

Postscript

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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 Windscrip’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 Windscrip 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.