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Introduction

Steven Pieragastini[1]

Researching the history of the People's Republic of China has never been easy. Archival access requires jumping bureaucratic hurdles and is inconsistent across time and space. Notably, in the course of the past ten years, access to and reproduction of documents on the post-1949 period has been considerably restricted, despite technological improvements and the digitization of many archival documents. But recent months and years have thrown up challenges that may leave researchers feeling truly despondent. With increasing political pressure from the mainland, including the kidnapping of booksellers and the implementation of a strict new National Security Law, even Hong Kong may become an unwelcoming research environment for scholars of the PRC, as the "restructuring" of the renowned Universities Service Centre for China Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong suggests. [2] Aside from new restrictions and a deepening animosity between the U.S. and China, which has already ensnared several academics, the COVID-19 pandemic has made in-person research nearly impossible.[3] Nevertheless, this special issue aims to provide a degree of hope and guidance to scholars of PRC history everywhere. The contributors to this issue are all recent PhDs or current graduate students who have put together impressive research projects using a variety of methodologies, in spite of the prevailing difficulties. In addition to offering models of how to conduct research under current conditions, their experiences and insights compel us to consider fundamental methodological and ethical questions around source acquisition, preservation, and utilization.

In organizing this special issue, the contributors were asked to reflect on the following questions in their individual pieces: What is that state of the archives in mainland China today? How easily can one research the post-1949 period in state archives? From the documents available, how accurate a picture do we gain using a curtailed list of state-authored sources? How does the trend of digitization in databases both within and outside of the PRC affect the research process, as well as the conclusions drawn from such research? In the absence of archival documents, or as an addendum to them, what kinds of sources are available? What epistemological and ethical issues do they engender? What advice can we give to graduate students today who are seeking dissertation topics? What does the availability and nature of sources mean for the future of historiographical trends in PRC history?

Drawing on the pieces as a whole, we can venture some tentative conclusions. The first is that we should not fetishize the archive or official documents. A considerable body of scholarship has highlighted the problems inherent on relying on state-produced documents, even when they are fully accessible, and PRC history is no exception to these issues. Second, any alternatives to the archive such as grassroots sources or oral history present problems of their own. Common standards of access and documentation need to be adopted so that information is not sequestered in private collections, only available for the owner's use. The retention or monopolization of sources by individual historians or institutions can lead to questionable interpretations, which only become apparent if the documents are later scrutinized by a wider body of scholars.[4] Third, new technologies are tremendously helpful, especially during the pandemic, not only in locating information but also by revealing connections that would not be possible without computational methods and data visualization. That being said, they are not a replacement for "analog" research methods. Moreover, while digitization in theory ought to greatly expand access and availability of sources, it can and has led to the opposite, where formerly accessible documents, folders, or entire sections of archives are obscured to researchers upon digitization. The removal of documents can even be instantaneous; in a dramatic example, the excellent and extensive website www.archives.gov.cn suddenly went offline in the spring of 2020 and has not been revived since. Machine learning may provide the means for a new paradigm of information control, projecting the latest methods of surveillance and censorship back into the historical record.[5] In sum, more than ever, historians of the PRC will have to be patient, creative, and diligent in finding information while critically analyzing their sources and being honest about their limitations.

A number of published pieces and scholarly gatherings have informed and inspired this special issue, including but not limited to a roundtable at the 2018 Meeting of the Historical Society for Twentieth Century China [6], a workshop on "Revolutionary Routine: Grassroots Sources on Work, Family, and Private Life in Maoist China"[7] at Columbia University in September 2019, a series of webinars on "Doing Chinese History in a New Era"[8] in 2020-21 presented by the UC Irvine Long US-China Institute and the Council on East Asian Studies at Yale University, a workshop on "Chinese Archives in Crisis" organized at Stanford University in 2020, and two recent *PRC History Review* Roundtables on sources and methodology.[9]

There are far more promising young scholars than could be included in this special issue. Particularly in light of the pandemic, it is essential to build networks to share information and encourage those who are in the course of their doctoral studies, or completing their degrees in the face of a dire job market. Online venues and social media are a great means for developing scholarly networks while discussing sources and methodology, and highlighting the work of junior scholars. On a related note, it was our intention to include pieces by scholars currently based in the PRC, but we were unfortunately unable

to, as doing so in the current environment would potentially put these scholars' careers and livelihoods in jeopardy. This special issue is therefore dedicated to the principle that scholars, regardless of their nationality, should be allowed to conduct research, share their conclusions, collaborate with colleagues, and pursue a more accurate understanding of the past free from harassment or intimidation.

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[1] I would like to express my sincere thanks to the contributors, to Aminda Smith, the other directors of *PRC History Review*, and to Denise Ho for generously offering to write a postscript with her reflections on the issue.

[2] "Chinese University of Hong Kong to 'Restructure' China Study Center" (https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/hongkong-china-12242020163515.html). For its part, the University released a statement denying the "rumors" and "misinformation" about the Centre's closure and guaranteeing future access to USC collections through the CUHK University Library system (https://www.cpr.cuhk.edu.hk/en/press/open-letter-relating-to-the-universities-service-centre-for-china-studies-usc/).

[3] Though not entirely impossible; Jian Ren, "Dissertation Research Travel in China: Pandemic Version" (https://rccs.rutgers.edu/blog-details/230-dissertation-research-travel-in-china-pandemic-version)

[4] As with an important recent debate on the translation and interpretation of phrases spoken by Mao Zedong during the Great Leap Forward. Adam Cathcart, "Mistranslating Mao in Chengdu, 1958" (https://adamcathcart.com/2019/01/07/mistranslating-mao-in-chengdu-1958/). See also the discussion of Mao's interjections during a March 1959 Party Plenum in Shanghai on H-PRC (https://networks.h-net.org/node/3544/discussions/99266/looking-great-leap-smoking-gun-document) and a transcription of Mao's words from the Wilson Center's Digital Archive (https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/123036).

[5] Glenn D. Tiffert, "Peering down the Memory Hole: Censorship, Digitization, and the Fragility of Our Knowledge Base" *The American Historical Review*, Volume 124, Issue 2, April 2019, pp. 550–568

[6] "Sources of/for the post-1949 History of China," 2018 Biennial Conference of the Historical Society for Twentieth Century China.

[7] http://archive.weai.columbia.edu/event/revolutionary-routine-grassroots-sources-on-work-family-and-private-life-in-maoist-china/

[8] Especially "Part 1: Digital Sources for Chinese History" (https://youtu.be/s5BRRjP5Us0) and "Part 3: Thinking Outside the Archive" (https://youtu.be/K8mY7PGIXpc)

[9] "China from Without: Doing PRC History in Foreign Archives" http://prchistory.org/review-june-2017/; "New Perspectives in PRC History" http://prchistory.org/review-october-2018/

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Garbage Gleanings: Collected Knowledge of PRC History

Yi Lu

A few years ago, I began my dissertation research with an odd goal. At a time when scholars of PRC history scoured marketplaces such as Panjiayuan or Kongfz.com for primary sources, I was more interested in the story of these "garbage materials": Where do they come from, what can they tell us about the bureaucracy that produced (and discarded) them, and how do they shape our knowledge of the Mao era?

Archives are a barometer of politics, and it is easy to say that Chinese archives are in a state of crisis.[1] The first issue involves access: since start of the Xi Jinping era, Chinese archives – post-1949 collections in particular – are increasingly closed to researchers. While access is already tenuous for Chinese nationals, foreign scholars, who already faced tougher restrictions before the Covid-19 pandemic, must now face the prospect of writing history without official archives.[2] Any visits to China will remain difficult until at least after the 2022 Beijing Olympics. Even then, amid deteriorating US-China relations, the Chinese government is likely to impose on foreign readers even stricter visa rules and restrictions on access to libraries and archives.

But the crisis in Chinese archives is not limited to access. Despite – or rather because of – tightening control in official collections, a secondary market for primary sources has emerged. From bidding platforms (such as Kongfz.com) to unofficial compendia (e.g. *Collection of Important CCP Historical Documents* 中共重要历史文献资料汇编), rampant commercialization of Chinese archives over the past few decades has fueled a multi-million dollar industry and spawned a new landscape of publishing ventures and grassroots collections.

A majority of grassroots archives came from work units that became defunct after the Mao era. Instead of transferring the records for permanent retention according to China's archival laws, many offices sold them as waste paper during a period of rapid urbanization. At first sight, this lapse in archival custody confirms our popular impression of official corruption and malfeasance. Indeed, both the sellers and collectors of grassroots sources are quick to defend their trade as an act of resistance to official amnesia. "We are saving history from the dustbin," many dealers would tell me during my ethnographic fieldwork. In their accounts, the Chinese government looms as the real villain: not only does it suppress popular memories of sensitive historical events such as the Cultural Revolution, it is also an irresponsible custodian of the nation's documentary heritage.

But the Chinese state is not a monolith. A simple morality tale – of freedom vs. censorship, memory vs. forgetting – does not hold when we look more closely at actual flows of paper and money: just as low-level bureaucrats sell Mao-era records for profit, the country's education ministry has paid millions to institutions such as the Contemporary China Social Life Data and Research Center at Fudan University (复旦大学当代中国社会生活资料中心) to re-accession these displaced records.[3] The privatization of official archives might be illegal on paper, but it cannot be blamed on individual greed or official graft alone. If anything, its popularity — and profitability — attest to the resilience of the informal economy in contemporary China. There, cultural entrepreneurs, grassroots intellectuals, and local officials alike have carved a small, yet significant, sphere formerly monopolized by the archival system: the supply of historical documentation.

To be sure, this gray market of archives is neither new nor unique to contemporary China. As a distinctive channel of political communication, the used paper market has long reassembled scraps of information from the pinnacle of power for street consumption. From official anthologies of Liulichang[4] to the Grand Secretariat archives in the 1920s,[5] what some call "sinological garbology"[6] today is but the latest episode in China's long history of archival displacement.

Historians grieve to see archives in the dump, but the market is sadly no savior of history; the need for profit dictates their afterlife. Thin on profit but high on bulk, archives are purchased by a small but loyal group of collectors. As market trends shift constantly, few dealers specialize in archives alone; instead, most supplement their income with lucrative trades in rare books, antiques, and other curiosities. But while archives are only one asset in their "portfolio," they occupy a singular place: as a symbol of truth, they confer an aura of authenticity unmatched by any other object. In Shenyang, for example, a merchant proudly showed me a hand-written letter from his collection; it was a from the wife of Bo Xilai (薄熙来), who was once tipped for supreme power. "Just imagine," his face lit up with glee. "It would have been a letter by the first lady!"

Had Bo remained in power, the letter would have fetched a good price – such was the dealer's lament. From waste pickers to wholesale dealers to retail merchants and scholarly collectors, money casts a long shadow on both human sociability and archival conditions. In this bazaar economy, buying is not only an economic transaction, but also an elaborate ritual. At a time when information about the items on sale — from provenance to authenticity — is poor and unequal, buying signals interest and establishes trust; it is an essential part of sociability. Many collectors tell me that they would make small purchases just to stay on good terms with the seller; otherwise, the next "scoop" might go to another bidder. In the reverse direction, constant bargaining is important to dealers, too. Not only does it

introduce them to the latest trends in collecting, it also helps connect them to the most serious buyers.

These days, however, due to the illicit nature of the gray market, few dealers put their collection on display; both their physical and online store fronts are but an entry to — and camouflage of — the real offerings. Here, the clandestine nature of the trade not only adds to the allure of archives; it also changes their physical constitution. Secrecy sells. To increase revenue, top secret documents or specific key records are often extracted from the rest of the file; the original context and provenance — the hallmark of archives — are destroyed.

More than their contents, archives are thus valued for their materiality and sold like rare books or manuscripts, with additional premiums placed on rare seal designs, signatures of famous politicians, and more. Preservation standards vary among the dealers: while some continue to arrange the files by the official business for which they were created, others re-re-arrange them using new subject headings and remove more profitable items.

Here, the point is not to decry the "amateurism" of these collectors.[7] After all, archival concepts and institutions have their own histories, and their reception in twentieth-century China had a complicated past. For too long, professional standards — of appraisal, description, and access — have also excluded marginal knowledge and memory of the past. For many dealers, garbology is a physical record of their life. Almost exclusively men of the Cultural Revolution generation, many of them rank among the most marginalized members in society and embody the grim face of China's urban growth. The world may choose to praise their ingenuity or blame their bootlegging, but one thing is clear: their archival practice is not just reselling but transformative work, one that reconstitutes both the physical record and their epistemic meaning.

And herein lies the irony. While the grassroots archives have endowed these merchants with cultural capital and collective identity, they enact new forms of violence. Compared to the injury to the physical record, far less invisible is the harm to human privacy and dignity. Many people whose personal records are on sale remain alive; they never consented to be personal collectibles or academic footnotes.[8]

Historians play a unique role in this trade. Private collectors such as Fan Jianchuan (樊建川) or Gao Xiaosong (高晓松) might have amassed enormous collections with their wealth, but professional historians provide luster and cachet. [9] From conference invitations to book forewords to exhibition opportunities, the trade has created new sociabilities between academic and grassroots historians.[10] Even though the former frequently accuse the dealers of monopolistic control and price-gouging, many have no recourse but to cash in their social capital. Unable to afford the materials, one scholar I met gained access by striking up an unusual deal with the merchant: together, the pair would edit a documentary compilation, which would open with the collector's introduction and personal profile.

Scholars who do not patronize Kongfz.com or the flea markets may think they are immune from this ethical conundrum. In reality, garbology casts a long shadow over the origin and trajectory of our field. Some of the most popular sources on PRC history — ranging from Song Yongyi's Databases of Contemporary Chinese Political Campaigns (中国当代政治运动史数据库) to the famous *Tiananmen Papers*[11] — came from leaks, and their provenance is still shrouded in obscurity.

On a deeper level, garbology as a method of intelligence could be traced to the Cold War, when the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies, with funding from the Ford Foundation, sponsored the creation of China studies. Among the key early issues of our field was the collection and dissemination of mainland materials in Hong Kong. Though not without contention and reform, the knowledge infrastructure of the American national security state remains.

Showing the underbelly to our field is not meant to indict any specific collection or institution, nor do I issue any blanket call to boycott garbology. If anything, its history highlights the connections among politics and knowledge production. Archives, in the past as today, are instruments of power. For this reason, as much as we must speak out against archival redactions and censorship in China, let us not forget over-classification, reclassification, and chronic under-funding of archives in the United States.[12] To do so is not to engage in *tu quoque* arguments, but to recognize how archival access, often elevated to the level of national security, remains a transnational issue. As tensions between the world's two largest powers deepen, our access to archives is more precarious than ever.

In the meantime, murderous remains of the Mao era have been let loose. As they transitioned from state secrets to street commodities to scholarly resources, every physical journey of the archives entails rich epistemic changes.[13] We will never be able to reconstitute the archives "as they existed," but we can trace the meanings they lost and made. To compensate for the lack of provenance, grassroots archives have hastened to digitize their collections. While large holdings, such as those at Fudan, have tried to preserve the original grouping as much as possible, smaller collections, such as the Maoist Legacy Project at the University of Freiburg, re-arranged materials more fluidly by size and subject. Indeed, the new archival landscape we face today is a jungle of databases, each with its system for description, arrangement and storage. We urgently need shared standards for interoperability.[14]

In the meantime, many scholars are looking further afield to collect materials from foreign archives. Most active among them are Chinese scholars. Recognizing limitations of archival access at home, professors such as Shen Zhihua at East China Normal University are dispatching entire teams to purchase archives from around the world.[15] Bankrolled in part by the Chinese government, these ambitious initiatives seek to not only "tell China's stories well," but also build the knowledge infrastructure for a new generation of area studies.

Archives are the stuff of history, but they do not set our questions and paradigms. We do. As much as we lament our dwindling access to official stacks, let us not forget that published collections, rather than original documents, are still the primary means of archival opening in China. We have only begun to study their history;[16] we have yet to apply new digital methods to re-examine these old sources. One urgent task, I believe, is to create a meta-data archive of sorts, one that pools information from Chinese archives, published sources, and private collections to improve the discoverability of materials we can already access.[17] The creation of such a database will empower new computational study of PRC history, which could further reveal the potential and limits of our current sources.

For example, while it is tedious and time-consuming for human readers to compare different editions, a machine could easily and quickly reveal textual discrepancies, thereby shedding light on the CCP's methods and logic of textual censorship.[18] In the future, natural language processing technologies will permit us to extract named entities (individuals, places, organizations), explore topic models, and visualize information networks within the bureaucracy.[19] These new digital archives will not only enlarge our source base at a time when access to Chinese collections becomes increasingly restrictive. While computational methods could never replace close reading of primary sources, they offer new forensic tools and yield fresh perspectives on a perennial question: how do we know what we know about China?

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[1] This was the title of a recent conference at Stanford: https://networks.hnet.org/node/22055/discussions/5856649/cfp-chinese-archives-crisis-international-workshop-stanford.

[2] On a recent discussion of access conditions to Chinese archives, see Charles Kraus, "Researching the History of the People's Republic of China," *The CWIHP Working Paper Series*, 2016.

[3] On the history of the collection, see Letian Zhang, "Preserving Collective and Individual Memories: The Contemporary China Social Life Data and Research Center at Fudan University," *Journal of Modern Chinese History* 10 (January 1, 2016): 87–97.

[4] On the commerce of information at Liulichang, see Emily Mokros, "Reading the Guides, Directories, Manuals, and Anthologies of Liulichang," *East Asian Publishing and Society* 7, no. 2 (October 25, 2017): 127–66.

[5] Shana J. Brown, "Archives at the Margins: Luo Zhenyu's Qing Documents and Nationalism in Republican China," *The Politics of Historical Production in Late Qing and Republican China*, August 13, 2007, 247–70.

[6] See Jeremy Brown, "Finding and Using Grassroots Historical Sources from the Mao Era" (Chinese History Dissertation Reviews, December 15, 2010), https://dissertationreviews.wordpress.com/2010/12/15/finding-and-using-grassroots-historical-sources-from-the-mao-era-by-jeremy-brown/.

[7] For a rich discussion on the meaning of connoisseurship, see Laurence Coderre, "The Curator, the Investor, and the Dupe: Consumer Desire and Chinese Cultural Revolution Memorabilia," *Journal of Material Culture* 21, no. 4 (December 1, 2016): 429–47.

[8] Jie Li and Enhua Zhang, eds., *Red Legacies in China: Cultural Afterlives of the Communist Revolution* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2016).

[9] On Fan and his museum town, see Denise Y. Ho and Jie Li, "From Landlord Manor to Red Memorabilia: Reincarnations of a Chinese Museum Town," *Modern China* 42, no. 1 (January 1, 2016): 3–37.

[10] On grassroots historians, see Sebastian Veg, *Minjian: The Rise of China's Grassroots Intellectuals* (Columbia University Press, 2019).

[11] 新世紀出版社, ed., *最後的秘密：中國十三屆四中全會"六四"結論文檔. The Last Secret: The Final Documents from the June Fourth Crackdown* (新世紀出版社, 2019).

[12] Matthew Connelly, "State Secrecy, Archival Negligence, and the End of History as We Know It" (Knight First Amendment Institute, September 2018), https://knightcolumbia.org/content/state-secrecy-archival-negligence-and-end-history-we-know-it.

[13] Kuisong Yang, *Eight Outcasts: Social and Political Marginalization in China Under Mao* (University of California Press, 2019).

[14] A noteworthy initiative is currently underway at the Maoist Legacy Project, which has entered a formal agreement with CrossAsia to index their collection. The team has also adopted the open-source platform Omeka for front-end access, Dublin core standards for metadata, and Apache Solr for indexing. The platform is free to the public with registration. This essay was revised on September 30, 2021 to clarify the Maoist Legacy Project's data management practice.

[15] Professor Shen Zhihua's project, "The Collection, Organization, and Research of Eastern European Countries during the Cold War 东欧各国冷战时期档案收集、整理与研究," was funded by the National Social Science Fund of China 国家社会科学基金, and has recently published Shen Zhihua 沈志华, *Catalogue of Documents on the Transformation of Social Systems in Eastern Europe* 东欧各国社会制度转型档案文献编目 (社会科学文献出版社, 2019).

[16] Martin T. Fromm, *Borderland Memories: Searching for Historical Identity in Post-Mao China* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[17] A good example is the CrossAsia Integrated Text Repository (https://crossasia.org/), which, in addition to robust search functions across hundreds of Chinese-language documents, supports digital humanities analysis.

[18] For a recent example, see Cheng Yinhong 程映虹, "毛澤東的「階級分析」，原版有「數據支持」？後來刪掉了什麼？ Was Mao Zedong's original class analysis backed up by data? What was deleted?" (端傳媒 Initium Media, July 25, 2021), https://theinitium.com/article/20210725-opinion-mao-theory-data/.

[19] For example, see the Contemporary Chinese Village Data Project (http://www.chinesevillagedata.library.pitt.edu) at the East Asian Library of the University of Pittsburgh: Yuanziyi Zhang, "China's Rural Statistics: The Contemporary Chinese Village Gazetteer Data Project," *Journal of East Asian Libraries*, no. 171 (2020): 8.

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Problematizing the "Personal Collection": the Politics and Implications of How Historians Cite Sources

Matthew Wills

Several years ago, graduate students at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) were asked to consider the defining features of our modern Chinese history program. For better or for worse, answers generally coalesced around UCSD's reputation for studies investigating the "lived experiences" of everyday people in the People's Republic of China (PRC). UCSD is not alone in this pursuing this scholarly direction; a growing group of universities across the world are home to Chinese history scholars who use a variety of paper-based sources – many not housed in official Chinese archives – to write the histories of social movements, the economy, agriculture, class, gender, and a host of other aspects of the Mao-era. These materials, often sourced from flea markets, bookstores, online booksellers, and dealers, include official documents, personnel files, pamphlets, handbooks, locally-produced documentary collections, leaflets, diaries, tickets, identity cards, and all the other ephemera of everyday life. This brand of scholarship goes by several slightly fluid umbrella terms, with "garbology" (which I will use here) and "grassroots history" being two of the most popular in English. The fantastic studies drawing from these sources continue to overturn the grand narratives of modern Chinese historical studies. While access to official archives in the PRC remains difficult and heavily mediated by the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) desire to control historical scholarship, the turn toward using alternative sources of information like garbology materials is unlikely to disappear.

Rather than speaking to the many merits of this school of scholarship, however, this piece draws attention to how garbology can – and does – lead to deeply problematic practices concerning the citation of non-archival materials. At the center of this malaise is the notion of the "personal collection." So far, the scholars who collect these garbological materials have tended to keep hold of them, making references to "personal collections," "author collections" and items being "in the author's possession" more and more common in the footnotes of scholarly writing. The growth of this practice, largely unquestioned, is exemplified in the work *Maoism at the Grassroots*, the 2015 edited volume overseen by Jeremy Brown and Matthew Johnson. Arguably representing the high tide of the first wave of garbological scholarship, the work makes reference to personally-held materials across several chapters. In other chapters, relatively obscure materials have no clear provenance, and in the absence of a more in-depth citation it seems fair to assume that at least some of these are being held by the authors. Overall, *Maoism at the Grassroots* typifies the broader ease with which historians have felt comfortable citing materials that they personally hold. In the paragraphs that follow, I will lay out the reasons why I think this practice poses practical and ethical challenges for the field. I will also lay-out alternatives for future garbology research so that we can avoid some of the mistakes of the past.

Problematizing the Use of Garbological Sources

Because it is an instructive case, I will stay with the example of *Maoism at the Grassroots* and examine its citation practices more closely. In 2016, I pored over the book's endnotes and bibliography to get a sense of how many citations referred to material either in the collection of the chapter's author or not ascribed to any collection at all. Among the contributors, there exists a very clear split between those who provided accessible routes to their cited source material and those who did not. Stand-out examples of the former include Cao Shuji, Matthew Johnson and Xiaoxuan Wang, who all draw on documents housed in municipal and county archives. While access to these repositories is far from guaranteed in today's research climate, it is nonetheless theoretically possible for an historian to access these sources independent of their author.

When it comes to the garbologists employing materials not found in state archives, their citations are markedly less helpful to the scholarly reader. Yang Kuisong draws heavily on a "Xuchang XX factory hooligan dossier—Zang Qiren" which is not attributed to any collection, whether personal or institutional. Daniel Leese's excellent study of "Revising Political Verdicts in Post-Mao China" uses documents from a Beijing court which remain unattributed, while Jeremy Brown and Sha Qingqing cite a diary of unknown provenance. In the absence of proper citation and attribution, I suspect that all these materials come from the authors' own collections. In addition, Wang Haiguang relies heavily on material attributed to his own collections and, throughout the book's notes, sporadic references to documents in various authors' collections reaffirms the importance of privately collected material to garbological scholarship. While I do not have the space here to provide an exhaustive list of all scholarship that contains similar types of citation, it suffices to say that this practice is common and posed as legitimate to junior scholars looking to make their initial forays into the field.

Anybody who has braved a cold morning to go to a book market, or spent hours trawling online websites for materials, knows the effort required to collect garbological sources. In some ways, these experiences might even generate a strong level of attachment between the historian and the fruits of their labors. For my own dissertation project, for example, I collected hundreds of books related to the Criticize Lin, Criticize Confucius campaign (1974-1976) and will freely confess to being very invested in them and their research value.

Extrapolating from my own experience, I believe this attachment in part drives the practice whereby garbologists maintain possession of their own collections of material *even when they have cited them in public-facing research*.

When historians use materials from their own collections and cite them as such, they are not fulfilling one side of the academic bargain. Ideally, the academic prestige, scholarly capital, and career advancement authors gain from publishing an article or monograph stems partly from their willingness to open up their ideas to the scrutiny of others, contribute to the broad sweep of scholarly knowledge, and risk push-back and engagement from others. When citations cannot be followed-up and material cannot be independently scrutinized, this harms the further development of the field by creating a situation where academic scrutiny depends on the author themselves mediating access to their source materials.

Besides the obvious intellectual benefits that accrue from other scholars following-up on references and scrutinizing how the garbologists analyze their source material, the practice of citing the "personal collection" has deeper political implications and consequences. In citing materials remaining only in their possession, garbologists create informal networks of access to information as a substitute for formal structures. When a personal collection is cited, other scholars wishing to scrutinize such scholarship and obtain the cited sources must approach the original author. This introduces interpersonal dynamics – which in academia are often subject to a complex network of power relations – into access to scholarly knowledge. If garbologist A and scholar B do not get along, how might this affect A's willingness to share materials with B? If A is a tenured professor and B a first-year graduate student, how comfortable will B feel emailing A to request access to every "author's collection" source used in A's recent article? How might race, gender, and class further mediate the contact between A and B? I strongly subscribe to the opinion that Open Access is a necessary precondition to making academia as inclusive as possible, and I suggest here that the notion of the "personal collection" works against this goal. Jeremy Brown and Matthew Johnson highlight in their introduction to *Maoism at the Grassroots* that archives "are produced by institutions of state power" (5). I want to highlight here how the personal collection is likewise connected to and produced by questions of power and privilege.

If access to materials is mediated through the dynamics of peer-to-peer relationships, this also risks a situation where those with the best networking ability stay at the head of the field in the cut-throat academic job market. I have been in enough conference settings and talks to know that sources are often shared as a result of serendipity, where individuals that "get on" and have overlapping research interests proceed to exchange sources. I myself have benefited from just such an arrangement. People are, of course, free to dispose of what they privately collected in any way they wish, but the institutionalization of *cited* material as a matter of course is one way in which the field can collectively sidestep the need for some of these personal connections. Those without the social capital to form them, or the financial capital to travel to these all-important conference events, should not lose out as a result.

I need to make something clear here: I do not subscribe to the belief that archives, archivists, and librarians are neutral custodians, outside the bounds of the politicization and regulation of knowledge. Recent coverage of "archiving while black" had made this once again abundantly clear. Digital repositories, likewise, privilege those with access to particular technology and other resources, and like the physical archive they present material in ways that shape analytical narratives. An abundance of archival studies scholarship exists to question and complicate these institutions and their dynamics, and these have had a big influence on my thinking.

But accepting that there will never be a "perfect" solution to the question of how the historical archive is organized and preserved, I do believe that institutionalizing materials marks a step forward from the practices I have critiqued above. Compared to historians without formal training in archive science, expert librarians and other data management professionals in the Chinese studies field are in my view better placed to consider how to overcome the limitations of the archive. Besides this conservation benefit, long after the historian has moved on to the next research project, institutions will continue to confront and be confronted with the politics and power behind their archival practices. By making garbological materials a part of the public archival record, this would open the door to the kind of critical examination that is rarely found in the scholarship of garbology's practitioners. Weighing the choice between having material in institutions or tucked away in private office drawers, I find that the former not only widens access and increases the longevity of materials, but also opens up the door to future interrogation of the sources and archives underpinning historical research.

The above paragraph allows me to propose an alternative to the personal collection: transferring materials just *ahead of an article or book's final publication* to the care of institutions and away from the offices of individuals. If materials are transferred once research is completed and an article or book is in its finalized form, this protects the intellectual research of the original collecting scholar while respecting the broader interests of the community. For my part, I did exactly this with my own extensive collection of Chinese propaganda materials –much of which is scarce or contains idiosyncratic bibliographic features not found in other copies – ahead of publishing my dissertation in 2021. These materials now live in the library at UCSD, and future scholars who wish to analyze my use of sources, or use them for their own work, will always be able to do so without recourse to me. They will never need to pay registration fees and fly to a conference to network with me, they will never have to write me an awkward email, and they will not need to navigate the intricacies of our peer-to-peer relationship. For a scholar wishing to study the structure of the archives underpinning scholarship on the history of modern Chinese propaganda, institutionalization has made this more possible.

At this juncture, I want to recognize that some prominent garbologists have recently taken retrospective steps to widen

access to their materials. Jeremy Brown, for example, now runs a website called "PRC Source Transparency" holding digital scans of all of the garbology material cited in his scholarly work (with the exception of material with personal information requiring possible redacting). Michael Schoenhals' materials are now housed at the Lund University Library and the collection is available online. These recent solutions address some of the issues regarding access covered in this piece and thus represent a positive step forward. At the same time, they possess limitations that institutionalizing material ahead of publication would avoid. In both cases, these online depositories are not connected to the citations in their scholarship, leaving the readers to join the dots after publication. Scans are also not a surrogate for physical copies because they preclude analysis of a source's materiality. In the case of Brown, the materials remain in his possession and access to the physical copy appears to remain through him.

As already suggested, transferring material to institutional care has the added benefit of preserving materials for future use. Given the low quality of much of the paper used during the Mao era, storage of materials under proper archival conditions will prolong their life and prevent vital information from wasting away. In transferring materials to the care of librarians and archivists, we can call upon their expertise in preserving sources and balancing the needs of users with the concerns of conservation, while institutionalization makes the politics underlining these choices more explicit and more accessible. The concept of the "personal collection" tacitly implies that the historian, and not the professional archivist, knows what is best for sources. Meanwhile, the physically fragile documentary record collected so painstakingly on research trips and cited so judiciously in scholarship sits in offices, cupboards and drawers, rapidly degrading and literally fading away. Archivists are not historians, and neither should historians pretend to be archivists.

Garbology's source practices and "personal collections" also generate a whole host of legal and ethical dilemmas. For one, the provenance of sources like documents, personnel files, and diaries is rarely clear when they are purchased, leaving open the possibility that these are stolen or obtained in an underhand manner for resale into the secondhand market. Given the amount of money these materials can now command in the marketplace, with big institutions inside and outside of China looking to make acquisitions, it seems unlikely that all these garbology materials are just dug out of the trash. In China, taking documents outside of the country is illegal and, while these restrictions are often viewed as a way for the state to control scholarship, we must also recognize that they help prevent the circulation and sale of files and documents in dubious circumstances. These laws also exist to protect privacy. Many garbologists rightly change the names of individuals named in personnel files to protect their identity, but this sidesteps ethical questions concerning whether historians have any right to personally own large swathes of an individual's personal information without their express consent. I do not imagine that the individuals mentioned in personnel files or bureaucratic documents would be too reassured to know that they now sit in an academic's office. I, for one, would not want my grandparents' medical records or work performance files in the private, unregulated hands of a dealer, bookseller, or scholar. Institutionalizing materials does not eliminate these ethical dilemmas, but once again I argue that institutions are better placed than individuals to navigate these ethical implications and ensure that privacy is protected at all costs. Archivists and librarians deal with these questions on an almost daily basis, and historians should again acknowledge their expertise.

Considering that garbology and grassroots history resists many of the hegemonic narratives of PRC history, it is also ironic that the commodification of sources 'owned' in personal collections strips these sources of much of their counter-narrative agency. As I argued above, personal collections create hierarchies of access to knowledge and information, and these in some ways replicate those introduced by the CCP. In the 1950s and 1960s, only a privileged few enjoyed access to internal information, and these individuals exerted significant social and political influence as a result. In *Maoism at the Grassroots*, Michael Schoenhals shows in his piece on China's "Great Proletarian Information Revolution" that the Red Guard movement was partly an attempt to disrupt strangleholds over information. Red Guard factions used situation reports, telephone codes and bureaucracies spreading across China to assert control over the narrative of the Cultural Revolution, prompting the authorities to respond with policies of "enforced dissolution" (253). In the act of citing sources in his personal collection, however, Schoenhals ironically turned these materials into privately held commodities available only to a limited, elite academic audience. When materials sit in personal collections after they have been cited, their collectors have taken away much of these materials' potential to mount further challenges to existing ideas by restricting their circulation. Sources become a commodity to be 'possessed' and shared informally among the collector and their friends or colleagues. When materials are purchased either with public money or fellowship funding rather than private funds, this is another reason to open them up for the common good. With funding for the humanities disappearing amidst an unfolding economic downturn, sharing the fruits of research trips (once their collector has made use of sources in their scholarship) will help ensure that those without the means to make expensive trips to China can continue their research.

One final critique of the "personal collection" pertains to their long-term future and the current absence of any plan for repatriation of materials. Some garbologists working in the West legitimize the transferring of two types of garbological source – government documents and personnel files – out of China by citing the Chinese state's attempts to suppress these histories, push its politicized narratives of modern Chinese history, and (in some cases) destroy these materials. Official documents and personnel files, however, cannot be like many of the antiquities in Western museums, plundered from their original context and never to return. When we buy documents and files in book markets, irrespective of whether they end up in personal collections or institutions abroad, we take possession of the documentary record of the Chinese state and its citizens. Therefore, we must do so with the hope that we can

eventually transfer them back to their home context. This hope already sounds loaded with colonial baggage – are scholars in the West now deciding when a state can be trusted with its own archives? – and this is one of the reasons why collecting documents and files is arguably best avoided in the first place. But, given that so many materials have already been taken out of China, institutions are better placed to evaluate these processes, take the lead in returning them to their proper context, and undergo outside scrutiny concerning these questions. In the absence of stated concrete plans from garbologists regarding the long-term future of collected sources, moving private collections to libraries and other depositories ensures a more stable future for these materials and will facilitate their eventual repatriation.

Concluding Thoughts and Future Directions

The aim of this piece is to advance discussion about the practice of citing and keeping personal collections of material. It is not the final word, nor the only word, but an attempt to problematize a practice that has lain uncritiqued in print for too long. I would like to suggest to younger scholars like myself that we can follow a different path to the first generation of garbologists. For one, we can institutionalize the materials we cite to promote open access to information, remove some of the power dynamics of academic life, and aid the work of future historians. Institutionalizing materials will also advance the responsible custodianship of our sources by those better placed than us to evaluate the many dilemmas these materials engender. In short, I would like to propose an alternative set of principles for us to follow:

1. That materials cited in scholarly work should be available for other academics to consult.
2. That these materials should be housed in institutions – archives, libraries, and research centers – to ensure historians do not become archivists and gatekeepers to the source material they cite.
3. That historians should do everything in their power to guarantee the usefulness of their citations for subsequent generations of scholars, including not referring to "personal collections" in their citations.

These guidelines are not perfect, nor do they successfully resolve many of the political considerations tied up in grassroots research on PRC history. I can also foresee a range of scenarios in which applying them might cause personal problems for scholars working in sensitive academic environments. As for institutions, we must also reckon with the fact that many do not have the space, money, or inclination to absorb large donations of materials, and these problems will likely worsen under the long-term impact of budget cutting at universities. My remarks here are trying to underscore that citation and archival practices are an essential and undervalued part of ethically producing and revising scholarly knowledge. The garbologists themselves have recognized this in their critiques of other scholars.[1] Strong citations and community-oriented approaches to materials facilitate research into important histories, encourage scrutiny of scholarly arguments and archives, and advance understanding of how to ethically practice the historian's craft. Given that access to sources at Chinese archives is rapidly diminishing, questions over how we should handle garbology materials become ever more urgent.

[1] For example, see footnote 37 on page 10 of Michael Schoenhals' *Spying for the People: Mao's Secret Agents, 1949–1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

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Researching the PRC in Municipal and Provincial Archives

Sarah Mellors Rodriguez

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.

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Doing Research on Pre-1949 Land Reform in China

Qiong Liu

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.

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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

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Researching the History of PRC Foreign Relations in an Uncertain Era

Thomas Burnham

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 fields[12] 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，《冷战史研究档案资料源导论》（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.

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A Survey of "Printed" Sources for Researching the Early Maoist Period

Steven Pieragastini

This essay will discuss on the availability and utility of printed, published sources for studying the early years of the People's Republic, up to the Cultural Revolution. "Printed sources" here includes physical copies of printed sources as well as printed sources that have been scanned or transcribed and made available in databases. This category also includes both items from the Maoist period itself as well as those compiled since the start of Reform and Opening Up. While the resources discussed below are not a comprehensive list of printed sources, they are reasonably easy to locate and access and should provide at least a starting point for a wide variety of research topics.

Sources produced during the Maoist period itself range from well-known and widely available sources such as *People's Daily*, which is fully digitized and searchable for anyone to use[1], to more obscure and rare sources, or sources with a deliberately limited circulation. In addition to *People's Daily*, regional and local newspapers can often be found on microfilm at major research universities, and some have been digitized and made available in databases accessible in mainland China. Additionally, relevant newspapers from Hong Kong[2] and Taiwan[3] are readily available online for the public or through several major research institutions. Many periodicals from the Maoist period have been digitized and are available as part of major Chinese databases like CNKI and Duxiu. Beyond newspapers and periodicals published for mass consumption, there are a range of government periodicals from the Maoist period that detail provincial and local government activities and orders (政报) or focus on specific areas of work, either periodical reports like 政讯 and 简报, or published collections of documents with phrases like 参考资料 or 文件汇编 in their titles. One of the best starting places for research on the 1950s and early 1960s is the *Internal Reference* 《内部参考》 a limited-circulation publication for high-level cadres that offered frank descriptions of major problems. Many of these have been transcribed and included in the excellent Databases on the History of Contemporary Chinese Political Movements[4] edited by Song Yongyi and managed by the Chinese University of Hong Kong. CUHK's Universities Service Centre for China Studies has scanned copies of the full run of *Internal Reference*; unfortunately, with the closing of the Centre, the future of this resource is uncertain. Additionally, there are a range of published sources with some sort of *neibu* designation that are nonetheless available to researchers today. Taking, for example, a research topic dealing with land reform in Yunnan, a researcher could employ various individual publications in the large series 少数民族社会历史调查 as well as compilations of materials on land reform at the local level that were published during the campaign itself, such as 《德宏傣族地区和平协商土地改革文件汇编》. It is worth noting that, while the *Internal Reference* contains information that can be difficult to obtain elsewhere, *neibu* designations were used widely and not all *neibu* publications are particularly revealing to scholars of PRC History.[5]

When it comes to sources published since the start of Reform and Opening Up, perhaps the most voluminous are collected archival documents put out by provincial and municipal archives and Party history offices. These include collections of important documents on various matters from provincial and municipal party committees, as well as collections of documents dealing specifically with major campaigns in the Maoist era, such as Liberation, Land Reform, Co-operativization and collectivization, the Great Leap Forward, and the Four Cleanups/Socialist Education Movement (though not the Cultural Revolution). Local Party histories are often little more than wearisome lists of individuals and the positions they held, along with their deeds in service of the Party, but they occasionally can be of tremendous value (and include primary documents if part of a 党史资料 series). Similar collections of documents include major directives by the Party Center (including 《中共中央文件选集》 and 《建国以来重要文献选编》, which is available online)[6], speeches and writings of Party leaders (which can be thematic, such as 《周恩来外交文选》), collections of documents pertaining to or originating from particular regions or administrative units (for example, 《中共中央西北局文件汇集》), thematic collections relating, for example, to foreign relations (such as 《现代中越关係资料选编：1949. 10—1978》 and 《中国与苏联关系文献汇编：1952 年-1955 年》), or collections that include documents from various geographic locations and levels of the Party-State bureaucracy, often focused on a particular area of Party work (for example, 《农业集体化重要文件汇编：1949-1981》 and 《中国共产党与少数民族地区的民主改革和社会主义改造》). The documents included in such collections can vary widely, from reproductions of articles from *People's Daily* and major speeches of Mao and other Party leaders that are available elsewhere, to very local, low-level reports from Party cadres that would only otherwise be available in the archive itself. There are a number of issues with such collections of documents, the most obvious being the likelihood that documents have been edited to exclude certain information. Moreover, the published documents do not include identifying information indicating their provenance or order in a group of documents, nor do they include marginal notes.

Another extremely useful source for scholars of the post-1949 period are the "new" gazetteers (地方志), distinct from gazetteers published in the imperial or Republican eras. For provinces, prefectures, and larger municipalities, dozens of dedicated thematic volumes (专业志) have been published on a wide range of subjects (these also often exist for smaller municipalities and counties, but can be difficult to locate). The "new" gazetteers are widely available outside of mainland China and in many cases have been digitized, available either on dedicated websites (such as http://www.shtong.gov.cn/node2/index.html and http://www.gxdfz.org.cn/) or as part of the Wangfang Data gazetteer database (http://fz.wanfangdata.com.cn/). Unfortunately, a number of websites that had digitized copies of the provincial-level gazetteers are now defunct, while the Wanfang database appears to have not included, or included and then removed, a number of volumes or sections of gazetteers dealing with "sensitive" topics. The status of these websites and databases can change quickly, and it is worth checking to see if resources have been reconstituted in a different form (for instance, the site with digitized copies of gazetteers for Jiangsu[7] went offline, and later came back online with a different URL and a requirement to register). Aside from accessibility, as a source of information, gazetteers have some obvious problems relating to their production and approval by Party-affiliated offices (often local branches of the 政协). Nevertheless, they can be surprisingly revealing and are especially useful for raw data. There are also village gazetteers 村志, which range from semi-official to unofficial publications, and are increasingly available outside of mainland China (the University of Pittsburgh has an especially large collection, some data from which has been collated for researchers' use).[8]

Another very large collection of sources that is worth any researcher's time to examine is the *Compilations of Important Historical Documents of the CCP* (中共重要历史文献资料汇编), published by the Service Center for Chinese Publications (中文出版物服务中心). The collection is divided into 35 series (辑), each composed of dozens or hundreds of parts (分册), which themselves are often several volumes. It is difficult to overestimate the breadth and depth of this collection; while much of the it focuses on high-level Party politics as well as the internal organization and administration of the Party, many volumes also deal with the grassroots implementation of and reaction to political campaigns, especially the Cultural Revolution. There are also series dedicated to military affairs, public security, borderlands and *shaoshu minzu* policies, and economic policy. The chronological range of the sources stretches from the Party's revolutionary phase before 1949 nearly down to the present. Major research libraries (including UCLA[9], Harvard[10], and Princeton[11]) house large portions of this collection, and much of it has been digitized by Harvard's Yenching Library and Hathitrust. A number of the volumes in this collection have also been transcribed and included in the aforementioned CUHK Databases on the History of Contemporary Chinese Political Movements.

The above types sources may not be equivalent to easy access to the archive, which appears unlikely for the foreseeable future, but used carefully and in conjunction, these sourcebases can serve as a great alternative. In particular, *neibu* sources and compilations of primary sources can be exceptionally rich sources of information.

With all of these considerations in mind, where should a researcher look for sources when embarking on a new project? Perhaps the best place to start is WorldCat (www.worldcat.org), which allows searches in both *hanzi* (simplified or traditional work, regardless of the format of the title) and pinyin (aside from proper nouns, individual syllables must be separated as is conventional in library cataloging; so, for example, "Mao Zedong xuan ji" instead of "Mao Zedong xuanji"). WorldCat is especially useful because it is tied in with Interlibrary Loan, which allows for sources to be shipped or scanned from other libraries to one's home institution, even internationally in some cases. Another great resource, if your institution has access, are Chinese databases such as CNKI, Duxiu, and Chinamaxx, which have scanned periodicals from the Maoist period and some primary source collections, along *wenshi ziliao* (文史資料), memoirs, oral histories, and secondary scholarly works. It is also worth looking at the enormous and freely-accessible 抗战文献数据平台 (http://www.modern history.org.cn/), which, despite its name, contains digitized (and mostly searchable) newspapers, periodicals, archival documents, photographs and more from the entire Republican era and into the early 1950s. The platform also includes scanned copies of primary sources compiled and published since 1980, including those pertaining to the early PRC (some examples: 《湖南和平解放接管建政史料》, 《苏州城市接管与社会改造》, and the periodical 《广州市政》).

Book buying sites, like the well-known www.kongfz.com/ may not have quite as many sources as a decade ago, but they still do include a tremendous amount of contemporary and recent compilations of sources that would be difficult if not impossible to locate outside of mainland China (and generally do not entail the same ethical problems associated with buying deaccessioned or perhaps stolen archival documents). Especially due to the pandemic, shipping can be extremely slow and expensive, but some sellers are willing to scan sources if you contact them. There are also a number of buying agents that can purchase materials domestically and then ship them internationally for a fee. Although it would have been more fruitful several years ago, a simple search on Baidu or Google may yield sources that have been scanned and uploaded, especially into a cloud service like Baidu *wangpan*. Similarly, though many posts dealing with sensitive issues have been taken down, blogs can still be a great way to access primary sources, which are often extensively reproduced or scanned. Recently, private WeChat groups have emerged as a valuable means for accessing materials, but depend on an invitation or at least the approval of group administrators, highlighting again the importance of networking and information-sharing.

Finally, it is worth thinking critically about the nature of printed sources and access to them. Their very existence and reproduction by government offices and publishers reflects the fact that this was information that the state deemed worthwhile

to document and propagate. Moreover, despite their apparent fixed and permanent nature as printed words on paper, these sources are in fact dynamic; ink fades, paper decomposes, scans and photographs can be blurry, web links "rot" over time or are deliberately broken, and documents can be selectively excised from digital collections.[12] Additionally, the pandemic has highlighted pre-existing issues like the difficulties of researchers who are not affiliated with or living near major research libraries for East Asian Studies. Libraries and research institutions have responded to the pandemic by expanding access to their digitized collections; these allowances would improve the quality of research and allow for a more diverse range of perspectives if they were made permanent in some fashion.

[1] Available at http://data.people.com.cn/rmrb, http://www.laoziliao.net/rmrb/, and elsewhere.

[2] Old Hong Kong Newspapers (https://mmis.hkpl.gov.hk/old-hk-collection) and

[3] 台灣新聞智慧網 http://tnsw.infolinker.com.tw/

[4] http://ccrd.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/

[5] See Nicolai Volland, "Clandestine Cosmopolitanism: Foreign Literature in the People's Republic of China, 1957–1977" *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 76, Issue 1 (Feb. 2017), 185 – 210; Wen-hsuan Tsai, "A Unique Pattern of Policymaking in China's Authoritarian Regime: the CCP's Neican/Pishi Model" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 55, Number 6, pp. 1093–1115; and Michael Schoenhals, '信息、决策和中国的"文化大革命"' in 朱 佳木 (Ed.), 當代中國與它的外部世界 (當代中國出版社, 2006).

[6] http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/209963/index.html

[7] http://58.213.139.243:8088/FZJS/index.html

[8] http://www.chinesevillagedata.library.pitt.edu/ Also see Kristen Looney, "'Village Gazetteers, a New Source in the China Field.' *The China Journal* 60, 135-47.

[9] https://bit.ly/3kPa3Gs

[10] https://guides.library.harvard.edu/ld.php?content_id=23588005

[11] https://catalog.princeton.edu/catalog?utf8=✓&search_field=all_fields&q=中共重要历史文献资料汇编

[12] Even something as minor as the collective abandonment of Adobe Flash Player by most web browsers at the end of 2020 can cause tremendous headaches for researchers, since many Chinese websites still use Flash Player to display documents.

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Private Letters as a Source of PRC History

Yanjie Huang[1]

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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[1] I want to thank Zhang Letian and Li Tian of Fudan University for kindly introducing me to and generously sharing with me the family letters collection at the CCSLDR. At Columbia University, I am grateful to Eugenia Lean, Madeleine Zelin, and Chris J. M. Chang, who have always supported my exploration in grassroots sources. I am also grateful to an anonymous reviewer whose comments helped me to improve the draft. Lastly, I also want to express my gratitude to Steven Pieragastini for painstakingly going over the earlier drafts of the paper.

[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.

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How to Read a Mao-Era Diary

Shan Windscript[1]

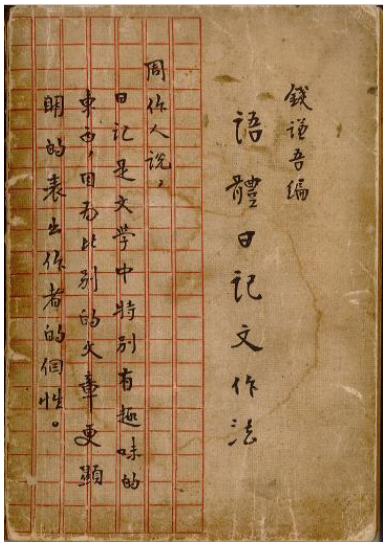
Keeping a journal was a widespread practice under the Maoist Communist regime. Yet to mention Mao-era diaries today is often to invite scepticism. Mainstream views about the period often call into question the value of the diary as a reliable historical source, seeing the medium largely as the product of state propaganda, and hence as evidence for little other than the destruction of individual autonomy and the "private self" by a mass "totalitarian" dictatorship.[2] Underlying this assumption is—aside from an obvious Cold War liberal essentialism[3]—a conceptual tendency to posit "privacy" and "autonomy" as natural features of, and criteria for, "authentic" journal-keeping.

This essay proposes a more fruitful methodology for approaching Mao-era diaries, one that treats the medium not as a fixed form with definitive, timeless boundaries, but as a historical *problematic* that must be dealt with in consideration of its cultural and political conditions of production. Like many other genres of life-writing (autobiography, memoir, and letter), the diary defies stable, trans-historical definitions. Since the cultural and linguistic turn, many literary scholars and historians have emphasized the diary's elastic, hybrid, and historically contingent nature, rejecting conventional tendencies to essentialize the genre as embodiment of the private sphere.[4] As Desirée Henderson argues, the modern diary, structured by and large around principles of "dailiness" and seriality, emerged out of the "nexus of individual experience, historical and cultural context, and literary tradition."[5] A more productive and critical point of departure for reading a Mao-era diary would be to contextualize and historicize what it meant to keep a journal under Communist rule.

In what follows, I survey the changing and contested meanings of the diary in modern Chinese history, followed by a discussion on two useful interpretive approaches to Mao-era diaries, each of which is underpinned by distinct theoretical and historiographical orientations. A complex yet capacious genre, the diary offers historians of Maoist China new possibilities and challenges, from the empirical quest for reconstructing social history "from below" to the discursive pursuit of theorizing revolutionary subject-formation.

Revolutions in Diary

The popularization of diary-keeping in Maoist China can be viewed as a product of the country's ongoing search for modernity, born of revolutionary upheavals at the turn of the twentieth century. In the late imperial period, many educated men and women used the diary for purposes of life-recording and moral self-cultivation. In the late Qing and Republican era, however, the meaning of the diary underwent a radical change. Many progressive writers and educators of the time, inspired by similar trends elsewhere, began to link diary-writing with China's national exigency of cultivating new, modern citizen-subjects as the country underwent tremendous cultural and political transformation.[6] They began to see journal-keeping as a literary and pedagogical tool for emancipating the individual's creative self-expression from the shackles of traditional cultural conventions (Figure 1). Around this time, the first-person genre acquired an individualistic and "intimate" character in China. Keeping a journal was now closely linked to notions of psychological interiority, self-reflexivity, and creativity, although "privacy" was not much of a critical concern.[7]



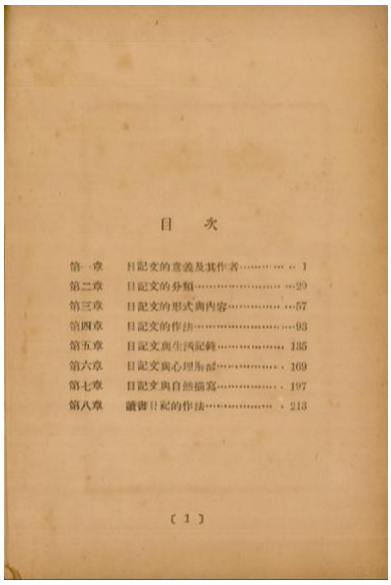


Figure 1: Front cover (left) and table of contents (right) of Qian Qianwu's *Methods of Writing a Vernacular Diary* (Shanghai:

Nanqiang Bookstore, 1931). A quote from Zhou Zuoren adorns the book's cover: "The diary is a very interesting thing in literature. It reflects more clearly than does any other genre the individuality of its writer." Author's collection.

Sitting at the intersection of personal and social transformations, the diary was well suited for the Maoist regime's purpose of social transformation according to state-socialist ideals of modernization. From the 1950s through to the 1960s, the parameters of how to write a diary shifted (Figure 2). The "old diary" was now denounced as a "bourgeois" medium that fostered unrestrained individualism and self-interest—symptoms of the decay of the "old society"—within the diarist. The liberated "new Chinese masses"—those belonging to the proletarian and peasant classes—were to use the journal for improving literacy, organizing their work and lives, and cultivating socialist consciousness. To keep a journal in the Communist "new China" was to link the self with society, the state, and history through conscious engagement with revolutionary ethics and politics in everyday personal writing.

Not everyone wrote a diary in accordance with the new political imperatives, of course, but the idea of being able to claim a historical and political subject position using such an ordinary form became increasingly attractive in the early 1960s, thanks in no small part to the state's systemic propagation of "red diaries" written by revolutionary role models (e.g., *Lei Feng's Diary*). By the time the Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966, diary-writing was widely regarded as both a technology and a symbol of radical political and class identification, especially among the youth. Yet such conflation of the diary with its writer's worldview also gave rise to the practice of publicizing "black diaries" of convicted "class enemies" so as to expose their "counterrevolutionary crimes." Nevertheless, most people approached diary-writing without fuss about the possibility of ideological incrimination. Many indeed scrupulously exposed their incorrect "bourgeois" thoughts and behaviors as part of their revolutionary self-criticism, and voluntarily exchanged diaries with their comrades for critical feedback on how to improve their ideological outlook.[8] Even when the mass political campaign waned in the late-1960s as the "Down to the Countryside" movement commenced, the socio-political significance of the diary for proletarianizing the "self" continued to influence the ways in which many young people related to history, politics, the state, and the world communist revolution on the agricultural fields in their narrations of daily life.

Figure 2: Author's collection of guidebooks on diary-writing and "model diaries" published in twentieth-century China.

As this brief history of modern Chinese diaries shows, what it meant to keep a journal, and how to do so *properly*, were contested and historically contingent questions whose answers depended on shifting cultural and political parameters of expression of everyday life and selfhood. This shows the limit of the methodological concern with "privacy" and "autonomy" for determining the historical value of Mao-era diaries. Rather than serving the purpose of cultivating the liberal "private self," diary-writing under Mao was to produce a conscious subjectivity in opposition to the inward-looking "private self." How, and to what ends, should we read a Mao-era diary?

Finding "People" in Diaries: The Empirical Approach

The dominant interpretive approach to diaries in history is by-and-large empirical, treating the medium as a repertoire of intimate and microscopic social experiences. This analytical method corresponds with "people's history" (or microhistory) as a methodology to studying the past. It seeks to reconstruct social histories "from below" by excavating information from diaries about "ordinary people's" perspectives, the minutiae of their day-to-day "lived experiences," and small-scale events unfolding at the grassroots.[9]

This approach requires careful and critical execution of established historical methods of source analysis: investigating the biographical background of the diarists, evaluating their intents and purposes, asking who their audience might be, triangulating and corroborating with other sources to situate the diarists and their narratives within wider contexts, and close reading of the diary content to locate a research focus and main themes. For Mao-era diaries, especially those produced during the Cultural Revolution, empirical diary analysis often also requires reading against and despite the presence of ideological language.

One example to illustrate this approach is Sha Qingqing and Jeremy Brown's analysis of the diary written by a high school student in the second half of 1976. Setting aside the diary's "unsurprising political content" and "revolutionary language," Sha and Brown explore the student's "personal thoughts and painful experiences" unencumbered by the party-state's

ideological discourse.[10] Similarly, in another recent example, Guobin Yang uses sent-down youths' diaries, along with other first-person materials, to illustrate what he claims to be the "the affirmation of the values of ordinary life among the Red Guard generation" at the rural grassroots. Purposely brushing aside revolutionary language, Yang focuses on young people's narratives of scarcity and hardships, arguing that former rebels underwent a humanist awakening to the "bare necessities of life" and the value of "personal interest" as the revolutionary horizon receded.[11]

The empirical approach to diaries has offered historians of Mao-era China a productive avenue for correcting orthodox historiographies' oversights of the individual and grassroots as topics of historical inquiry. Using the diary as evidence for personal and local particularities, historians of the period have highlighted the limits and unintended consequences of hegemonic political order in people's daily lives while restoring agency to social actors overlooked by top-down and state-centered historiographies.[12] But the appeal to the diary as a repertoire of "experience"—"experience" here is treated as the origin and foundation of knowledge— leaves vital epistemological issues unaddressed.[13] What constituted the parameters and functions of diary-writing under Mao? What cultural and political conditions gave rise to specific modes of life-narration and self-expression in diaries of the time? How did journal-keeping shape and influence the *construction* of "experience" and identity in relation to state socialist discourses? Without attending to these questions, the empirical approach to Mao-era diaries risks reifying the diary as a genre of the "authentic private self" and essentializing the autobiographical "I" as a unified entity with a stable, transhistorical identity.

Diary-Writing and Subject-Formation: The Discursive Approach

The past 30 years have seen growing methodological interest across academic disciplines in researching diaries as instruments for the construction of modern subjectivities. Following the poststructuralist turn in the humanities and social sciences, many scholars, especially in the field of Sovietology, have embraced the diary as a practice of identity-formation *within* specific historical and discursive contexts.[14] Instead of mining diaries for factual and biographical information, scholars have focused on historicizing the conditions as well as the processes of subject-positioning, treating the diarists as both actors and products of their writing whose identity and "experience" are narrated within certain textual conventions and "structures of self-becoming."[15]

This approach still requires the utilization of conventional methods of source analysis, as mentioned above, but its focus is primarily on reading the diary *in dialogue with*, not in spite of, available cultural and ideological frameworks. This entails interrogating the historical meanings, functions and content of diaries in relation to politics of identification and everyday life (as well as to dominant discourses such as class, race, ethnicity, the nation-state, and gender). Concerning Mao-era diaries in particular, this approach calls for taking seriously the diarists' inclusion of political language in their narratives as constitutive to their self- and life-narration rather than as mere mechanical or cynical reproduction.

One of the few ready examples to illustrate the discursive method of diary analysis in the Maoist context is Sigrid Schmalzer's use of the diaries of sent-down youths in the two concluding chapters of her book, *Red Revolution, Green Revolution: Scientific Farming in Socialist China* (2016).[16] Here, Schmalzer takes ideology and language, as well as individual experience seriously, reading sent-down youth's life-narratives in relation to messages about scientific modernization and self-improvement propagated by the state. This allows her to analyze the complex effects of ideology in everyday context, and to shed insights on the productive dimension as well as the limits of hegemonic discourses in influencing the youths' self-conceptualization.

All this does not mean that we should treat Mao-era diaries as insincere or as simply determined by the language of propaganda. In fact, as my research on the diaries of sent-down youth shows, critical commentary about back-bending work abounded; diarists did not fabricate their experience of physical hardships or mindlessly reproduce authoritative language for the sake of proletarian self-fashioning. But a discursive approach to the diary recognizes that these complaints were not expressed outside of, or in opposition to, state socialist ideals. Rather, they were articulated in, and enabled by, normative frames specific to the Maoist society. For instance, in writing about clearing weeds in the rice field, one sent-downer expressed dissatisfaction in her diary over arduous, menial labor, seeing it as an obstacle to timely rice-planting:

> Looking at this huge land of wild grass, I felt a little resentful and bored. I thought: "So much wild grass! When will we be able to pull them all out? We don't have any tools, relying on our bare hands to pluck them one by one. At such a rate, when will we be able to plant down the rice seeds?"[17]

The problem here for the diarist was construed not as harsh physical labor *per se*, but as inefficient, underdeveloped farming methods. The correct approach, in her opinion, was not to avoid "working hard" [苦干, *kugan*], but to also apply the method of "working skillfully" [巧干, *qiaogan*]—a concept popularized since the Great Leap Forward connoting the modernization of the "rural" by integrating "creative ideas into manual labor."[18] Only in this way, the diarist wrote, can one seize the "opportunity for production" while advancing towards the dual goal of "conquering nature" and tempering one's body and soul.[19] Here, we can see how Maoist developmentalist language of rural modernization and self-transformation provided a framework both for the diarist's articulation of her experience in the paddy field, and for her identification with the state's agenda as a modern and revolutionary subject in the countryside. At the same time, the diarist narrative also produced a differentiation and disarticulation of herself from the "rural environment," deviating from the norm that youth should "take root" in the countryside.

A discursive approach to diaries would benefit historians of Mao-era China who seek to challenge and move beyond the long-entrenched paradigm of liberal-totalitarian, state-individual, and private-public distinctions.[20] Not only does this approach permit a deeper and more critical exploration of the workings of Maoist culture and politics in people's everyday lives; it also rejects the liberal sovereign subject as the foundational category of analysis, opening up new possibilities for exploring epistemological questions concerning the individual's relationship with state ideology. It posits that the individual's expressions of "experience," identity, and selfhood are historically and culturally specific, contingent on the contexts and conditions in which the autobiographical "I" emerges. This allows a theorization of why and how revolutionary subjectivity was formed, contested, resisted, and transcended in relation to both individual "experience" at the everyday level, and the Maoist political economy and the wider international geopolitical order at large.

Conclusion

Personal diaries of Mao-era China constitute a complex but rewarding historical source. When approached appropriately and critically, they can offer rich insights and fresh perspectives lacking in many other types of sources on life and society under the Maoist regime. In this essay, I have argued that the diary should be read in light of the broader historical circumstances and public discourses of modern China. Approaching the diary in this way reveals the mediated and contingent nature of the genre, highlighting the intersection between everyday writing and changing hegemonic ideals of selfhood, nation-state, and history. Read empirically through the lens of "people's history," diaries of Mao-era China can provide much valuable first-hand information and unorthodox insights about the individual and social life at the grassroots. But to strip the diaries (and their authors) of politics and ideology is to forego the opportunity to theorize the conditions for the production of autobiographical texts and subjects. A discursive analytical approach can remedy this oversight: when read as a method for understanding processes of subject-formation, diaries can bring much needed insights into the complex dialogical nexus of power, writing, and creative human agency. At a time when personal diaries are emerging as an important source for historical scholarship on Stalinist Russia and World War II in East Asia,[21] this essay argues for the importance of Mao-era diaries for equivalent research in the Chinese context.

[1] I thank Antonia Finnane for her helpful suggestions and editorial insights on this article.

[2] See, for example, Liu Zhongli 刘中黎, *Zhongguo 20 shiji rizha xiezuo jiaoyu yanjiu* 中国 20 世纪日札写作教育研究 [Diary education in twentieth-century China] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2013); Sang Ye, "Keeping a Diary in China: Memories for the Future," *The China Story* (blog), June 4, 2015, accessed January 8, 2020, https://www.thechinastory.org/2015/06/keeping-a-diary-in-china-memories-for-the-future/; and Wang Youqin, "Xuezhe Wang Youqin: wenge cuihui le zhongguoren de riji" 学者王友琴：文革摧毁了中国人的日记 [Academic Wang Youqin: the Cultural Revolution destroyed the diary of Chinese people]. Podcast. *Radio France Internationale* 法国国际广播电台, accessed December 22, 2018, http://cn.rfi.fr/ 中国/20180109-学者王友琴文革摧毁了中国人的日记.

[3] See Anna. Krylova, "The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1, no. 1 (2000): 119–46.

[4] Aaron William Moore, "The Chimera of Privacy: Reading Self-Discipline in Japanese Diaries from the Second World War (1937-1945)," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 68, no. 1 (2009): 165–98.

[5] Desirée Henderson, *How to Read a Diary: Critical Contexts and Interpretive Strategies for 21st-Century Readers* (Routledge, 2019). 7.

[6] For a more detailed discussion on the history of diary-keeping in modern China, see Shan Windscript, "How to Write a Diary in Mao's New China: Guidebooks in the Crafting of Socialist Subjectivities," *Modern China* 47, no. 4 (2021): 412–40.

[7] While many writers did idealize the diary for its supposed "privateness" (i.e., written for oneself with no immediate audience in mind), they saw "privateness" more as a favorable condition for candid self-expression rather than as a signification of "hidden truth." Indeed, the May Fourth era saw the proliferation of published diaries, and the rise of a type of literature known as diary fiction (fiction written in the diary format), precisely due to the widespread view that the diary was a genre of self-writing for oneself, a genre that could lead the reader to the writer's innermost world. "Privacy" was thus more an imagined ideal than reality when it came to writing a personal diary. For more critical discussion on issues concerning "privacy" and the diary, see Penny Summerfield, "Historians and the Diary," in *Histories of the Self: Personal Narratives and Historical Practice* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2019), 50–77; and Aaron William Moore, "The Chimera of Privacy: Reading Self-Discipline in Japanese Diaries from the Second World War (1937-1945)."

[8] This was very much in line with the Marxian ethics that "The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims" – a concept popularized in China by Liu Shaoqi in his 1939 speech, *How to be a Good Communist*. In Maoist China, especially during the Cultural Revolution, the "private self" was considered neither a locus of authenticity nor a positive source of identification.

[9] For a genealogy of "people's history," see Andrew I. Port, "History from Below, the History of Everyday Life, and Microhistory," *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2015, 108–13.

[10] Qingqing Sha and Jeremy Brown, "Adrift in Tianjin, 1976: A Diary of Natural Disaster, Everyday Urban Life, and Exile to the Countryside," in *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism*, ed. Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), 179–98.

[11] See Guobin Yang, "Ordinary Life," in *The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 93–118.

[12] Some of the recent examples include Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, eds., *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015); Felix Wemheuer, *A Social History of Maoist China: Conflict and Change, 1949-1976* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019); and J. M. Chris Chang, "Paper Affairs: Discipline by the Dossier in a Mao-Era Work Unit," *Administory* 4, no. 1 (2019): 125–40.

[13] For an eloquent critique of the category of "experience," see Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 773–97; for a historiographical review of debates concerning histories "from above" and "from below," see Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Territory of the Historian," in *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 63–85. Gail Hershatter has also cautioned against the notion of idealizing the "authentic person with an interior persona" when it comes to researching 1950s China. See Gail Hershatter, "Model," in *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2011), 210–35. 235.

[14] See Dan Healey, "The Diary as Source in Russian and Soviet History," in *Reading Russian Sources: A Student's Guide to Text and Visual Sources from Russian History*, ed. Gilbert George (London: Routledge, 2020), 196–211.

[15] Jochen Hellbeck, "Liberation from Autonomy: Mapping Self-Understandings in Stalin's Time," in *Popular Opinion in Totalitarian Regimes: Fascism, Nazism, Communism*, ed. Paul Corner (New York, United States: Oxford University Press, 2009), 49–63, 56.

[16] See Sigrid Schmalzer, *Red Revolution, Green Revolution: Scientific Farming in Socialist China* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), Chapters six and seven, 155-205.

[17] Liu Ping, May 22, 1970. Diary. From Dartmouth Digital Library Program. https://n2t.net/ark:/83024/d4hm3f (accessed May 6, 2020).

[18] Yu Zhang, *Going to the Countryside: The Rural in the Modern Chinese Cultural Imagination, 1915-1965*. 159.

[19] Liu Ping, Ibid.

[20] For discussion on these binary conceptions in the context of Soviet Studies, see Anna. Krylova, "The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies."

[21] Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006); Aaron W. Moore, *Writing War: Soldiers Record the Japanese Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013).

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Postscript

Denise Y. Ho

Many thanks to Steven Pieragastini for inviting me to comment on this critical and timely set of contributions on the state of research in PRC history. Reading these essays has made me reflect on the ways in which classes or generations function in scholarship. Perhaps we are the "old three classes" (*laosanjie*) who came of age when PRC history was a field, but who are grappling with a sea change—since 2012—in the way we research the history of the People's Republic. These essays will benefit the youngest of the three classes, those who are entering graduate school and formulating their dissertation topics while facing both the uncertainty of political conditions and the restrictions of the global pandemic. The middle of the three classes is represented by the scholars in these pages, up-and-coming historians whose dissertations and books reflect both the challenges and opportunities of shifting research conditions. The oldest of the three classes, if I may take my experience as an example, began working just as materials were beginning to be digitized. When I began my dissertation research, Republican-era periodicals were still on microfilm, searchable indexes were in their infancy, and archival files were more likely to be in paper than on screen. I remember being able to hold documents up to the light to read sentences that were blacked out, a practice that doesn't hold up to digitization. Speaking for my colleagues from the eldest of the "old three classes" and above, I thank the contributors to this special issue for their generosity, vision, and service. Their articulation of individual research processes serves as a bridge across "classes" and as an example of how the field should navigate changes collectively.

Compilation

One of the themes that unites this collection is its emphasis on the compilation of materials for a dissertation and a book. For this, Matthew Wills provides an excellent introduction to the "garbological turn," followed by Yi Lu's ethnographic study of how PRC materials are collected and exchanged. These essays can be usefully paired with Yanjie Huang's deep dive into the use of family letters and Shan Windscript's invitation to think about diaries as sources. I am struck by how established "garbology" has become. A decade ago on the job market, we were warned against talking about sources from flea markets and garbage piles, told that Americanists and Europeanists would look askance at a candidate that was not a "real archival historian." Today, candidates in non-China fields speak of the "archive of the street," and "building one's own archive," and this kind of research is seen as reflective of an interviewee's creativity and initiative.

To this end, this special issue provides a handy how-to guide on how to integrate traditional archives with digital sources, how to navigate different archives with attention to how documents are made, and how serendipity and flexibility aid the collection of oral histories. In the age of online research and travel restrictions, a graduate student might begin with Steven Pieragastini's useful survey of printed sources for PRC history, an introduction to how to search within important collections and how to navigate WorldCat, Chinese databases, and even book-buying sites like kongfz.com. From this survey, a next step would be to read Thomas Burnham's contribution on researching the history of PRC foreign relations, as he provides a specific case study of how to link published primary sources with archival material. Burnham, like Sarah Mellors Rodriguez, suggests considering how provincial and municipal archives have specialties; in this way, materials on foreign engagement can be found beyond the Foreign Ministry Archive. Mellors Rodriguez offers specific suggestions on "making the most of the archival bureaucracy": construct a multi-archival research project, pay attention to different archival logics to reveal extant holdings and refine search criteria, and take advantage of varied organization in both archives and libraries. Behind the scenes at the archive, Qiong Liu provides insights into the priorities of archivists, the ways in which universities and archives work together, and how professors at Chinese universities might help foreign graduate students. Her advice that "finding sources in the archives often requires luck" echoes Yidi Wu's vivid and inspiring tale of how going to an informant's funeral led to a snowball effect: an invitation to regular lunch meetings with former "rightists," the opportunity to make offline contacts, and clues into other kinds of archival, library, and memoir sources. Wu's account and others' demonstrate how "building one's own archive" is an iterative process.

Context

Taken together, these contributions highlight the importance of attention to context, or how specific materials were produced, used, and preserved. This extends to close readings of language, from Qiong Liu's attention to words in handwritten police files to her observation of silences in interviews with women who had experienced land reform. In a similar vein, Yanjie Huang analyzes family letters in the collection of Fudan University's Center for Contemporary Social Life and Data Research, showing how propaganda language was used in private life and how ordinary people would reflect on official ideology. Shan Windscript argues that diaries, taken in the context of what it meant to keep a journal in the Mao era, had the goal of producing "a conscious subjectivity" that differed from the inward-looking "self" in liberal societies. In the discursive approach she advocates, diaries should be read "in *dialogue with*, not in spite of, available cultural and ideological frameworks." Like Qiong Liu, Yidi Wu highlights oral history and explains how she used oral narratives in conjunction with

written accounts, taking into consideration the earlier date of these memoirs.

Beyond individual files and personal documents, Steven Pieragastini reminds us to be critical "about the nature of printed sources and access to them," as their existence "reflects the fact that this was information that the state deemed worthwhile to document and propagate." Thus, published sources are the beginning but not the end of the research process. Turning to the archive, Thomas Burnham explains how, despite the strength of documentation about PRC foreign relations, its top-down nature makes it simultaneously a topic much harder to access. Viewing issues from the bottom-up, such as using the Fujian Provincial Archives for cross-strait relations or Shanghai Municipal Archives to study diplomatic visits, provides materials "lower down the administrative ladder," necessary to broaden the scope of historical inquiry. A similar example from Sarah Mellors Rodriguez's essay shows how a researcher might leverage archival knowledge, as in her search for the archival existence of clinical medical trials. In the final analysis, as Yi Lu reminds us, "archives…are instruments of power." Knowing how historical materials are made is the first step in using them in the service of history.

Community

A third thread which runs through this special issue is the ethics of research, from our commitments to colleagues in China to our responsibilities to historical subjects, and specifically, oral history informants. This commitment is evident in the earliest pages of the introduction, in which Pieragastini remarks on the absence of China-based scholars among the contributors, dedicating this issue to the principle of freedom in research and collaboration. Of the individuals on archival—or garbological — pages, Mellors Rodriguez questions the consistency of barring files for personal privacy and Yi Lu points out that individuals whose records are for sale as grassroots archives may still be alive, and "they never consented to be personal collectibles or academic footnotes." In one form or another, all of us face the difficulty of navigating research ethics in a gray or in-between space. Yidi Wu highlights the inapplicability of traditional IRB approval. There is no one standard; for example, Huang points out that some historians replace all names and work units with pseudonyms while others prefer to us real names. Throughout, there is a responsibility to telling the stories of informants; in Wu's words, "the obligation to share their stories with a wider audience."

Above the level of commitments to individuals is a concern with ethics for the entire field. Two of the contributions address the ethics of the archive head-on. Yi Lu's ethnography of grassroots archives demonstrates the complexity of archive-making, explaining that it is no "simple morality tale." Instead, the "gray market of archives" is influenced by concerns of profit, is conditioned by human relationships among buyers and bidders, and operates in clandestine ways. Thus, while grassroots archivists see their role as "saving history from the dustbin," Lu suggests that grassroots archives "enact new forms of violence," gleaning from or rearranging materials for the dictates of the market. Finally, Matthew Wills' essay is an explicit call-to-arms to democratize garbology. On the one hand, garbology has been seen as an unofficial response to official archives, a window into grassroots history. On the other hand, as Wills' points out, garbology also privileges those with the access, connections, and funding to buy ephemera. And, by "making one's own archive," there is not only no channel for future researchers to check footnotes marked "personal collection," there also is no open way to share those resources. Wills offers a number of solutions, from his own example of donating dissertation materials to the university library to online projects like Jeremy Brown's *PRC Source Transparency* website.

Of course, as Wills acknowledges, there is no perfect solution. The ethics of the individual may run against that of the collective. For example, as Qiong Liu writes in her essay, "if any resource could potentially cause trouble for Chinese scholars…their provenance should be kept secret and readers should accept the limitations on relocating said sources." Our collective desire to share sources, perhaps by making them digitally available, has the potential to be limited by archival regulations or copyright law. If I may add another ethical dilemma to Wills' list, in addition to institutions like libraries facing constraints on space or funding, there is the dilemma of the individual researcher's limits of time; while many would be glad to make their materials accessible, the time and other resources necessary runs against other demands of teaching, research, and service.

The authors of this special issue highlight critical challenges facing the field of PRC history. Archival research in China, as we have known it in the past, is changing, though—as Qiong Liu points out—perhaps there was never a "good time" to examine archives. Though researchers may face differential access depending on their background, sometimes being an insider is a double-edged sword, as Yidi Wu discovered when public security called her family to dissuade her from pursuing an oral history interview. Despite problems with the popular idea of a "Cold War 2.0," official and unofficial constraints on research are not only a problem in China but also in the United States. The US government, as Burnham reminds us, has targeted Chinese students and scholars, and archival access, Lu explains, is "a transnational issue." As historians, we should recognize that previous generations faced challenges and still produced the fields of China studies and PRC history, and that their strategies contain lessons for us today. These essays—and the pathbreaking research they represent collectively—demonstrate that PRC history remains alive and well, especially with this new generation as its steward.