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(Article begins on next page)
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. Since then, the Chinese state has been impermeable to domestic and foreign researchers. Since Xi Jinping was elected 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.

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, scholars began to explore archives outside China and East Asia to write Chinese history. 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. 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.\(^\text{15}\)

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.


5. For China’s freedom of information legislation, see Jamie P. Horsley, “China’s FOIA Turns Eight,” *Freedomain.info,* April 28, 2016 (http://www.freedomain.info/2016/04/chinas-foia-turns-eight/)


10. 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).


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

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.