

Researching the History of PRC Foreign Relations in an Uncertain Era

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This essay discusses three aspects of conducting research into the history of the People's Republic of China's foreign relations today. First, the essay will provide a top-down overview of the materials available to scholars with an eye to linking Chinese-language archival and published primary sources with the structure of the PRC state.¹ Second, this essay will propose an alternative approach to studying the history of the PRC's foreign relations as a means of overcoming the limitations placed on research into the topic and for creating novel interventions into PRC history. Finally, this essay will confront the implications for future historical research posed by recent developments both in terms of archival access and the situation of the world, which is, at the time of writing, still in the grips of the Covid-19 pandemic and the "Cold War 2.0".

Taking Account of Background and the Structure of Foreign Policy Decision Making

An understanding of the overarching characteristics of the PRC's foreign policy provides a central point of reference for studying the history of its foreign relations and diplomacy. It is crucial to consider both the historical background of and the role of the party in the PRC's foreign policy and diplomacy. The scope of this topic extends further into the past than 1949 not only because Beijing inherited the legacies of the Qing and Republican period but also in the sense pointed out in Niu Jun's pivotal *From Yan'an to the World: The Origin and Development of Chinese Communist Foreign Policy*. Specifically, Niu illustrates how Beijing's independent foreign policy emerged and evolved in the context of the CCP's pre-1949 engagements with the wider world, highlighting the centrality of the party and its experience of the revolution.

Similarly, Lu Ning's *The Dynamics of Foreign-Policy Decision Making in China* points out that the CCP's foreign policy has been defined by deep verticality in terms of its decision-making since the days of Yan'an.² From the very beginning, the "core leader" and the Politburo Standing Committee have wielded exclusive control over foreign policy and diplomacy. Decisions regarding external relations are arrived at by the top before specific tasks are delegated down to the supraministerial Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group and the Central Military Commission (CMC). These are in turn made responsible for producing guidance on the formulation of policy at the official level. Guidance generated by the LSGs and the CMC is then formalized by the rest of the politburo as well as the State Council before being assigned to the organs responsible for policy implementation. Being the official organ of Beijing's diplomacy as well as the largest ministry in terms of staff, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is perhaps the first to come to mind but is not the only player involved. Others, such as the Ministry

of Foreign Commerce or the International Liaison Department, are responsible for separate tasks and may operate both in concert with and independently of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These ministerial bodies further delegate tasks to localized foreign affairs bureaucracies at the provincial and municipal level.³

The centrality of the party and the top-down nature of PRC foreign policy mean that published primary sources produced by the Party Literature Research Center, the Central Archives, and the Foreign Ministry are all good places to start. Materials which historians of the PRC are likely to already be familiar with such as *Mao Zedong on Diplomacy* or *Selections of Zhou Enlai on Diplomacy* 《周恩来外交文选》 provide a glimpse into the foreign policy decision-making process and the leadership's reactions to external events. Similar materials on less central members of the leadership such as the *Chen Yi Chronology* 《陈毅年谱》 or *The Diary of Yang Shangkun* 《杨尚昆日记》 are windows into the Chinese Foreign Affairs University and the CMC respectively. Commentaries by Geng Biao and others who were either close to the leadership or had greater access to party materials as found in *New Diplomatic Situation* 《新外交风云》 or *Researching Zhou Enlai: Diplomatic Thought and Practice* 《研究周恩来：外交思想与实践》 are also useful for better understanding the party leadership's role in the PRC's foreign relations, as are memoirs by Foreign Ministry personnel and even members of leading small groups.

Other published primary sources such as the state- or institution-authored edited document collections or chronicles of events (大事记) can also serve as points of reference provided the work is done to confirm the information found within them. *The Sino-African Chronicle of Events* 《中国非洲关系大事记》 published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Institute of West Asia and Africa Studies documents many of the agreements making extensions – or formal offers – of aid to African countries.⁴

Because of the top-down nature of its foreign policy and diplomacy, the PRC's foreign relations as a historical topic is simultaneously among the best documented and the least accessible. This is because many materials which might draw the clearest picture of the party and military leaderships' calculations have never been made available. As noted by Charles Kraus, in the era of "guarding the archives for the party" (为党守档), the twinned processes of digitization and reappraisal of previously declassified documents is exacerbating this problem rather than alleviating it.⁵ While the

above published primary sources can serve as points of departure, archival research is still necessary.

An Approach for Archival Research into PRC Foreign Relations History Today

In the archival sphere, the gap between documentation which exists and documentation which is available is widening. This is perhaps best exemplified by the current state of the Foreign Ministry Archive. Beginning in 2004, there were three rounds of declassification and a growing number of documents made available to scholars. Between 2008 and 2011, this process reached its peak with some 83,000 documents available at the Foreign Ministry Archive.⁶ Extensive research was carried out by historians from around the world with scholars more or less free to carry out research into various topics as they saw fit. A significant portion of documents remain available in the Woodrow Wilson Center International Cold War History Project with a smaller number available in translation online via their Digital Archive. However, in 2012, the Foreign Ministry Archive closed, only opening again in 2013 with the documents available reportedly shrinking to barely a tenth of what was on offer before. After another closure in 2014, the records available appear to have been reduced even further.⁷

Time might be better spent targeting the most relevant provincial archives. As has been summarized by Jiang Huajie, different archives may serve particular specialties. For instance, the Jiangsu Provincial Archive holds records of the six meetings of the National Conference on Foreign Affairs held between 1958 and 1962, meaning it is replete with documentation on the central leadership's position on events in Sino-Soviet relations in the late 1950s and early 1960s as well as reports on the implementation of policies directed at the third world in the same period. Similarly, the Fujian Provincial Archives are not only useful for cross-strait relations but, because of its importance as a coastal province more generally, Sino-American, Sino-Korean, and Sino-Indian relations as well.⁸

Municipal archives also have their specialties. Engagement with other countries often involved the invitation of foreign leaders, representatives, and delegations of students or other visitors to Beijing, Shanghai, and other cities. The preparatory work that went into these encounters are often described in detail under archival holdings pertaining to the Communist Youth League, the All-China Federation of Trade, local Propaganda or Cultural Departments, and others. Provincial and municipal authorities were also privy to information from higher up if it regarded their side of the implementation of a given policy, giving good reason to examine not only documents generated by local Foreign Affairs Offices but also the International Economics and Trade Committees and International Commerce Departments.

To offer a speculative example from Sino-African relations, a common request of African governments in the early 1960s was for assistance in setting up tea planting and processing operations to satisfy their domestic markets for green tea. Beijing accommodated this request with the dispatch of experts like Zhang Shungao. Zhang, a member of the Tujia minority,

was among the first of the accredited experts to be deployed to Africa in the 1960s through the Yunnan Tea Science Research Institute.⁹ Bodies subordinate to the Yunnan provincial government would have been involved in Zhang's deployment. This means materials might be available at the Yunnan Provincial Archives which could be used alongside a wider body of research to formulate lines of inquiry into not just tea cultivation but, for instance, the participation of ethnic minorities in PRC foreign policy in the Cold War or Beijing's particular approach to economic aid in the 1960s.

In combination with one another, state-authored sources, materials from lower down the administrative ladder, and other sources like interviews or diaries allow for a diverse range of historical inquiry. This should not be understood as work done in lieu of research in the Foreign Ministry Archive. Alone, documents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs provide only a partial sketch of the foreign relations of the PRC, and, being focused on the official organ of diplomacy and foreign policy, that sketch is blinkered to the on the ground effects of policy decisions or implementations. It is also important not to allow the window in which the Foreign Ministry Archive was open to overshadow the importance of documents from other ministerial or supraministerial bodies which have yet to be made available in the same way.

Implications for Future Research on the History of PRC Foreign Relations

The closure of the Foreign Ministry Archives is not the only limitation faced by historians. Most glaringly, there is the fact that at the time of writing research travel remains impractical if not impossible for scholars due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. This fact will push international scholars to make deeper and more effective use of not only published primary sources but also online databases, and this will in turn result in some reinterpretations of topics as well as original investigations into novel ones. However, it is nonetheless a major challenge.

There is also the matter of the chilling effect of recent changes in PRC law. On the one hand, there has been the much talked about 2020 National Security Law. On the other, there is a less discussed 2018 revision of the 2010 PRC Law on Protecting State Secrets which effectively reclassified vast swathes of materials, including previously declassified documents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁰ This means that scholars making use of such materials may face repercussions for publishing their work or sharing their findings with others. This may have contributed to the growing hesitancy among China scholars to work and study in China.¹¹

Finally, there are the issues facing international scholars in general and scholars of Chinese citizenship in particular. So far, the US government has either specifically targeted Chinese students in STEM fields¹² or has adopted retaliatory policies affecting not just Chinese students but foreign students in general.¹³ It remains to be seen how this new era of McCarthyist Sinophobia will affect humanities scholars, but it would not beggar belief if historians of the PRC's foreign relations were

impacted in one way or another in the near future. If this happens, Chinese scholars will be stuck between a rock and a hard place. They will be faced with limited documentary access in mainland China as well as strictures placed on their work using foreign archives and cooperation with foreign scholars.

The limitations placed on research and the chilling of academic openness brought on by worsening relations between the US and the PRC pose the risk of sending us back into the days of "Kremlinology". Writing on the Sino-Soviet Split in 1962, Donald Zagoria tried to get beyond "Talmudist" interpretations which leveraged privileged linguistic or cultural understandings of the socialist camp's official press.¹⁴ Today, such othering discourses still have to be actively avoided. Every effort should be made not to engage in orientalist analyses of the PRC which suggest the key to understanding a given historical event lies in this or that "correct" translation of this or that Chinese idiom expressed by the officialdom, as if situating the PRC state in its difference from the scholar can make up for a dearth of historical materials. This essay has tried to suggest that an avenue for avoiding a revival of such Talmudism is studying the history of the foreign relations of the PRC by combining all available sources and paying particular attention to documentation from lower down in the archives.

At the same time, the limitations placed on international research pose the risk of Eurocentrism being smuggled back into the foreign relations history of the PRC. In advocating for getting beyond conventional international relations theory with a multidisciplinary investigation of "identities, borders, and orders", Yosef Lapid highlights that IR theory, based as it is in analyses of the Westphalian world order of states, is defined first and foremost as a universalizing project of inscribing the Western order onto the rest of the world. Lapid contends that the progressive "breaking down" of disciplinary boundaries has provided the opportunity to get beyond this understanding.¹⁵ Beijing's experience of having the Westphalian order foisted upon it before becoming first a revolutionary renegade against

it and then a disgruntled stakeholder within it makes it a fruitful field for investigating historical questions along the axes of identities, borders, and orders identified by Lapid. Moreover, the growth and acceleration of international cooperation in historical research since Reform and Opening has enabled historians to produce work which is sensitive to this. However, the limitations placed on future research by the pandemic and the US-China rivalry have reinforced many of these boundaries.

If, as Donald J. Puchala notes in the introduction to his instructive *Theory and History in International Relations*, "(h)istory remains the laboratory of international relations", historians working on the PRC need to take great care to avoid both Talmudism and Eurocentrism.¹⁶ This is especially the case today with talk of a "Cold War 2.0". As emphasized by Covell Meyskens, there are deep historical problems with reading the "Cold War 1.0" back onto today's decoupling of the U.S. and PRC economies, not least among them being the fact that China's experience of the Cold War was nothing like either the U.S. or the Soviet Union's.¹⁷ There is the danger that, despite not fitting the working definition of "empire" accepted within IR as a "core state" within an imperial system of "client states", today's IR theorists will slip the PRC into the same conceptual space as the Soviet Union, rereading Moscow and Washington's interimperial competition in the 20th century – "the dancing of the dinosaurs" – onto the discontents of the 21st.¹⁸ Historians should pre-empt and correct such potential misreadings by approaching the traditionally top-down field of PRC foreign relations history from other angles and persisting in their research despite the challenges posed by the pandemic and the Sino-US rivalry.

¹ There is also the other side of PRC foreign policy as well as third party perspectives on its foreign relations, and archival sources in the rest of the world, are sometimes more accessible if not just as important as Chinese-language sources, but this essay will focus on opportunities for research in mainland China.

² Lu Ning, *The Dynamics of Foreign-Policy Decision Making in China* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2000), 2-3.

³ *Ibid.*, 7-19. They also work in close partnership with the Chinese Foreign Affairs University as well as on the institutional level through universities, academies, and other research and development bodies.

⁴ However, a distinction must be drawn between aid extended and aid drawn upon. During the 1960s, African countries only drew upon a fraction of the aid on offer by Beijing. This means each entry in the *Chronicle* should be checked against the real world. This is because it does not always include whether an extension was ever drawn upon or whether a given project ever came to fruition, and many did not.

⁵ Charles Kraus, "Researching the History of the People's Republic of China", Cold War International History Project Working Paper #79, April 2016. Web retrieved 30 October 2020. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/researching-the-history-the-peoples-republic-china>

⁶ 蒋华杰, "中国大陆地区档案", 姚百慧, 《冷战史研究档案资源导论》(北京: 世界知识出版社, 2015), 260.

⁷ Kazushi Minami, "China's Foreign Ministry Archive: Open or Closed?", Woodrow Wilson Center blog, 2 October 2017. Web retrieved 31 October 2020.

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/chinas-foreign-ministry-archive-open-or-closed>

⁸ 蒋华杰, "中国大陆地区档案", 265.

⁹ 蔡圆圆, "惟青山不老——记中国现代茶叶科技先生行者张顺高", 《中国高新科技企业》2014年第32期, 170.

¹⁰ "2018 年最新保密法全文", 找法网, 2018-06-27. Web retrieved 1 November 2020.

http://www.findlaw.cn/130300/article_17954.html

¹¹ "Will I return to China? A ChinaFile Conversation", *ChinaFile*, 21 June 2021. Web retrieved 14 July 2021. <https://www.chinafile.com/conversation/will-i-return-china>.

¹² Edward Wong and Julian E. Barnes, "U.S. to Expel Chinese Graduate Students with Ties to China's Military Schools", *The New York Times*, 28 May 2020. Web retrieved 1 November 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/28/us/politics/china-hong-kong-trump-student-visas.html>

¹³ Rachel Treisman, "ICE: Foreign Students Must Leave the U.S. if their Colleges Go Online-Only this Fall", *NPR*, 6 July 2020. Web retrieved 1 November 2020.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/07/06/888026874/ice-foreign-students-must-leave-the-u-s-if-their-colleges-go-online-only-this-fa>

¹⁴ Donald Zagoria, *The Sino-Soviet Conflict, 1956-1961* (Princeton University Press, 1962), ix.

¹⁵ Yosef Lapid, "Identities, Borders, Orders: Nudging International Relations Theory in a New Direction", Mathias Albert and David Jacobson, *Identities, Borders, Orders: Rethinking International Relations Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 7.

¹⁶ Donald J. Puchala, *Theory and History in International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 7.

¹⁷ Covell Meyskens, "There Never was a Cold War China", Woodrow Wilson Center blog, 9 September 2020. Web retrieved 1 November 2020.

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/there-never-was-cold-war-china>

¹⁸ Puchala, *Theory and History in International Relations*, 97.