The PRC History Review Vol. 6, No. 3 (September 2021): 1 - 36. © The PRC History Group, 2021

The Secret Police, A Funeral, and Lunch Gatherings: My Story of Doing Oral History Interviews in China

Yidi Wu

The Story

My dissertation research focused on Chinese student activism in 1957. During the 2014-15 academic year, I collected nearly 70 oral history interviews nationwide from college students who went through the political campaigns of 1957, as well as classified documents and student journals at university libraries and archives. Being a native Beijinger, I conducted most interviews in that city. My fieldwork also brought me to Wuhan and Kunming, as my research drew comparisons across several universities. Due to the sensitivity of my subject, my fieldwork had no shortage of difficulties, though in retrospect it was productive and exciting, for both good and bad reasons.

In late August 2014, I started my archival research and interviews in Hong Kong for two reasons. One is that the University Service Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong had the collections of the *Internal Reference* [内部参考], the Anti-Rightist Campaign Database, and the *Wenhui Daily*, all of which were crucial to my dissertation. The other is that Wu Yisan (pen name), one of the organizers of *1957 Academy* [五七学社], which published memoirs and works related to the Anti-Rightist Campaign, helped me connect with student "rightists" who were living in Hong Kong and in mainland China.[1] I conducted most interviews at the 1901 Bookstore, not far from the Chungking Mansions. My very first interviewee was Chen Yulin, the chief editor of the Academy and a student "rightist" at Beijing Foreign Studies College in 1958. The last day I was there happened to coincide with a small-scale demonstration that turned out to be a prelude to what later became known as the Umbrella Movement. On the main stage, the slogan "civil disobedience" [公民抗命] was in bold black strokes on a banner. I was impressed by the organized and civil gathering, even though I could not understand a word of Cantonese.

The day after I returned from Hong Kong to Beijing, my father received a phone call at work from the secret police, who met him later that day to deliver a message for me: that I should not interview W, a then 78-year-old man who had been a Peking University (Beida) student in the late 1950s.[2] He is one of the active student "rightists" in Beijing who still writes articles and occasionally petitions at Beida calling for compensation for "rightists." At that time, I had only exchanged emails with W, not actually met with him. It is most likely that the secret police monitored W's email account, where they saw my email to him. The fact that the secret police reached out to my father instead of to me showed not only their power, but also the patriarchal mindset they had in expecting that I would succumb to familial pressure. As a Party member working at a state enterprise, my dad was startled by the phone call and the meeting. Ironically, he had little idea of my research topic or interview plans, even though I had explained them to him plenty of times. Later that night, my dad even called back to the secret police to report that he had a conversation with me.

Though I knew my research might be considered sensitive to the Chinese authorities, the indirect encounter with the secret police was still unexpected. I would be lying if I said I was not terrified that I might have to abandon my interview plans due to the authorities' intervention. But that call also confirmed my conviction that the interviews were important not only as historical records, but also an act of defiance. Originally, I planned to start my interview with W and then get introduced to his schoolmates, but now I had to change tactics. I looked for interviewees who were relatively off the radar, and I started making more phone calls rather than writing emails.

One of my first contacts in Beijing was Gan Cui, a student who studied at People's University in the late 1950s. He was a boyfriend of Lin Zhao in 1958, when both were working at the school library as "rightists" waiting to receive further sentences. Lin was a Chinese literature major at Beida, where she attracted many male classmates because of her talent in poetry. She became critical of the Party only after the Anti-Rightist Campaign, and eventually was executed in the Cultural Revolution. As "rightists," they were prohibited from dating, but they defied that rule by holding hands in public. This one-year relationship cost Gan two decades of manual labor in Xinjiang, during which time he never saw Lin again. During my interview, Gan showed me his handwritten copy of Lin's writings from prison. As a gift, he gave me a photo of the two at Jingshan Park, taken in 1958 when they were both 26 years old. In return, I took a photo with Gan and promised to visit again with the photo. By the time I left, he walked me all the way to the metro station, telling me that he no longer had the time to write his memoir, but that I should write about Lin.

I failed to keep my promise to visit again, for a month after I interviewed Gan, he passed away in his sleep. I felt obligated to attend his funeral, though I had no family connections with him, and I had only met him once. At the funeral, I was not the only person unrelated to his family, as a dozen "rightist" friends showed up as well. Some were curious to see a young person like me and asked about my connection with Gan. It turned out that some of Gan's "rightist" friends had been attending monthly gatherings among "rightists" and their descendants or friends since 2007, the fiftieth anniversary of the Anti-Rightist Campaign. After hearing about my project, they invited me to their next lunch meeting.

At the lunch gathering I attended in November 2014, to my happy surprise, W showed up, the person who I was warned against interviewing. We shook hands, sat down together, and arranged a time for an interview on the following weekend, with no need for calls or emails. The lunch meetings turned out to be the best networking opportunity for me to secure interview contacts. Participants were mostly "rightists," though not all had been college students in the 1950s. Some were descendants of "rightists" who had passed away, and others were sympathizers, though they were not "rightists" themselves. At the lunch table, discussions usually focused on contemporary politics, and attendees seemed unanimously critical of Xi Jinping. Some advised me that I should record the conversations for future reference, and some warned me to be aware of "government spies" at the table.

By sharing this story, I do not wish to reinforce the impression of China as a police state. Rather, I wish to suggest that there are usually ways to get around the limits, even when it comes to the secret police. I was able to interview the person they warned me against, and they never contacted my dad again. The secret police might be omnipresent, but not omnipotent. The fear of what the Chinese authorities can do to researchers is very real, but sometimes instilling fear is all the authorities are able to do.

Behind the Story

My position as a native Chinese gives me some advantages in conducting oral history. I did not need any school affiliation, otherwise my research topic would not have survived bureaucratic scrutiny. Having little language barrier is an obvious benefit, though I had some difficulty with interviewees who had heavy Wuhan or Kunming accents. I have no immediate family members who suffered from the Anti-Rightist Campaign, but I was able to gain the trust of my interviewees once they learned that I took classes with Qian Liqun during my high school years in Beijing. Qian was a Beida student in the 1950s, and he wrote one of the first books in Chinese on college students in the 1957 political campaigns.[3] Though Qian was not labeled a "rightist," he is well respected for speaking on behalf of the group, and he has written prefaces for a number of "rightist" memoirs. The downside of being a Chinese national in this case is that my family could potentially become collateral damage. It would be unimaginable for an American PhD student to conduct interviews in China, even after her parents received a phone call from the Chinese authorities telling them that their daughter should not interview someone!

My fieldwork owes a huge debt to several people who provided contacts at the beginning of my research. I would not have been able to locate and interview many people without those personal connections. One is Song Yongyi. Working as a librarian at California State University, Los Angeles, Song has compiled a series of digital databases on political campaigns in the Mao era, including the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution.[4] These collections of primary materials are a treasure trove for historians of the PRC. Based on available sources, Song suggested Wuhan University and Yunnan University as comparisons with Beida, and I followed his advice during my fieldwork and dissertation writing. Song also introduced me to his friend in Hong Kong, Wu Yisan. As I mentioned earlier, Wu provided me with a list of contacts, either email addresses or phone numbers, of student "rightists" from the three schools I was researching. Thanks to these initial contacts, I was able to expand my list of interviewees through their classmates or friends. A third person who helped me secure contacts at Yunnan University is John Israel. While working on his book about Lianda, Israel became friends with several history faculty members at Yunnan University and Yunnan Normal University.[5] The latter school carries over Lianda's education department, and now hosts a museum dedicated to Lianda.

Most of my interviewees were student "rightists," and my research focuses on their thoughts and deeds in the Hundred Flowers and Rectification Campaigns of 1957. Many are willing to share their stories because they were victims of Mao's political campaigns, and they believe that what they said or wrote in 1957 about the Communist Party is still true today. However, I have tried to interview non- "rightist" students as well, because I want to present the spectrum of participation, including students who spoke out in defense of the Party, or who stayed silent. Ultimately, both "leftists" and "rightists" were numerical minorities, even though they made the most noise, while many students were somewhere in between. I had more difficulty tracking down and interviewing non-"rightists," as not many of them were willing to share their experience of 1957, not to mention reflect on their potential responsibility in victimizing their classmates. Among such people, two interviewees were involved in writing articles that attacked "rightists." They showed me their original works and expressed their regret for having been mouthpieces of the school authorities. Two others were Party members and student cadres who were responsible for identifying "rightists" among fellow classmates. Both claimed to have kept the number of "rightists" in their class as low as possible, and that they have been able to maintain a good relationship with their classmates to this day.

Besides conducting interviews, I also checked out written sources at the Peking University library, the Wuhan University archive, and the Yunnan University archive. As one of the most popular campuses for summer tourists visiting Beijing, Peking University has somewhat strict rules allowing people to enter. I usually wait for a friend, or a friend of friend, who currently studies or works at the school to meet me at the front gate in order to get me into the campus. But once inside, the main library and department libraries, along with their librarians, are friendly and helpful. The school library also has a decent catalog system available to the public. I was able to find student journals from the 1950s on open shelves. When the book I was looking for seemed missing from the bookshelf, the librarian emailed me later when they found the book. I have yet to visit Peking University archive, as I have learned that post-1949 materials are off limit. However, I was able to use school archives at Wuhan University and Yunnan University with various degrees of openness. At Wuhan University, I could not request the materials myself, but a graduate student there helped

me hand copy the catalogue of 1957. When I tried to request specific documents based on the catalogue, they were all rejected. At Yunnan University, thanks to a connection to the president's office, I had access to both the catalogue and some unclassified documents. Seeing names of people that I could recognize, or even better people I had interviewed, in the archive was exciting. The archivist apologized for not granting access to classified materials but could not provide a reason as to why they remain classified.

After the Story

Since other articles of this special issue focus mostly on archives in written forms, conducting oral history seems like an outlier. However, one can argue that oral history interviews as a research method contribute to a different kind of archive. Several differences are worth noting. First, oral history projects are time sensitive. Both archival documents and oral history interviews have the difficulty of access, but at least written materials as a physical form exist somewhere (unless the authorities intentionally destroy them), whereas oral history is much more intangible and exists as memories in the minds of human beings – that is, if they are alive. But the people we hope to interview will not live forever, and I often feel like I am racing against time to get to my interviewees before they pass away. Several times I failed, and some other times I barely managed to get ahead. In the past years since I first conducted interviews, I would hear news of my interviewees passing away from time to time. One can imagine that in a decade of so, it will be impossible to interview these college students from the 1950s.

Second, results of interviews might differ depending on the moment we talk to our interviewees. Oral narratives, as Gail Hershatter reminds us, are subjective and self-serving, and they reflect as much about the present as the past.[6] If written records in archives are somewhat permanent, memories are more changeable. As times goes, we all remember things differently. As researchers, we should be aware of the problematic nature of interviews and treat them cautiously, as we do other written sources. During my fieldwork, I also collected several self-published memoirs and articles written by my interviewees years before I talked to them. Without the interviews, I would not have been able to find some of these writings. Their oral narratives mostly corroborate their written accounts, but I find myself using more of the latter in my research because they are more detailed. It does not mean that their memoirs are more reliable than their oral narratives, because they are both based on memory, but the memoirs had been written almost a decade before I met the authors.

Third, oral history involves two processes at once – talking to people and then making interviews into accessible archives. Conducting interviews is only the first step for historians who study the recent past. After all the conversations, we still need to transcribe, translate, and incorporate the interviews into our writing. If written archives are readily available for reading and analysis, oral history requires the extra mile of converting the medium from oral to written first. While the interviews can be exciting and adventurous, the processing of these narratives is time consuming, tedious, and sometimes frustrating. Often great stories from an interviewee just do not fit into our writing. What to do with oral history interviews, especially audio and video recordings, after the research is done? Since one can only include a limited amount of information from the interviews in a publication, the recordings could be put to better use if we can share them with a broader public, with interviewees' permission. Two digital projects worth mentioning are China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: The CR/10 Project at the University of Pittsburgh, and the Memory Project at Duke University, which focuses on survivors of the Great Famine.[7] I admire the tremendous effort put into these projects, and think these interviews are a great primary source for both research and teaching. However, it can be tricky to get permission from interviewees to publicize recordings in online platforms, and we never know for sure if there will be repercussions from the Chinese authorities. At the same time, some of my interviewees have a real desire to get their voices out to the world, and they no longer fear any authorities. As researchers, we face an ethical problem to share the stories of interviewees in written form and beyond, without jeopardizing the contacts and their families.

For historians who are interested in collecting oral history interviews in China, I can think of several tips to share. One is about establishing an interview network, especially on topics that do not have institutional support. Knowing someone who is well connected with people on the subject is certainly beneficial, but one should not worry too much if there is not a list of contacts before starting fieldwork. A snowballing effect will occur, as one contact will lead to several others. Interviewees might be better connected than one thinks. I certainly did not expect that "rightists" in Beijing (as well as a few other cities across China) were gathering monthly. At first, local authorities would intervene by shutting down the restaurant for gathering or cutting off its electricity. But by 2014, the gatherings took place without any interference.

The second piece of advice has to do with how to document the interviews, or in other words, how to make oral history into physical archives. I tried my best to get permission from my interviewees to video or audio record the conversations, with an understanding that the recordings are for my research. For interviewees who refused to be recorded or hung up the phone, I simply was not able to extract much useful information. With each interviewee, I had a set of questions that I wanted to ask, though a lot of times I let the conversation go its own direction. Some researchers are required to go through Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, a process that is supposed to protect human subjects. I find it ineffective and almost unnecessary. In fact, the American Historical Association made a statement in 2008 that recommended oral history be exempted from IRB review.[8] I believe ultimately the recordings are not just for my own research, but also for future historians and students. I advocate for finding an institutional home for the recordings, even if they cannot be publicized except for research purposes. The interviews are my private collection in the short term, but I hope they will serve an educational purpose as part of a library project in the long run. Housing the interviews in a library or research institution will also make my

research transparent in case other researchers want to verify the information in my publications.

The third point has to do with the matter of investment and return. Doing oral history interviews takes a considerable amount of time and financial costs with all the travel, but the effort does not easily translate into usable or quotable materials. Despite spending ten months conducting interviews, most of the interviews I conducted did not get into my dissertation. This is also true for any archival trips, when we have access to many more documents than what we can include in our writings. For me, the interviews are about making a personal connection with the people I write and care about. As I keep in touch with several of my interviewees, they also motivate me to continue writing and getting things published. They have shared their life stories with me, and I feel the obligation to share their stories with a wider audience.

Many things have changed between 2015, when I finished my dissertation fieldwork, and 2020, when trips to China have been suspended or canceled due to the pandemic. The 1901 Bookstore in Hong Kong was forced to close after several cases of Hong Kong booksellers disappearing in late 2015, and the 1957 Academy stopped publishing memoirs in 2016 for fear of repercussion. By the sixtieth anniversary of the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 2017, despite pressure from local authorities and a few "rightists" from the mainland being deterred from attending, the 1957 Academy was able to host a conference reflecting on the 1957 events with over 50 participants at a hotel in Hong Kong. Chen Yulin, my first interviewee, was a major organizer, and he was briefly detained at Shenzhen Customs because of the conference. Over the past five years, several interviewees have passed away, including Chen. Each passing makes me more grateful that I talked to them before it was too late and encourages me to get my words out as soon as possible. One secret has remained though: my dad still has no clue that I managed to meet and interview W, despite the secret police's warning.

[1] Wu Yisan is an adopted name the person prefers to use.
[2] I decided to keep his name anonymous for this article.
[3] Qian Liqun, *Jujue yiwang: "1957 nian xue" yanjiu biji* 拒絕遺忘："1957 年學"研究筆記 [Refuse to Forget: Research Notes on the "1957 Studies"] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2007).
[4] Song Yongyi ed. Zhonguo dangdai zhengzhi yundongshi shujuku 中國當代政治運動史數據庫 [Contemporary Chinese Political Campaign Database] (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong University Service Center, 2010)
[5] John Israel, *Lianda: A Chinese University in War and Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).
[6] Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 17-24.
[7] *China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: The CR/10 Projects*, University of Pittsburgh library digital collection, https://digital.library.pitt.edu/collection/chinas-cultural-revolution-memories-the-CR10-project; The Memory Project, Duke University library digital collection, https://repository.duke.edu/dc/memoryproject.
[8] Arnita Jones, AHA Statement on IRBs and Oral History Research, 2008, https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/february-2008/aha-statement-on-irbs-and-oral-history-research