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Private Letters as a Source of PRC History

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While letter-writing has been a traditional way of long-distance communication for families and friends since pre-Qin China, private letters only emerged as a significant source of Chinese history in the twentieth century.[2] Unlike specialists of other periods, historians of the PRC could potentially tap a vast stock of private letters written by ordinary people from diverse backgrounds and locales. However, as centers for housing extant private letters are still processing and cataloging them, they remain mostly unexplored.[3] The only exception is the *Qiaopi* genre, typically a short note attached to remittances from overseas Chinese to their families in China.[4]

Private letters are an ideal source for examining the history of the PRC from below. For example, the family letters curated at the Center for Contemporary Social Life Data and Research (CCSLDR), Fudan University, include regular exchanges between family members about their health, emotions, financial conditions, political events, and reading experience between the 1950s and the 1990s. It is worth noting that this large set of letters curated at the CCSLDR is now available via Brill.[5] Although these letters invariably center on family affairs, they also provide a grassroots view of historical events and processes. The collection of the Wus, the family of a mid-rank cadre couple in Shanghai and their three daughters, consists of 1,600 letters between members of the extended family in Beijing, Xinjiang, Henan, and Anhui between 1968 and 1988. One letter from Wu Youzhen's sister-in-law in Beijing to his wife on October 30, 1976, for instance, discusses at length the various rumors surrounding Jiang Qing, which were circulating among mid-rank cadres in Beijing a few weeks after her downfall.[6] The letter collection of the Chens, an intellectual family, features 90 letters between two brothers working at two research institutes between 1962 and 1968. A letter from the younger Chen brother, a researcher at a PLA research institute in Hainan, to his elder brother at Fudan University, describes the ideological mobilization and atmosphere at a military base in Hainan during the rapid escalation of the Vietnam War in April 1965.[7] All in all, private letters are a reliable testimony to the history of everyday life and its interaction with broader historical processes.

Private Letters as the Voice from Below

Private letters from the Maoist period enable scholars to look into the nitty-gritty of everyday life. One way to use these letters is to focus on the otherwise voiceless letter-writers by contextualizing their life experience in broader historical and cultural contexts. Due to the limited space of this article, I will discuss below three salient issues where these letters supply especially rich information: the communication of private emotions with propaganda language, individual reflection on official ideology, and microeconomic planning within a family.

Private Use of Propaganda Language

Propaganda language pervades Maoist private letters. But does the use of propaganda language make the author's words less authentic? For starters, letter-writers used propaganda letters for two purposes. First, people deployed revolutionary slogans as a cover when they feared that an unreliable third party, such as the inspector or a neighbor, might read the letter. For example, when urban parents wrote to their sent-down children in the countryside, they filled the letters with revolutionary quotes to dispel any suspicion from a third-party reader. However, letter-writers also used propaganda to communicate authentic emotion since they lacked an alternative set of vocabulary. In the excerpt below, a Shanghai worker, Hua Hengfa, revealed the desperate financial situation of his family to his eldest daughter, Xiuzhen, who went to Jilin in 1969. The family accumulated a debt of 410 *yuan* as they prepared for her resettlement. In a letter to his eldest daughter in Jilin on February 9, 1971, Hua Hengfa mobilized revolutionary idioms to urge his daughter to take up the moral obligation of repaying the family's debts:

> "We have not told you all our economic difficulties to let you have a peaceful mind when tempering yourself through manual labor. It is good to tell you the full story at this time. We hope it works like Grandma Li's bitter telling of her family history, so your revolutionary zeal will be strengthened like Li Tiemei. The old black trousers, worn successively by your mom, your two younger sisters, Xiudi and Xiuling, had forty-one patched holes. But Xiuling still has had to wear it for years to cope with our financial difficulties. She and your younger brother had to sleep on the floor every night. We had sold our 5-*chi* long old wooden bed when we moved. I have to wear the old cotton coat that I have worn for twelve years to brace against the winter chill. I will at least have to wear it for another three to five years…..... Let's muster your spirit of thorough revolution—'first, don't fear hardships; second, don't fear death'—to overcome the current difficulties."[8]

Just as this letter shows, Maoist-era letter writers could use revolutionary tropes to tell of bitterness in their private life. The first trope here is the story of Tiemei, the heroine of the *Legend of the Red Lantern* (红灯记), one of the eight "model dramas" during the Cultural Revolution. The "telling of bitter family history" marked a critical moment the drama, when Grandma Li revealed to her "granddaughter" that they were not related by blood but bonded by a common cause in the Communist Revolution. Hua imbued the family's struggle to pay debts with a revolutionary aura by evoking the episode. The second trope

here is a well-known Maoist dictum, "First, don't fear hardships; second, don't fear death," which first appeared in Mao's talk with representatives of PLA soldiers who participated in the Sino-Indian War of 1962.[9] This military slogan entered everyday language as a palliative for economic pain in the 1960s, when the government froze wage rates and cut employment. Hua Hengfa's deployment of revolutionary tropes for the mundane purpose of debt repayment thus "secularized" the utopian vision of the Communist revolution as the family's struggle with economic hardship.

Reflections on Official Ideology

Private letters not only shed light on the private appropriation of official ideologies; at times, they deconstruct orthodox doctrine when the writers reflect on their personal life and make a political stand in the context of a significant historical turning point. Such a rare glimpse into the private thoughts of ordinary people both enriches and challenges the standard intellectual history of this period which has focused on intellectual elites and political activists. Take the example of Wang Haisheng, a sent-down youth from Shanghai in the 1970s. He was sent to rural Wuhu in 1972 and transferred to a local shipyard in 1975. A revolutionary zealot, Wang became a sophisticated, self-interested young man when he penned this letter to his fiancée on August 16, 1977:

> "After years of study, I feel that I must develop my unique views on any and every subject. The perspectives of others cannot bind us. If we examine history and current affairs, no political slogan, article, or proposition can produce a consistent explanation throughout our society. Those 'poisonous weeds' became 'fragrant flowers' under the Gang of Four, and in the era after the Gang of Four, they turned into poisonous weeds again. Nothing remains unchanged throughout our history. As you have rightly observed, political struggles are meaningless power struggles that serve only the ruling class. They have nothing to do with ordinary people like us. People like us who live at the bottom of society should have our independent political views, even if they are reactionary. Our understanding of everything should rest on an understanding of our interests."[10]

Wang's letter came at a critical moment in China's transition from revolutionary politics to economic reform. However, the heated political debates on the criteria of truth, the Democracy Wall, and other major political upheavals seem to have had little bearing on everyday life, as indicated in this letter. Wang and his fiancée simply turned away from politics and focused on their self-interests. In the context of post-Cultural Revolution Shanghai, Wang's letter reflected the broader trend of political disillusionment and withdrawal to the family among the returned sent-down youths, especially the former revolutionary activists.[11] This value shift resembled Albert O. Hirschman's account of the European mind in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when there was a move away from religious sentiments to conceptualize economic interests as the new foundation of the social order.[12] This transvaluation of politics and everyday life predated the economic reform and heralded the advent of the post-revolutionary mindset of the 1980s.

Economic Planning within a Family

Private letters are products of everyday communicative purposes. While the Maoist-era state penetrated deeply into everyday life, private letters were never mainly about everyday politics. Even during the highly politicized moments of the Cultural Revolution, people wrote letters primarily to negotiate everyday life between family and friends, from seeking emotional comfort to making economic plans. Let us return to the Wu family collection to analyze how a typical well-to-do household mounted a collaborative effort to accomplish a significant enterprise, namely, purchasing wristwatches for their coming-of-age daughters. In 1975, the three sisters, Xia, Lian, and Yang, were aged 20, 18, and 16, respectively. The eldest, Wu Xia, was a trainee in a commercial school, while the other two sisters were still in vocational schools. When the father received a wristwatch coupon from his work unit, the parents made a delicate economic arrangement. In anticipation of the family's long-waited reunion during the summer vacation, the mother wrote to the youngest daughter:

> "Your father just bought a Shanghai-brand wristwatch with the coupon. As for the 125 yuan for the wristwatch, your dad wrote a letter to Xia and suggested that she take the watch while paying him a monthly installment. She will pay the full amount within three years if she pays 2-3 yuan per month. Once she pays the 125 yuan in full, your dad will use the 125 yuan to buy another wristwatch for Lian. Lian will do the same in the next 2-3 years. Your dad will buy another wristwatch for you and you will pay back in turn. Your dad said: 'It's better for the girls to be self-reliant when it comes to their first wristwatches. They will then take pride for their accomplishment and cherish their wristwatches even more.'"[13]

The wristwatch was one of the key desiderata for urban Chinese youths in the 1970s. However, a good wristwatch, such as the Shanghai-brand watch, usually exceeded the economic means of a new worker, who typically earned a starting pay of only 40 yuan and could save a few yuan per month. The interest-free monthly installment within the family was an ingenious financial arrangement to fund such purchases. While the Communist state was not absent from the wristwatch fever,[14] the fundamental force was urban consumer culture. The new economic ethos in urban China in the 1970s highly valued the cultivation of economic virtues such as self-discipline and self-reliance. The wristwatch served both as a marker of status and a symbol of virtue. This new economic ethos would no doubt serve the Wu sisters well when they built their family economy in the subsequent decades of market reform. While oral history might capture anecdotes such as watch-buying, contemporary sources like the family letters tend to supply accurate dates and contexts.

Challenges of Private Letters as a Source

Many researchers might cast doubt on the reliability of private-life documents due to the totalitarian character of the Maoist

state. However, Maoist state surveillance likely only had limited influence on the authenticity of the letters. Xu Xiao, a letter writer and the editor of *Letters by Ordinary People* (民间书信, 安徽文艺出版社, 2000) was monitored and arrested by the police in the late 1970s. She found that the inspection was so superficial that they included the record card in the returned items when she received her belongings from the police.[15] My experience of reading Maoist-era letters suggests that people generally trusted their close relatives and friends enough to communicate authentic thoughts after the high tide of the revolution in 1966-1970, even as they were aware of state surveillance. Therefore, the reliability question should be handled on a case-by-case basis, depending on relations between the writers and readers of the letters.

Any research on private letters inevitably faces the issue of personal privacy. Questions about research ethics are especially acute for Maoist-era letters, since some writers or readers of the letters may still be alive. Social science protocols demand a total "desensitization" of private information by replacing all names and work units with pseudonyms. Historians may dispute the validity of such an approach since an essential task of history is to restore events and personalities in their exact contexts. The falsification of names, times, and places could distort historical facts and undermine the source's value. Possibly due to such concerns, while PRC historians in China generally follow social science protocols, some still prefer to use real names in their research.[16]

An additional challenge for researchers of private letters arises from stylistic defects of Maoist-era private writings. Since extant private letters are preserved as free-style manuscripts without uniform writing standards, they are often difficult to decipher and contextualize even for professional historians. Figuring out the institutional contexts of these letters sometimes requires a considerable investment of time. Also, after researchers have deciphered the writing and have determined the theme, the idiosyncratic language of some writers often presents a significant challenge for close reading. There are no hard and fast rules to overcome stylistic difficulties. The most effective way to master the genre is to read thoughtfully one or two extensive collections of private letters curated at document centers.

These challenges are not insurmountable. As more Maoist-era letters are compiled, digitalized, and studied by researchers, we will develop a more effective research strategy. In the future, we will not only deploy discourse analysis to analyze individual letters, but also apply digital humanities approaches such as text analysis to study the larger corpus of letters. We might even compile an annotated reader of Maoist-era private letters for both research and educational purposes.

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[2] While archaeologists have long excavated family letters in pre-Qin tombs, historians have rarely used letters as sources of Chinese history. Extant letters before the PRC are predominantly works of literati, writers, and scholars. For example, Antje Richer's edited volume, *A History of Chinese Letters and Epistolary Culture*, focuses almost exclusively on the literati and modern writers.

[3] The three most significant curators of these letters are the Contemporary China Social Life Data and Research Center (当代中国社会生活资料中心, CCSLDR) at Fudan University, the Shanghai Ordinary People's Letters Museum, and the Museum of Family Letters at Renmin University. According to Professor Zhang Letian, Director of the CCSLDR, the Fudan center alone houses about 370,000 private letters. For a sample of the letters, refer to the official website of the CCSLDR: https://chinalife.fudan.edu.cn/simpsearch.action.

[4] Among the subgenres of contemporary private letters, only *Qiaopi* has received extensive attention, thanks to the comprehensive publication of *Qiaopi* collections and their value as a unique source for the history of transnational Chinese communities. Liu Hong and Gregor Benton's wide-ranging analysis of the *Qiaopi* literature is the definitive work on this subgenre of private letters from an institutional perspective. C.f. Gregor Benton and Liu Hong, *Dear China: Emigrant Letters and Remittances, 1820-1980*, Berkley and Los Angeles, C.A.: University of California Press, 2019.

[5] Zhang Letian and Yan Yunxiang ed., *Personal Letters between Lu Qingsheng and Jiang Zhenyuan, 1961-1986*, Chronicles of Contemporary Chinese Social Life, Vol. 2, Leiden: Brill, 2018.

[6] Yu Lijuan to Yu Limei, October 29, 1976, CCSLDR.

[7] Chen Fuqing to Chen Furong, May 22, 1965, CCSLDR.

[8] Hua Hengfa to Hua Xiuzhen, February 9, 1971, CCSLDR

[9] "Yibu Paku, Erbu Pasi de qianshi jingshen" (The History of the Slogan-- "First, fear not a hardship; second, fear not death") http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2018-02/11/c_129810538.htm [Accessed on June 12, 2020].

[10] Wang Haisheng to Liu Xiaoting, August 16, 1977, CCSLDR

[11] "Huihu zhiqing zhong bufen dangyuan fanying" (Feedback from Some Party Members among the Returned Sent-down Youths), Shanghai Department of Propaganda Thought Monitor No. 44 (July 3, 1979), Shanghai Municipal Archives, A22-4-117.

[12] Albert Hirschman, *The Passion, and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before Its Triumph*, Princeton: N.J., Princeton University Press, 1977.

[13] Yu Limei to Wu Lian, 16 July 1975, CCSLDR.

[14] Karl Gerth analyzes the popular fixation on wrist watches, bicycles, and sewing machines as results of "state

consumption”. See Karl Gerth, *Unending Capitalism: How Consumerism Negated China’s Communism,* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp.15-17.

[15] Xu, X. (2001). “Ni budebu tongqing dali: Wo bian minjian shuxinji” (You Must Be Understanding: The Experience of Compiling Letters from Ordinary People), *Tianya*, no. 1, pp.77–79.

[16] Among the articles mentioned above, only Xu Xiuli uses real names. All other researchers abide by social science protocols. This paper, too, uses pseudonyms.