



China from Without: Doing PRC History in Foreign Archives--Editorial Introduction

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Introduction¹

Arunabh Ghosh & Sören Urbansky

The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 has had a significant influence not only on the history of China but also on how that history has been studied. As the mainland closed its borders and barred its archives, historians of China were left with no choice but to turn to Taiwan and Japan as the new geographical loci from which to study China's history. During their withdrawal to Taiwan, the *Guomindang* took with them many archival records pertaining to imperial China and their own rule. These materials came to be stored at the National Palace Museum (Qing era documents), Academia Sinica (diplomatic and economic materials from the late Qing, the Republican era and post-1949 Taiwan), and at Academia Historica (government archives from the Republican era and the post-1949 government), and transformed Taiwan into the major center of historical scholarship on Qing and Republican-era China.² Japan, long a center of excellence in scholarship on middle-period China, also became a useful site for studying recent Chinese history through the immense paper trail generated by Japanese colonial and imperial projects in China.³

Things began to change in the early 1980s, when the PRC began to cautiously open many of its more than 3,500 archives to domestic and foreign researchers. Since then, the Chinese archives system has experienced tumultuous ups and downs.⁴ In theory, Chinese archives are meant to “serve the people.” Yet despite a government records access statute implemented in 2008 that allows for the disclosure of government-held information,⁵ no “freedom of information” law or principle exists with regard to the accessibility of archival collections. For the Chinese state the key purpose of archives is the national safekeeping of intellectual property. With record retention rates at well over fifty percent, the consequent imperative to preserve, arrange, and describe records is often used as an excuse to deny access to researchers. As a result, conditions governing archival use are in a constant state of flux; rules are frequently bent depending on topic, location, or the researcher's *guanxi* with officials. In many instances, scholars with links to the state or Party are favored over their Chinese colleagues or foreign scholars.⁶ An easy rule of thumb says that historians working on pre-1949 history or on topics not linked to political, diplomatic or military history will have an easier time gaining access. Similar restrictions also apply to sensitive subjects like religion and ethnicity.⁷ Even so, by the 1990s, it had become ordinary to conceive and execute research projects that required archival work on the mainland, in Taiwan, and in Japan.

The next major change occurred in the 1990s, when the gradual opening of collections dealing with post-1949 China allowed historians to begin researching and writing the history of the early PRC in new and exciting ways.⁸ While the Central [Party] Archives (中央档案馆), located outside of Beijing in the Fragrant Hills, continued to remain out of bounds for virtually all researchers regardless of their nationality, an increasing range of provincial, county, municipal, and institutional archives began to make PRC era documents accessible to scholars and researchers. Running parallel to the greater accessibility of archival collections was a boom in antique or used book markets and online booksellers, which constituted a treasure trove of discarded documentary materials from the PRC era. This method of “flea market research” has also been labeled the “garbology school of PRC history” by its first and foremost exponent, and has facilitated the writing of granular, micro-histories of the PRC, something heretofore deemed impossible.⁹

This general trend towards greater openness (within certain limits) proceeded apace through the 1990s and into the early 2000s. Its apogee was reached in 2007 when the archives of the Foreign Ministry were opened for the first time to both domestic and foreign scholars.¹⁰ Since Xi Jinping was elected both chairman of the CPC Military Commission and General Secretary of the Communist Party of China in November 2012, however, the trend towards gradual openness has begun to reverse. No matter what the subject or era, access to national, provincial and local level archives is becoming increasingly restricted again.¹¹

In many ways, the latest and most geographically expansive approach to twentieth century China has emerged as an outcome of the comingling of trends identified above with the emergence of global and transnational history as distinct fields unto themselves. With links between academic communities around the world growing closer and with the collapse of the bipolar system that resulted in archival revolutions in many of the successor states of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe,¹² scholars began to explore archives outside China and East Asia to write Chinese history.¹³ These different developments have made historical research on twentieth-century China increasingly and unquestionably global. The clearest evidence of this expanded scope can be found in the emergence of “Cold War international history” as a distinct field.¹⁴ Scholars such as Shen Zhihua, Chen Jian, Sergey Radchenko, Lorenz Lüthi, and Austin Jersild have drawn on non-Chinese language

sources from archives in Russia and Eastern Europe to reinterpret the foreign and military policies of the PRC, expanding our understanding of crucial historical events such as Beijing's involvement in the Korean War and its deteriorating relationship with Moscow.¹⁵

While acknowledging the giant leaps made by Cold War international history, the essays in this volume, however, seek to expand our historical field of vision beyond diplomatic history. Indeed, while sometimes basing their research on the same collections that formed the core of the diplomatic histories of the Cold War, the essays instead focus on the educational, scientific, economic, and cultural dimensions of China's ties with the world – whether at the grassroots or elite level. At the same time, the essays also cast our archival nets across wider geographies, exploring repositories in the Global South (Asia and Africa) and the Americas. Taken together, they are suggestive of the fresh perspectives we can gain on different aspects of twentieth-century Chinese history; sometimes complementing what we know, and at other times radically expanding how we think about key issues.

In light of the recent restrictions in access, this transnational approach to the study of modern Chinese history has taken on added urgency. And yet, up to now much of this scholarship has been produced largely in isolation and without broader reflection on its nature. It was with a view to overcoming that isolation that the authors of this volume gathered in spring 2016 at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in Seattle. We shared our experiences conducting research in a range of international archives in the hopes of starting a conversation on how to fruitfully combine such work with more traditional work in archives within China, Taiwan, and Japan.

The essays in this volume—based primarily on the AAS presentations—are meant to continue that conversation. Even though they span several continents and a wide array of topics, the coverage is not comprehensive. This is as much a reflection of the availability of our eventual AAS participants as it is of the preliminary nature of such work, where some areas and archives have received greater attention than others. Besides the relative focus on post-1949 China, readers will discern a few common themes: the importance of delegations as producers of useful source material, the potential of oral history, the frequently transnational character of individual actors, and the importance of non-state archives. Attention to the periods covered in the essays also helps us recognize that different geographic regions can provide valuable source material for studying different eras of twentieth century Chinese (and especially PRC) history. The 1950s, for instance, can be studied using materials from the Socialist bloc and India. In similar fashion, materials in places such as Tanzania or Morocco or the United States can be especially valuable for studying the 1960s and 1970s. Finally, the unevenness of coverage also points to general issues of archival access. While each article provides a clearer sense of the possibilities, the general picture that emerges suggests that access in the United States and Germany is excellent; in Russia, always in flux but currently good; in India and Mexico, generally good,

but not without issues; and in Tanzania, generally good, but less so in Algeria and Morocco. In spite of such unevenness, the promise indicated in these preliminary essays ought to spur us to approach our research in the most catholic way possible and pursue sources where we ordinarily would not.

NOTES

¹ The articles in this special issue date back to a series of two roundtables at the AAS Annual Conference in Seattle, March 31 – April 3, 2016. In addition to the discussants and the two anonymous reviewers, we would like to especially thank William Kirby and Prasenjit Duara, both pioneers in the use of multi-national archives, who generously agreed to chair the two roundtables.

² Cf. Ye Wa and Joseph W. Esherick, *Chinese Archives: An Introductory Guide* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1996): 326–35.

³ There is already too large a body of scholarship to do it justice here, but notable examples include Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900-1942* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988) and Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁴ For a brief history, see: Ye and Esherick, *Chinese Archives*: 4-27; for a detailed discussion of archival practice and politics in the PRC period, see Vivian Wagner, *Erinnerungsverwaltung in China: Staatsarchive und Politik in der Volksrepublik* (Köln: Böhlau, 2006); for a comprehensive discussion on the nature of archival access pertaining to PRC history, see Charles Kraus, "Researching the History of the People's Republic of China," *Cold War International History Project*, Working Paper Series, No. 79 (April 2016).

⁵ For China's freedom of information legislation, see Jamie P. Horsley, "China's FOIA Turns Eight," *Freedominfo.org*, April 28, 2016 (<http://www.freedominfo.org/2016/04/chinas-foia-turns-eight/>) and Weibing Xiao, "China's Limited Push Model of FOI Legislation," *Government Information Quarterly* 27/4 (October 2010): 346–51.

⁶ An interesting new development in this regard is a move by Taiwan to enforce strict reciprocity in access to archival materials, which will effectively bar mainland scholars from conducting research at archives in Taiwan. For more, see: "Top archive to bar mainland China scholars," *The China Post*, July 30, 2016.

<http://www.chinapost.com.tw/taiwan/local/taipei/2016/07/30/473868/Top-archive.htm>.

⁷ Cf. William W. Moss, "Dang'an: Contemporary Chinese Archives," *The China Quarterly* 145 (March 1996): 112–29.

⁸ This trend was recognized by a special issue of *The China Quarterly*. See: Julia Strauss, ed. "The History of the People's Republic of China, 1949-1976," *The China Quarterly Special Issue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁹ For reflections on this method, see Jeremy Brown, "Finding and Using Grassroots Historical Sources from the Mao Era," *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/>). For some of the limits of this approach, see Elizabeth J. Perry, "The promise of PRC history," *Journal of Modern Chinese History*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2016).

¹⁰ Amy King, "Navigating China's Archives," <http://asaa.asn.au/navigating-chinas-archives/>.

¹¹ On the drastic reduction in access to collections of the Foreign Ministry Archives, Beijing, see: Arunabh Ghosh, "Urgent Update on Foreign Ministry Archives, Beijing," *Dissertation Reviews*, August 6, 2013. (<http://dissertationreviews.org/archives/5411>). More generally, see Maura Cunningham, "Denying Historians: China's Archives Increasingly Off-Bounds," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 19, 2014. (<http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2014/08/19/denying-historians-chinas-archives-increasingly-off-bounds/>).

¹² For post-Soviet Russia, e.g. Donald J. Raleigh, "Doing Soviet History: The Impact of the Archival Revolution," *The Russian Review* 61/1 (January 2002): 16–24. In recent years, however, things in Russia have moved in a less promising direction, cf. Markus Wehner, "Gescheiterte Revolution: In Russlands Archiven gehen die Uhren rückwärts," *Osteuropa* 59/5 (2009): 45–58; Mark Kramer, "Archival Policies and Historical Memory in the Post-Soviet Era," *Demokratizatsiya* 20/3 (Summer 2012): 204–15; From the Editors, "A new chill? Foreign scholars and the Russian visa question," *Kritika* 16/2 (Spring 2015): 229–33. For how this presented an interesting

opportunity for studying Chinese history, see Alexander V. Pantsov and Steven I. Levine's *Mao—The Real Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013).

¹³ An important early exception was William C. Kirby's *Germany and Republican China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984).

¹⁴ For more on Cold War international history, visit the site of The Cold War International History Project at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/program/cold-war-international-history-project>.

¹⁵ To name just three representative examples in a growing and lively field: Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008); Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962–1967* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2009); Shen Zihuha, *Mao, Stalin and the Korean War: Trilateral Communist Relations in the 1950s*, transl. by Neil Silver (London: Routledge, 2012).