scholars can make full use of my collection for their research." My dissertation benefits significantly from the sources he provided to me. Meanwhile, it is crucial to protect our colleagues in China; some scholars have come under investigation because of their research and use of archival collections. If any resource could potentially cause trouble for Chinese scholars who provide sources without state approval, their provenance should be kept secret and readers should accept the limitations on relocating said source(s). If it would still be possible for would-be censors to find out the sources' origins, scholars may have to refrain from using them in any way. When I was doing research in China, professors at different universities were willing to help graduate students and provide them "letters of introduction" in the name of their institutions to go to archives. However, it is nearly impossible to get such letters from Chinese universities now. A letter of introduction from a foreign institution may cause delays; the

staff would have to report the foreign visitor's request to their higher administrative authorities to get their approval of the request for access.

Finding sources in the archives often requires luck. One document significant for my work is a volume of police records that I found in the Shandong Provincial Archives in 2016. These materials were obviously written by local policemen who had received only elementary-level education in villages; their handwritten reports included lots of character variants and uncommon simplified characters. Their narratives were quite different from those of the outside (*waidi*) cadres and expressed more concerns about and dissatisfaction with the Land Reform movement. These police records are crucial to understand the variety of people's experiences of Land Reform. The policemen vividly recorded what happened in villages when struggle sessions were held, including villagers' doubts and confusions about the movement, conflicts between outside cadres and villagers, discussions among the villagers after the struggle sessions, etc.

One term that recurs frequently in the police reports is "worn-out shoes" (*poxie*, 破鞋), meaning "sluts" in vulgar Chinese slang. Why did the authors frequently use this term when referring to female activists? Did the use of this term reveal their misogyny? Who were the "sluts" of the revolution? My research starts from this term to examine how rural women experienced and practiced violence in the late 1940s, and how Land Reform changed poor rural women's social status, work ethic, and sexuality. However, when I tried to consult these documents again in 2018, the staff told me that they were no longer available.

Serendipity also came to the rescue during interviews that I conducted as a supplement to archival research. One day, I took a taxi in Jinan and, thanks to Jinan's notorious traffic jams, had time for a long conversation with the driver. He introduced me to one of his relatives, an old lady who had participated in the Land Reform and later became a provincial cadre's wife; my discussion with her proved to be one of my most fruitful oral history interviews.

Limited access to the archives drives scholars of the PRC to look for new sources and new topics. In addition to helping overcome archival limitations, oral history is particularly important for examining the history of marginalized groups, such as the rural women that my research focuses on.[1] Some interviewees greatly surprised me and led me to new avenues of research that I would not have otherwise explored. During one interview, the interviewee intently sang revolutionary songs and folk songs that she had learned when she was a teenager. Her singing made me think about the role of songs in rural women's lives. The majority of rural women were illiterate or only received an elementary education, and scarcely left any written records. However, among women, songs could be memorized and passed on for decades, as a kind of oral history archive. They often showed that women remembered the past in different ways than men did. Inspired by this lady, I kept searching for revolutionary songs and operas and collections of folk songs. Although exaggerated, these songs vividly describe an ideal woman, a condemned woman, or a kind of romantic relationship for the rural poor. For instance, official documents touch on the movement to "reform idlers" (*gaizao erliuzi*, 改造二流子) in the CCP base areas in the 1940s, but not much is known about the targets of this movement. A folksong I collected is a valuable example of a representation of a female idler, or slattern (*nüerliuzi*, 女二流子), a young woman who likes dressing up, cracking melon seeds, and spreading gossip while visiting neighbors, flirting with young men and gambling.[2] The song suggests that a lazy woman who did not participate in agricultural production was also regarded as a loose woman. In Communist campaigns, particularly the Land Reform movement, this group of women was targeted for "reform," to make their work ethic and sexuality conform to the expectations of the new socialist regime.

Historians must carefully contextualize interviews and analyze their subtexts and silences. Silences, omissions, and mumbled answers in women's stories reveal essential information about their social status. I only interviewed five people (two men, three women) who experienced Land Reform during my research trip, because it was difficult to find elderly people who experienced this period and still were able to narrate their experience clearly. Moreover, in the almost seventy years since the movement, their memories of Land Reform were reconstructed and reshaped in waves of political movements and personal life changes.

One of the most telling examples of silence is the way in which women reacted to the subject of violence. All four of my interviewees who had been cadres during Land Reform did not answer questions about violence they had witnessed in the movement. Instead, they always redirected the question, to talk about the necessity to "fight against the landlords" or how passionate the audience became in struggle sessions. The two male interviewees spoke more about their personal accomplishments, while female interviewees preferred to describe details of their activities in the movement. Only one woman, an ordinary villager who described herself as an "ingenuous" (老实, *laoshi*) woman with "a miserable life" (苦命人, *kumingren*), told me about the violence she had witnessed in her village.

All the interviewees also kept silent about sexual violence. However, the archives provide a great deal of evidence about sexual violence towards rural poor women before Land Reform, as well as sexual violence towards women during Land Reform (particularly women labelled as landlords) and women practicing violence against landlords in the struggle sessions. Women victims rarely used the term "rape" (*qiangjian*, 强奸), instead, they preferred "insult" (*zaota*, 糟蹋), "occupy" (*zhan*, 占) or "harm" (*hai*, 害) to describe their suffering.[3] Few scholars have paid attention to landlords' sexual violence towards rural poor women.[4] Most documents dealing with landlords' sexual violence have been collected in state-authored archival compilations, and it is reasonable to ask if these documents were forged for propaganda purposes. The landlord

class is described as debauched, avaricious, and brutal in these documents, as they are in contemporary local newspapers.[5] Literature, works of art, posters, and picture books also intensified the image of landlords as sexual predators and local bullies.[6]

However, the local police reports and some archives reveal that most of the struggle sessions "went to extremes" or were "left-leaning," and lots of targets in the struggle sessions were killed only because of their predatory sexuality. The villagers' reports also claimed that active and violent women in the Land Reform were seen by fellow villagers as "worn-out shoes," "collaborators" (*hanjian*, 汉奸), or "rascals" (*liumang*, 流氓). After examining these records of the Land Reform campaign, along with earlier documents, gazetteers, mimeographed tabloids, and literati memoirs, I conclude that polyandry, extra-marital affairs, coercive sexual relationships, and occasional prostitution were quite common in rural areas of North China in the 1940s, and women who were involved in these affairs were generally seen as "worn-out shoes." Being the focus of gossip for any reason would drag down a woman's reputation and make her a "slut." However, leaders of the party believed that utilizing "worn-out shoes" was an essential step to mobilize rural poor women, because of their acrid and bold personalities. Therefore, "worn-out shoes" are central to an examination of the intersection of politics, morality, and sexuality during Land Reform.

All these narratives obscure the relationships between the landlords (if this class can be said to have existed at that time), poor rural men, and women. Conflicting depictions about women activists also complicate our understanding of their sexuality and morality. From the various sources mentioned above, we can see at least four different voices about land reform: those of the state, outside (*waidi*) cadres, male peasants, and female peasants. However, one group of people will forever remain silent: the women labelled landlords and subjected to insult.[7] These competing voices raise many questions: how many women participated in violence and who were they? What particular local factors contributed to their violence? What was the fate of women landlords? These different voices reveal that different people pursued different objectives, each of which contributed to the complex reality of Land Reform.

To conclude, both written archives and oral interviews are fragmented. The usefulness of these various sources will vary according to the interests of the researcher. Official archives provide good material on the government's policies and activities, but lack information about marginalized groups. Local cultural and historical sources (*wenshi ziliao*, 文史资料) and gazetteers provide details of political campaigns, but tend to be influenced by later ideological constraints and require cautious scrutiny. Archives from the bottom, such as local police records and oral interviews, reveal the complicated human relations of small communities, often in considerable detail, but need to be examined carefully to distinguish different perspectives and initiatives of different groups. Interviewees rarely talk about violence and sexuality directly, but careful listeners can see fragments of the turbulent past in discrepancies and silences.

[1] Feminist historians of China have embraced the methodology of oral history. See Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past*, University of California Press Books, 2014; Li Hongtao, *Listening and Discovering: The China Women's Oral History Project*, 10 Volumes published by China Women Publishing House; Li Xiaojiang edited, *Let Women Talk*, 4 volumes published by Joint Publishing Company, 2003; Hearing her: Oral histories of women's liberation in China and the United Kingdom Project, University of Sussex, http://www.sussex.ac.uk/clhlwr/research/hearingher.

[2] A folksong "Slattern (*nüerliuzi*, 女二流子)," a folksong that the author collected during her research.

[3] In a report titled "Women's court to judge landlord" in Junan County, none of the women victims used the term "rape." In contrast, the one male accuser quoted in the report used "rape" to claim that the landlord raped his wife. *Task Express* (*gongzuo kuaibao*), August 6, 1947; September 17, 1947.

[4] One exception is Ma Junya, "Landlords' First Night Rights in Jiangsu and Shandong Province" (Su Lu diqu dizhu chuyequan, 苏鲁地区地主初夜权), *Literature, History and Philosophy* (*wenshizhe*, 文史哲), 2013, no. 1: 89-100; "Regional Social Differences and Droit de Seigneur at North Anhui," (Diquxing shehui chayi yu huaibei de chuyequan, 地区性社会差异与淮北的初夜权) *Journal of Beijing Normal University* (Social Sciences), 2016, no.4: 90-99.

[5] These archives include *Task Express* (gongzuo kuaibao), August 6, 1947; September 17, 1947; *The Land Reform in Shandong Province during the Civil War* (Jiefang zhanzheng shiqi Shandong de tudi gaige), published by Shandong renmin chubanshe, 1993; *Compilation of Historical Materials of the Land Reform in Hebei Province*, published by Hebei Provincial Archives, 1990.

[6] Materials include "The White-haired Girl Story," posters that describe the land reform, pictures, and woodcut prints and story books.

[7] Heads of households in North China in the 1940s were usually men, with very few women landlords. Before the land reform, most male landlords escaped to the cities and left their female relatives in the countryside. Widows with land usually hired laborers to work for them, and these widows were also seen as landlords during the movement.