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Researching the History of the People's Republic of China

By Charles Kraus, April 2016



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Researching the History of the People's Republic of China

Charles Kraus

Introduction

The history of the People's Republic of China (PRC), as a field, is booming.¹ This is in large measure due to the gradual opening of China's archives. Indeed, the study of China since 1949—once the domain of social scientists drawing on newspapers, interviews, and field work observations—is now dominated by historians, political scientists, and sociologists whose work is grounded in archives and archival materials.² From Frank Dikötter's popular trilogy covering the span of Mao Zedong's rule, to Jeremy Brown's fine-grained history of Tianjin;³ from Aminda Smith's inquiry into thought reform and the prison in socialist China, to Neil Diamant's work on the family and marriage laws;⁴ and from Thomas Christensen's work on alliance politics to Jeremy Friedman's new book on the Sino-Soviet split,⁵ there are simply too many books, articles, and doctoral dissertations which have drawn on *unpublished* archival sources and “grassroots” materials from the PRC to mention all of them here.

* I would like to thank the American Council of Learned Societies, the Luce Foundation, the Cosmos Club, the George Washington University History Department, the Sigur Center for Asian Studies, East China Normal University, and the Wilson Center's History and Public Policy Program for supporting my research trips to China since 2013. Michael Schoenhals, Amanda Shuman, Jeremy Brown, Joseph Torigian, Christian Ostermann, Sergey Radchenko, Benjamin Young, Qingfei Yin, and Covell Meyskens all graciously read draft versions of this paper and offered critical feedback. None of these institutions or individuals, however, is responsible for the content of this Working Paper.

¹ Julia Strauss, “Introduction: In Search of PRC History,” *The China Quarterly* 188 (December 2006): 855-869.

² Richard Baum, *China Watcher: Confessions of a Peking Tom* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 242-244. See, for example, Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Mark Selden with Kay Ann Johnson, *Chinese Village, Socialist State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991). The contrast between historical work and social science research in the case of the People's Republic of China is explained in Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, “Introduction,” in *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism*, ed. Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 1-15.

³ Frank Dikötter, *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962-1976* (New York: Bloomsbury, forthcoming 2016); Frank Dikötter, *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution 1945-1957* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962* (New York: Walker & Co., 2010); Jeremy Brown, *City versus Countryside in Mao's China: Negotiating the Divide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁴ Aminda M. Smith, *Thought Reform and China's Dangerous Classes: Reeducation, Resistance, and the People* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013); Neil J. Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family: Politics, Love, and Divorce in Urban and Rural China, 1949-1968* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

⁵ Thomas J. Christensen, *Worse Than a Monolith: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Split and the Third World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

Judging from the footnotes in scholarly books and articles, archival research in China is no longer a “special art,” as one handbook from the 1980s called it.⁶ Yet everyone who has researched the history of the People’s Republic of China *in* China would probably admit that it is not an easy enterprise. Although the archives in China are nominally open, the barriers to entry are many, access is often conditional or only temporary, and the holdings are sometimes slim. The abrupt closure of the PRC Foreign Ministry Archives in Beijing and the subsequent removal of the majority of its holdings from the public’s view in 2012-2013 demonstrated to the entire community of China specialists the tenuousness of researching PRC history in China.⁷ The chatter on H-PRC, across the Twittersphere, and at academic conferences paints a grim picture of doing archival research in China.⁸

What can scholars do to prepare for researching in China? How can scholars mitigate the bureaucratic constraints on research, while identifying and exploiting archival opportunities? In this *Working Paper*, I reflect on these and other questions related to researching the history of the People’s Republic of China. My findings, inclinations, and suggestions are derived from my experiences at 25 different archives in China—covering almost all levels of Chinese government administration: sub-municipal/district, municipal, provincial, and ministry-level—over a period of several years. Although several other articles, handbooks, and research briefs have discussed how to conduct research in Chinese archives, the development of PRC history as a field and changes in archival access in China in recent years makes updating these past guides worthwhile.⁹ At the same time, because the best overviews of Chinese archives have been written by William Moss, an archivist by training and profession, my perspective, as a researcher,

⁶ Karen Turner-Gottschang with Linda A. Reed, *China Bound: A Guide to Academic Life and Work in the PRC* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1987), 107.

⁷ Arunabh Ghosh, “Urgent Update on Foreign Ministry Archives, Beijing,” *Dissertation Reviews* (August 6, 2013), <http://dissertationreviews.org/archives/5411> (accessed March 8, 2016).

⁸ See, for example, “Archival updates,” H-PRC (June 2014), <https://networks.h-net.org/node/3544/discussions/32254/archival-updates> (accessed March 8, 2016).

⁹ Vivian Wagner, *Erinnerungsverwaltung in China: Staatsarchive und Politik in der Volksrepublik* (Management of Memory in China: State Archives and Policy in the People’s Republic) (Köln: Böhlau, 2006); Du Mei, “The Role of Archives in Chinese Society: An Examination from the Perspective of Access,” in *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar*, ed. Francis X. Blouin Jr. and William G. Rosenberg (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 427-435; William C. Kirby, “Archives and Histories in Twentieth-Century China,” in *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory*, 436-442; Wa Ye and Joseph Ersherick, *Chinese Archives: An Introductory Guide* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1996).

is different. I am less concerned by the laws on the books than by the actual situations on the ground.¹⁰

It is important to note that my experiences in China have been partially shaped by my citizenship: I am a “foreigner” (外国人 *waiguo ren*). Although archival research is by no means easy for Chinese nationals, non-Chinese citizens are required to satisfy more legal and bureaucratic demands in order to gain entry into an archive. Culturally and linguistically, non-Chinese citizens also face different challenges throughout the research process. As a result of my citizenship, some of what I say in this article will be more familiar to non-Chinese researchers than it is to Chinese nationals. Likewise, some of my advice will be more applicable to foreigners than it is to citizens of the PRC.

The Law

The Archives Law of the People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国档案法 *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo dang'an fa*) was passed by the National People's Congress in 1987, went into effect in 1988, and was amended in 1996.¹¹ The Law delegated responsibilities for archival management to several institutional stakeholders and issued regulations concerning the preservation of government records. Chapter IV of the Archives Law concerns declassification and public access, but, unfortunately, from a researcher's perspective it makes no guarantees.¹² Article 19 specifically states that:

Archives kept by State archives repositories shall in general be open to the public upon the expiration of 30 years from the date of their formation. Archives in economic, scientific, technological and cultural fields may be open to the public in less than 30 years; archives involving the security or vital interests of the State and other archives which remain unsuitable for accessibility to the public upon the expiration of 30 years may be open to the public after more than 30 years.

The use of phrases such as “shall in general,” combined with the under-defined condition that the materials may not impinge on the “security or vital interests of the State,” provides government

¹⁰ William W. Moss, “Archives in the People's Republic of China,” *The American Archivist* 45, no. 4 (Fall 1982): 385-409; William W. Moss, “*Dang'an*: Contemporary Chinese Archives,” *The China Quarterly* 145 (March 1996): 112-129. Although I have experience cataloging archival materials, I consider myself a researcher first and foremost.

¹¹ “Archives Law of the People's Republic of China,” http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Law/2007-12/12/content_1383932.htm (accessed March 8, 2016). For a longer summary and analysis of the law, see William W. Moss, “The Archives Law of the People's Republic of China: A Summary and Commentary,” *The American Archivist* 54, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 216-219.

¹² Moss, “*Dang'an*,” 123.

and Party entities with an out: files can be withheld even long after the 30 year benchmark has passed. I will illuminate this point with examples later in the *Working Paper*.

The “Implementation Measures for the Archives Law of the People's Republic of China” (中华人民共和国档案法实施办法 *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo dang'an fa shishi banfa*) was passed by the National Archives Bureau and went into effect in 1990.¹³ These measures restated some of the general principles articulated in the 1988 Law, including the “30 year rule,” while clarifying other issues which the original law did not address. For example, although the 1988 law stipulated that “citizens and organizations of the People’s Republic of China possessing lawful identifications” could access Chinese archives, it made no mention of foreigners.¹⁴ Fortunately, Article 22 of the Implementation Measures formally grants non-Chinese citizens conditional access to Chinese archives. It states specifically that: “use of China’s open archives by foreigners or foreign organizations requires the introduction of the relevant authorities in China as well as the agreement of the archive preserving the documents” (外国人或者外国组织利用中国已开放的档案，须经中国有关主管部门介绍以及保存该档案的档案馆同意).

Many provinces, municipalities, and counties also have their own sets of archival regulations and laws. While these rules, as well as the 1988 Archives Law and 1990 Implementation Measures, do not guarantee access to historically valuable materials, the legal framework is such that foreign and domestic researchers can expect at least modest levels of access to archives in China. But why should researchers even bother with archival research?

Why Archives?

History, of course, is not dependent on archives. Indeed, the postmodern turn in history has revealed the limitations of official archives and, more generally, textual evidence.¹⁵ Because archives are not the untainted, honest arenas which historians sometimes imagine them to be,

¹³ “中华人民共和国档案法实施办法 *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo dang'an fa shishi banfa*” (“Implementation Measures for the Archives Law of the People's Republic of China”), accessible at <http://baike.baidu.com/view/612879.htm> (accessed March 8, 2016).

¹⁴ The only explicit mention of non-Chinese persons in the Archives Law concerned the illegal sale of archival materials to foreigners. See Guan H. Tang, “Public Archives and Public Copyright: The Chinese Tale,” *European Intellectual Property Review* 34, no. 4 (2012): 266-268.

¹⁵ See, for example, Keith Jenkins, ed., *The Postmodern History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Willie Thompson, *Postmodernism and History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004)

history derived entirely from archives will necessarily exclude many perspectives and different voices.¹⁶

Nevertheless, using archives is appropriate and sensible, especially in the case of the People's Republic of China.¹⁷ The Party-state during China's high-era of socialism operated an immense organizational structure which penetrated almost all aspects of society and everyday life. The Party-state was inescapable, present in schools, workplaces, and family homes; even deeply involved in the food which people ate.¹⁸ Even while we must recognize that China's official archives, as instruments of power, do a better job of representing the history of the Party and the state (not the history of the people), official archival perspectives have to be taken seriously given the depth of the Party-state's penetration of Chinese society, at least through the death of Mao Zedong in 1976.¹⁹ Purposefully neglecting archives when writing PRC history is done at the researcher's own peril.

In the specific case of socialist China, there are other good reasons to investigate archives. Over the past several decades, the Party Literature Research Center (中共中央文献研究室 *Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi*) and the Central Archives (中央档案馆 *Zhongyang dang'anguan*) have assembled and published several major collections of archival documents covering the first three decades of the PRC's history. These include the 20 volume set of *Selected Important Documents issued since the Founding of the PRC* (published between 1992 and 1998);²⁰ the more recent 50 volume set of *Selected Documents of the CCP Central*

¹⁶ In the words of Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, the archive "further privileges the official narratives of the state over the private stories of individuals. Its rules of evidence and authenticity favour textual documents, from which such rules were derived, at the expense of other ways of experiencing the present, and thus of viewing the past." See Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern History," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 18. See also Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (New York: Verso, 1993).

¹⁷ Lawrence Stone, "History and Post-Modernism, III," *Past & Present* 135 (May 1992): 189-194; Francis X. Blouin Jr. and William G. Rosenberg, *Processing the Past: Contesting Authority in History and the Archives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ As Neil Diamant and others argue, distinguishing between "state" and "society" in socialist China is not possible. See Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family*. See also Brown and Johnson, eds., *Maoism at the Grassroots*.

¹⁹ In the case of communist societies (or other societies which experienced significant trauma and upheaval), there is also an important social and legal role for archives. See Mark Kramer, "Archival Policies and Historical Memory in the Post-Soviet Era," *Demokratizatsiya* 20, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 204-215, doi: 10.1111/russ.12020; Martin Kragh and Stefan Hedlund, "Researching Soviet Archives: An Introduction," *The Russian Review* 74 (July 2015): 373-376.

²⁰ 中共中央文献研究室 *Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi*, ed., 《建国以来重要文献选编》 *Jianguo yilai zhongyao wenxian xuanbian* (Selected Important Documents Issued since the Founding of the PRC), 20 vols. (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1992-1998)

Committee;²¹ and various multi-volume collections of the writings of individual leaders, including Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, Li Xiannian, and Zhou Enlai.²² In addition to these central-level collections, many localities have collected and published archival documents, sometimes for public view and sometimes for “internal circulation” (内部发行 *neibu faxing*) only.²³

These massive published sets of documents are tremendously useful. Not only are they accessible at many libraries around the world, but they take the messy handwriting of people like Zhou Enlai and make it legible to those of us who find reading his marginalia challenging. Nevertheless, scholars need to tread these sources carefully.²⁴ The books are, after all, curations; they distill down much larger bodies of work. Given the size of the Chinese bureaucracy, the types of materials included in published documentary collections are rather circumscribed. They are mostly speeches or reports given by leaders at the highest levels or decrees issued by the Central Committee, the State Council, and/or the Central Military Commission. Other arms of the central-level bureaucracy as well as voices from the provinces and municipalities, are usually underrepresented; reports from municipal districts, city neighborhoods, rural counties, and small villages almost never appear. The collections also privilege particular chronologies. Many do not wade into the messy circumstances of Chinese politics and society from 1966 through 1976, stopping firmly on the eve of the Cultural Revolution.

Perhaps more important, the compilers of these collections do not have full editorial freedom.²⁵ The offices involved in the production of these books are, after all, arms of the

²¹ 中央档案馆 Zhongyang dang'anguan and 中共中央文献研究室 Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, ed., 《中共中央文件选集, 1949年10月-1966年5月》 *Zhonggong zhongyang wenjian xuanji, 1949nian10yue-1966nian5yue* (Selected Documents of the CCP Central Committee, October 1949-May 1966), 50 vols. (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2013).

²² A 13 volume set of *Mao Zedong's Manuscripts since the Founding of the PRC* was published over the course of 1987-1998. See 中共中央文献研究室 Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, ed., 《建国以来毛泽东文稿》 *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* (Mao Zedong's Manuscripts since the Founding of the PRC), 13 vols. (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1987-1998). Similar collections for Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, and Li Xiannian are slowly being prepared and published by the Party Literature Research Center and the Central Archives.

²³ See, for example, 北京市档案馆 Beijing shi dang'anguan (Beijing Municipal Archives) and 中共北京市委党史研究室 Zhonggong Beijing shiwei dangshi yanjiushi (Party Research Institute of the CCP Beijing Municipal Committee), eds., 《北京市重要文献选编》 *Beijing shi zhongyao wenxian xuanbian* (Selected Important Documents from Beijing), 17 vols. (Beijing: Zhongguo dang'an chubanshe, 2001-2007).

²⁴ Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Competition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5-6.

²⁵ Although the editors of the U.S. State Department's *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) also do not have full editorial freedom, there has been an ongoing and open discussion about the challenges FRUS faces in terms of government secrecy as well as how the series can be improved. See William B. McAllister et al, *Toward*

Chinese Communist Party. The selection of files is sometimes skewed in order to maintain orthodox historical narratives. Indeed, leaked draft versions of official *nianpu* (Chronologies) demonstrate that censorship is rampant in the official Chinese historical enterprise.²⁶ Thus, even brand new document collections deliberately obscure important details surrounding important historical events.²⁷

Aside from the lack of diversity in the reports and the issue of selection and censorship, even remarkably useful collections divorce the individual documents from their archival context.²⁸ A document placed side-by-side other similar files in an archive allows researchers to better understand the evolution of a policy or a situation and gives them the ability to piece together how bureaucrats in Communist China reached certain decisions. In contrast to an archive, the collections also usually do not include draft versions of documents, which can help readers better understand the evolution and implementation of policies and reporting.

So there are good reasons to do archival research when studying PRC history, but where does one begin?

Getting in the Door

Although I will describe below just how different one archive in China can be from the next, all archives in the PRC have at least one thing in common: foreign researchers must have a letter of introduction (介绍信 *jieshao xin*) from a Chinese university (or other “work unit”) and a passport in order to get access to an archive and start doing research.²⁹ The letter of introduction need not be wordy. It can simply verify a researcher’s name and the nature/length of their

“Thorough, Accurate and Reliable”: A History of the Foreign Relations of the United States Series (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2015).

²⁶ Private communications between the author and a well-known historian, December 2015.

²⁷ For example, although several recent collections include documents describing biological warfare perpetrated by the United States during the Korean War, none of the collections include the files which reveal that this never took place and that China, in partnership with the Soviet Union and North Korea, concocted these allegations for propaganda and social mobilization purposes. See Milton Leitenberg, “China’s False Allegations of the Use of Biological Weapons by the United States during the Korean War,” *Cold War International History Project 78* (March 2015), accessible at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/chinas-false-allegations-the-use-biological-weapons-the-united-states-during-the-korean> (accessed March 8, 2016).

²⁸ Andrew Johnson, “Users, Use and Context: Supporting Interaction between Users and Digital Archives,” in *What Are Archives? Cultural and Theoretical Perspectives: A Reader*, ed. Louise Craven (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 154-155.

²⁹ Having a letter of introduction from your home institution abroad is not a requirement, but it often does not hurt to have a letter on your person. In my experience, when I have presented a letter from my home university along with my Chinese host institution, sometimes the archive will keep it for their files; in other instances, they will say it is not needed and hand it back over to me.

affiliation with the local work unit and ask that the researcher be given permission to see the holdings of a particular archive.

Some archives insist on receiving more than one letter of introduction. The Wuxi Municipal Archives, for example, requires foreign researchers to produce a letter from the Jiangsu Provincial Archives.³⁰ Similarly, in 2013, the Zhabei District Archives in Shanghai asked me to produce a letter from the local foreign affairs office (外事办 *waishi ban*) as well as my work unit; in 2015, the Wenzhou Municipal Archives asked for the same two types of letters. In both cases, after the archives' staff and I liaised with the next higher ranking archive—the Shanghai Municipal Archives in the former case and the Zhejiang Provincial Archives in the latter—the demands for a letter from the local foreign affairs offices were dropped, but leniency is by no means guaranteed. Because these rules tend to change frequently, researchers should contact the archives they plan to visit in advance to inquire about the required letter(s) of introduction

Sometimes a proper letter of introduction and a passport are not good enough to gain access to an archive in China. In part this is because not all Chinese work units are equal in the eye of the beholder. In 2013, I had a letter of introduction from a relatively obscure research organization in Shanghai and it did not get me in the door at every archive I visited. During subsequent trips, I had a letter from a more well-known university and did not encounter the same problem. Regardless of the provenance of one's letter of introduction, researchers may often notice the following sentence (or a variation of it) if they read the fine print of an archives' rules and regulations:

外国组织和个人利用本馆开放档案资料，须经国内有关单位介绍或直接向档案馆申请，经本馆同意。

Foreign organizations and individuals must have an introduction from a relevant domestic work unit, or apply directly to this archive, and obtain this archives' approval in order to use declassified archival materials.

In other words, some archives require researchers to present a valid letter of introduction as well as apply for permission to do research. To give several examples, as of fall 2015, the Nanjing Municipal Archives, the Wuhan Municipal Archives, and the Zhejiang Provincial Archives all

³⁰ Fortunately, the Jiangsu Provincial Archives is glad to make introductions on behalf of foreign researchers and the process of typing up a letter usually just takes a few days.

require foreign researchers to satisfy both of these demands. “Applying” usually involves filling out a registration form, describing a research project, and waiting for the archives to adjudicate the request. On paper, this may take up to 30 days; however, when pressed, most archives completed my applications within just a few days.³¹ Still, there are no guarantees of access to an archive, and the application process does not always end well. Some particularly conservative archives have denied my requests to do research because, as they said, “we do not approve” (我们不同意 *women bu tongyi*). This happened to me at the Changning District Archives in Shanghai in summer 2013 and fall 2015, and again at Shanghai’s Baoshan District Archives in summer 2014 and fall 2015. The culture at every archive in China is different, and researchers should not expect that every single archive will permit them to do research.

Fortunately, in my experience, it is much more common for archives to grant access to researchers (as long as they possess a letter of introduction and passport). After an archive accepts a researcher’s credentials, the researcher is often asked to fill out a registration form in Chinese, which includes information such as your name, host institution, address and/or phone number, purpose of research (writing “学术研究” [*xueshu yanjiu*], or academic research, is a safe bet), and a brief description of the research project. Sometimes filling out this form is just a formality and staff will not pay much attention to what is written down. Other archives, however, take the contents seriously and will work to ensure that only documents related to the project described on the registration form are made available to the researcher. Researchers should strive to describe their research to the archives in honest but general terms in order to retain some flexibility.

Research Orientation and Access Anomalies

At many of the archives I visited in China, I was able to complete registration procedures, view catalogs, make requests, and start reading documents within an hour’s time—sometimes even within just 15 minutes. Nevertheless, many archives in China are not fully “research oriented” and researchers inevitably encounter some obstacles in their efforts to access documents and start doing research.

The physical layout and infrastructure of Chinese archives can be a setback to research. Visitors at the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland, or the

³¹ In the case of the Nanjing Municipal Archives, I felt as if the application was more of a formality, but in the case of Zhejiang and Wuhan it seemed to be a key step in the research process.

National Archives in Kew Gardens, have the luxury of giant, open research spaces with tables, chairs, computers, and electrical outlets. Some archives in China do provide a similar research environment. The Shanghai Municipal Archives has dozens of computer work stations and several microfilm machines for researchers; the Beijing Municipal Archives has a wide reading room with rows of neatly arranged desks; and the Nanjing Municipal Archives and the Guangzhou Municipal Archives both have absolutely stunning new facilities. But not every archive in China has the infrastructure which is conducive to research, especially those archives “off the beaten path.” At the Longjing Municipal Archives in Northeast China, for example, I found only a service desk, coffee table, and a tattered faux leather couch in a cramped room. Halfway through my afternoon in Longjing, a construction crew showed up, lugging dozens of heavy heaters up and down the four flights of stairs. The crew hammered away loudly, removing the old heaters and installing new ones in each room. The staff looked at me and said, “sorry!”

The absence of reading rooms and desks for researchers is not that surprising when one understands the primary function of an archive in China. In addition to working closely with other government and Party agencies, the primary responsibility of an archive in China is to provide services to citizens (such as copying marriage certificates, property deeds, and work related documentation). The physical layout of many archives reflects this citizen-service-oriented mission. At the Huangpu District Archives in Shanghai, for example, visitors choose a “service window” and sit on one side of a counter and interface with staff who sit on the other side—a scene reminiscent of visiting a bank and speaking with a bank teller. For citizen’s wanting copies of one or two personal records and expecting to be in-and-out of the archive within a matter of minutes, the layout works well. But for researchers wanting to view dozens of archival records, it is hardly an ideal work space.

Physical layout is a minor problem compared to other access anomalies which crop up from time-to-time in Chinese archives. Some archives in China, for example, do not make the catalogs accessible to researchers. At the Zhejiang Provincial Archives, when researchers apply for permission to do research, they must explain their research topic to the staff, who then search the electronic catalog on the researcher’s behalf.³² In my experience, as helpful as they wanted to be, the staff did not know the intricacies of my project and did not know what to search for.

³² Only the PRC era catalogs at the Zhejiang Provincial Archives are kept from public view. The Republican period catalogs are searchable via computers on site.

Standing ten feet from the staff as they searched the computer, I tried to coach them on possible search terms and help them narrow down the results, but I have no idea what they actually typed and what results they were generating. Even worse, at the Wuhan Municipal Archives, I had to first apply for permission to do research before the staff would open the catalogs. Not wanting to waste the archives' time or my own, I kept asking, "why should I apply if I don't know if your archive even has anything for my project?" I never received a satisfactory response, other than "this is part of the process."

Even relatively "open" archives in China have frustrating restrictions in place. For example, the Beijing Municipal Archives has a maximum daily request limit of 15 folders for researchers.³³ My research at the Beijing Municipal Archives often finished by mid-day because, inevitably, some of the 15 folders I requested were terribly short or unexpectedly not related to my project ("duds," I called them).³⁴ Research is also slowed down by long lunch breaks. Most archives in China close during lunch for one hour, although some close for as long as two-and-a-half hours. During this time, the reading rooms shut down and staffs ask researchers to return their documents to the registration desks.³⁵ Some archives also have mandatory study days for staff and will close the archive for a full afternoon each week (such is the case at the Hangzhou Municipal Archives).

Academics tend to always be cooking up several research projects at once. A researcher might have a book project on one topic in the works at the same time they are writing several article length manuscripts on various other subjects. Due to the cost, time involved, and effort of coming to China from abroad, it makes sense to want to complete research for several different projects at the same time. Unfortunately, "multi-task" researching is not always possible in Chinese archives. At the Hangzhou Municipal Archives, one of the most laissez-faire archives I visited in China, the staff were concerned that the materials I looked at over the span of several days covered a lot of different historical ground. One day spent studying youth resettlement in the 1960s, the next day reading files on the history of the Hangzhou Distillery during the Cultural Revolution, another afternoon later in the week reading files about low-level Sino-

³³ Compare this to the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, which limits each request ("pull") to a cart filled with 20 or so boxes.

³⁴ Fortunately, the Beijing Municipal Archives does not count digitized records against a researcher's daily limit.

³⁵ The Shanghai Municipal Archives is a special exception in this regard, not closing or curtailing research services during lunch hours. Some other research oriented archives will keep the reading room open and allow researchers to continue working with materials already at their desks.

Japanese exchanges in 1965—the lead staff person finally asked, “I thought you were researching Chinese youth, why are you asking to look at all of these other files?” Fortunately, I was able to explain to the staff in Hangzhou that I was researching several different projects at once, in part due to the cost of coming to China, and they agreed that this was sensible. Other, more bureaucratic archives in China may not allow multi-project research, especially those requiring researchers to apply for permission to research a clearly stated topic.

Finding What You Want

Getting in the door at a Chinese archive is only the first important step to doing research; more important, you also have to be able to find what you are looking for. Archives in China have embraced the *respect des fonds* principle.³⁶ All materials are organized by provenance—that is, by the creator and/or recipient—and subdivided into record groups or fonds (全宗 *quanzong*) which bear the namesake of a particular work unit (单位 *danwei*).³⁷ The CCP Shanghai Municipal Committee (中共上海市委 *Zhonggong Shanghai shiwei*), for example, has a dedicated fond at the Shanghai Municipal Archives; while the Beijing Labor Bureau (北京市劳动局 *Beijing shi laodong ju*) has its own record group at the Beijing Municipal Archives.

Archives assign each work unit an individual record group number (全宗号 *quanzong hao*). The holdings of an individual work unit are then further sub-divided by catalog number (目录号 *mulu hao*), a digit(s) often related to the year in which files were created.³⁸ Within each record group/catalog, materials are then organized by folder (卷 *juan*). Each folder is assigned a folder number (案卷号 *anjuan hao*) and given a sentence-long title which describes, in broad terms, the individual records contained within. Individual documents are paginated throughout a folder in order to aid citation and subsequent location. The archival signature, or citation, for a specific folder in a Chinese archive is thus typically made up of a three part string of numbers:

³⁶ Laura A. Millar, *Archives: Principles and Practices* (New York: Neal-Schuman, 2010), 29, 98; Bruce W. Dearstyne, *The Archival Enterprise: Modern Archival Principles, Practices, and Management Techniques* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1993), 129.

³⁷ This description applies to provincial, municipal, and sub-municipal archives. The archives of government ministries, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, sometimes employ slightly different ways of organization. See 蒋华杰 Jiang Huajie, “中国大陆地区档案 Zhongguo dalu diqu dang’an” (“Archives on Mainland China”), in 《冷战史研究: 档案资源导论》 *Lengzhan shi yanjiu: Dang’an ziyuan daolun* (Cold War History Research: An Introduction to Archival Sources), ed. 姚百慧 Yao Baihui (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 2015), 254-273.

³⁸ To give one example, the Tumen Municipal Government was founded in 1965. At the Tumen Municipal Archives, the catalog number “1” refers to 1965, the first year of the Municipal Government’s existence. The catalog number “2” refers to 1966, “3” to 1967, and so on.

record group number/catalog number/folder number. The citation for a specific document should include the three part string of numbers as well as the inclusive pages.

In order to find useful documents, researchers must know their *danwei*. For instance, for my research on the resettlement of urban Chinese youth to Xinjiang in the 1960s, there were usually several municipal work units involved. These included a city's Municipal Government, Labor Bureau, Education Bureau, and Communist Youth League. All of these agencies have individual record groups at every municipal archive I have visited. Several short-lived and ad hoc offices and institutions were also involved in the campaign to move young Chinese people to the frontier, such as the Streamlining and Placement Office (精简安置办公室 *jingjian anzhi bangongshi*) or the Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages Office (上山下乡办公室 *shangshan xiexiang bangongshi*). In my experience, some archives have maintained separate record groups for these offices; others, however, have stashed these materials into the record groups of more enduring parent institutions.³⁹ The degree and specificity of organization depends entirely on the archive. Some archives have hundreds of record groups, while others have a more modest number of them.

Separate from the catalogs, most archives in China have produced a “guidebook” (指南 *zhinan*) to the fonds which can be used to track down the record group number of a specific *danwei*. The guidebooks—produced for public reference—are available onsite for consultation and, occasionally, can be found in outside libraries.⁴⁰ A good guidebook will introduce each record group, alerting researchers to the volume of materials, the general contents, and the associated call number. Many archives also provide a simple list of record groups which does not include any descriptive information aside from work unit and record group number.

With a record group number, a researcher can then locate the specific catalog for that record group. (As specified by the Archives Law, archives are to maintain catalogs for their materials.) The catalog typically lists the title, date range, page count, duration of preservation, and retrieval information of each individual folder found within a fond. The catalogs may also contain a “remarks” column (备注 *beizhu*) which indicates the classification status of the folders.

³⁹ At some municipal archives, the papers of the local Streamlining and Placement Office, for example, are found in the Labor Bureau's record group; other times they are available in the Municipal Committee's record group.

⁴⁰ The guidebooks for several major archives, such as the Shanghai Municipal Archives, are accessible at many libraries in the United States and Europe. Stanford University's East Asia Library has a large collection of guidebooks, which even includes some guidebooks for district-level and county-level archives.

Some archives have taken an extra step to prepare special catalogs which list only folders that are “open” to the public, which makes knowing what files can be viewed a more straightforward process. In the former case, researchers should only expect to be able to see files bearing an “open” (开放 *kaifang*) stamp in the remarks column—although there are exceptions to this rule, positive and negative.

The front cover and binding of a folder bears the folder’s title, date range, and citation information. Each folder will also include a table of contents (卷内目录 *juan nei mulu*) listing the individual documents it contains. The table of contents will often include information such as a document’s title, creator, creation date, and the page numbers on which it appears in the folder.

In the past, pulling paper catalog after paper catalog off the shelves and shuffling through dozens or hundreds of pages was the only way to find relevant materials. Many archives are simplifying this process by digitizing, publishing, and making searchable folder-level catalogs and, occasionally, even document-level catalogs. With both folder-level catalogs and document-level catalogs, researchers are usually able to search by creator, document title, and/or date range. Searching by known keywords in the title field should quickly generate a list of folders or documents related to a researcher’s project. Many of these catalogs can even be accessed offsite through the website of an archive.

While I stated above that knowing your *danwei* is essential for finding relevant documentation via the paper catalogs at a Chinese archive, the ability to search catalogs electronically by keyword may seem to obviate this need. On the contrary, because keyword searches cannot always produce desired results, it is still useful to know your *danwei*. Many document titles do not capture the full complexity of a given document, and there is usually no sophisticated metadata available to enhance searches.⁴¹ At the same time, the quality and functionality of these search engines varies widely. The electronic catalog of the Changshu Municipal Archives, for example, allows users to search only within a single record group, rather than across all of the record groups at the same time. Thus, a researcher needs to re-run the same keyword search at least several times. Familiarity with the *danwei* can also help a researcher to discern the types of documentation available, even when searching by keyword. For example, some *danwei* do not create policy, but they do try to implement it.

⁴¹ For example, for one of my research projects, I found that while the word “Xinjiang” produced many relevant results, “Xinjiang” does not appear in the title of every document about Chinese youth sent to Xinjiang in the 1960s.

There are usually no specific “pull times” for requesting documents. Researchers can normally request documents at any time of day by simply giving staff a list of archival signatures (although staff may ask a researcher to delay their request if it is already close to the lunch break or the end of the day). In my experience, it has never taken more than 30 minutes for staff to retrieve documents. Most archives in China are small enough that it may take only 10 minutes total.

The process of requesting and retrieving documents has been expedited if not eliminated altogether at archives with digitization initiatives. At the Beijing Municipal Archives and the Hubei Municipal Archives, among others, researchers still present archival signatures to the archives' staff. If the files have been digitized, the staff will direct the researcher to a computer to view them. At the Shanghai Municipal Archives or the Ningbo Municipal Archives, there is no need to interface with staff at all. Researchers can search the databases themselves and view files immediately, as long as they have been digitized.

Reading Chinese Documents

In late 2015, members of H-PRC debated whether Frank Dikötter, a well-known scholar in the field of PRC history, had misinterpreted an archival document which he quoted from in his book *Mao's Great Famine*.⁴² In Dikötter's reading of the document, Mao announced that “it is better to let half the people die so that others can eat their fill.” The document in question thus appeared to demonstrate Mao's callousness as well as his responsibility for the millions of deaths which took place in China in the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁴³ Others with access to the full-text of the original document, however, believed that Mao was in fact talking about letting half of all industrial projects perish, not human lives.⁴⁴

While narrowly focused on a single quote, the discussion on H-PRC brought attention to what is probably the most important question involved in researching PRC history: how should

⁴² “Looking for Great Leap ‘smoking gun’ document,” H-PRC (December 2015), accessible at <https://networks.h-net.org/node/3544/discussions/99266/looking-great-leap-smoking-gun-document> (accessed March 8, 2016). This was certainly not the first discussion about the document in question. See also Thomas P. Bernstein, review of *The Great Famine in China, 1958-1962: A Documentary History*, edited by Zhou Xun, *China Perspectives* no. 2 (2013), accessible at <https://chinaperspectives.revues.org/6196> (accessed March 8, 2016).

⁴³ Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine*, 88.

⁴⁴ “Mao Zedong's Interjections at the March 26, 1959, Meeting in Shanghai,” Gansu Provincial Archives 91-018-0494-0005, 44-49, obtained by Frank Dikötter, accessible at <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/123036> (accessed March 8, 2016).

researchers approach, read, and interpret materials written by the Communist Party of China and the Government of the People's Republic of China?

Interpreting documents requires some knowledge of the many shapes and forms which they came in during China's socialist era.⁴⁵ These include “speeches” (讲话 *jianghua*), “remarks” (发言 *fayan*), “memoranda of conversations” (谈话记录 *tanhua jilu*), “meeting memoranda” (会议记录 *huiyi jilu*), “reports” (报告 *baogao*), “letters” (信 *xin* or 函 *han*), “telegrams” or “cables” (电报 *dianbao*), and “reports requesting instructions/approval” (请示报告 *qingshi baogao*). If the “report requesting instructions/approval” was approved by a senior organization or cadre, it was usually “forwarded” (转发 *zhuanfa*) to other entities, sometimes with a brief comment or preface (批转 *pizhuan*).

Regardless of the type of record, the format and structure of Chinese documents produced after 1949 are strikingly similar. Many Party and government records from the 1950s through at least the 1970s were composed so as to accomplish three things: provide a summary of work completed to date, list the achievements as well as the shortcomings of that work, and, finally, offer proposals and instructions for work to be carried out in the near future. Although the self-reported “shortcomings” often provide the richest fodder for historians, for the sake of balance, researchers should still strive to draw upon and analyze the other sections of a document. It is also important to recognize that this tripartite formula circumscribed what could and could not be said in a document. Oral history based research and investigations using grassroots materials continues to show the gulf in official reporting and the experiences and attitudes of Chinese citizens during the Mao era.⁴⁶ Readers must be especially suspicious when those who write claim to be speaking for the people and channeling the opinions of the masses.⁴⁷ Due to the accessibility of draft versions of documents, our doubts about the reliability of official records can be partially assuaged. Many archives have preserved draft files and place them side-by-side with the “final” versions. Researchers can begin to reconstruct how a particular record came to

⁴⁵ See 国务院秘书厅 Guowuyuan mishu ting (Secretary of the Office of the State Council), “关于对公文名称和体式问题的几点意见 (稿) Guanyu dui gongwen mingcheng he tishi wenti de jidian yijian (gao)” (“Draft Views on the Names and Forms of Official Documents, 1957, in 松世勤 Song Shiqin, ed., 《文书学参考资料》 *Wenshu xue cankao ziliao* (Clerical Work Reference Materials) (Beijing: Zhongyang guangbo dianshi daxue chubanshe, 1984), 194-204. I am indebted to Michael Schoenhals for bringing this source to my attention.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

⁴⁷ Smith, *Thought Reform and China's Dangerous Classes*, 7-8.

be written by following which lines were crossed out, what sentences rearranged, and what the marginalia dotting the sides of a page says.⁴⁸

To be sure, not all records follow the same formula. Memoranda of conversations and meeting notes reproduce offhand remarks and organic dialogue produced by groups of people. While these seemingly unscripted encounters are rich sources, they are not the Nixon tapes. Rather than representing verbatim records of what was said, they are best understood as summaries which were (sometimes) subject to the biases of the note-taker or perhaps the subsequent review of the primary speaker. Comparing and contrasting the Chinese and foreign versions of conversations which Mao Zedong held with foreigners, for example, is often revealing.

Because of the astounding number of meetings convened by the Party-state from 1949 through 1976, the archives are littered with copies of speeches. But similar to the above point, the written record of a speech found inside an archive cannot necessarily be judged at face value. What is left in an archive may be a copy of a speech as it was prepared, but not necessarily delivered; or it could be someone's notes taken during a talk. In the latter case, researchers could in fact discover multiple versions of the same derivative material, with differences being determined by human error as well as the note-taker's biases, attention span, and language ability.⁴⁹ Besides speeches, Cultural Revolution-era records in particular were often cut up, rearranged, and edited as they circulated across different networks and through different mediums. Which version is "more right"? It is hard to say.

The above discussion points to some of the challenges associated with interpreting and drawing conclusions from documents relevant to PRC history contained in official Chinese archives. But what official document, regardless of its country of origin, is not to a certain extent a political and social construction? All government documents are shaped by the political culture under which they were created; all official written texts are subject to the biases of their authors. Researchers should simply interpret Chinese records much as they would interpret any other source: cautiously. One document is usually not enough to prove a point or sustain an argument, and an individual record must be evaluated and interpreted in the broader context of what else is

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ This is indeed what happened with the Mao speech cited by Dikötter: two different versions were found, one in the Lanzhou Municipal Archives and another in the Hebei Provincial Archives.

available in the archives.⁵⁰ (Chinese archives, after all, do contain contradictory accounts.⁵¹) Similarly, researchers must ask a series of rather standard questions about the documents they read: who created it, who was the intended audience, and what was the intended outcome of the document?

Aside from accessibility and interpretation, legibility is probably the biggest challenge to researchers. The mish-mash of traditional and complex characters alone challenges students who have only learned Chinese on the Mainland. Even more aggravating for novice Chinese speakers are the numbers of handwritten documents. Typewriters were not necessarily common in Mao's China, particularly the further down the bureaucratic food chain that a research goes. If a researcher ventures into an urban district level archive or a rural county archive, they are sure to discover huge numbers of handwritten documents. The unfortunate drawback of this point is that the wealthiest parts of country, such as Shanghai and Beijing, are probably overrepresented in the historiography simply because the materials at the municipal archives in these two cities are easier to read.

Declassification, Reclassification, and Duplication

All of the above discussions are based on the assumption that researchers are actually able to view documents at official Chinese archives. Unfortunately, considerable amounts of valuable historical materials are still inaccessible at Chinese archives because of the ambiguity built into the Chinese archives law of 1988.⁵² While some archives, such as the Shanghai Municipal Archives, have done well at declassifying records, many others have not declassified even modest amounts of their holdings. At several municipal archives in Jiangsu, for example, I was disappointed to see just how barren the catalogs were. In Suzhou, Wuxi, and Nanjing, all of

⁵⁰ Diana Kapiszewski, Lauren M. Maclean, and Benjamin L. Read, *Field Research in Political Science: Practices and Principles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 166-172.

⁵¹ For instance, in the Shanghai Municipal Archives I found a copy of a speech which celebrated the long train ride from Shanghai to Urumqi as a means of achieving self-realization; in the Nanjing Municipal Archives, I found another record describing how the train to Xinjiang was overcrowded with people, did not include sufficient luggage compartments, and lacked clean drinking water. See “新疆农一师胜利九场吴月英大会发言稿 Xinjiang nong yi shi shengli jiu chang Wu Yueying dahui fayan gao” (“Draft Speech of Wu Yueying of the Victorious 9th Farm, Xinjiang 1st Agricultural Division, at the Meeting”), April 29, 1964, 上海市档案馆 Shanghai shi dang'anguan (Shanghai Municipal Archives [SMA]), B127-1-162, 28-34; and 中共南京市委精简安置小组办公室 Zhonggong Nanjing shiwei jingjian anzhi xiaozu bangongshi (Office of the Streamlining and Placement Small Group of the CCP Nanjing Municipal Committee), “关于首批进疆知识青年途中情况的汇报 Guanyu shoupi jin Jiang zhishi qingnian tuzhong qingkuang de huibao” (“Report on the Travels of the First Group of Educated Youth Going to Xinjiang”), August 7, 1965, 江苏省档案馆 Jiangsu sheng dang'anguan (Jiangsu Provincial Archives [JPA]), 3030-003-0105, 6-8.

⁵² Moss, “The Archives Law of the People's Republic of China,” 218.

the catalogs I viewed in autumn 2015 were filled with empty white space. The bulk of the post-1949 holdings are still classified.

Because the 1988 archives law does not grant archives the authority to declassify materials which impinge upon the “security or vital interests of the State,” many archives are often reluctant to make available files bearing “secret” (机密 *jimi*) or “confidential” (秘密 *mimi*) classifications, even for documents well over 50 years old and already easily accessible online and in print. Once at the Hangzhou Municipal Archives, for instance, I was told I could not see files written by the CCP Central Committee because they were still “secret.” I tried to explain to staff, to no avail, that the documents I wanted to see had in fact already been published in *Selected Important Documents issued since the Founding of the PRC* (1992-1998) or *Selected Documents of the CCP Central Committee* (2013).⁵³ China did enact freedom of information legislation in 2007-2008 through the “Articles on Government Information Disclosure” (中华人民共和国政府信息公开条例 *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo zhengfu xinxi gongkai tiaoli*), but how researchers—especially foreigners—can use this law to their benefit is unclear.⁵⁴

Archive directors can and do deny access to files seemingly arbitrarily (“because they say so”). It is also becoming more and more common for archives in China to “re-classify” documents that were previously accessible. This is often done during the course of “digitization” projects. “Digitization” (数字化 *shuzi hua*) on its own is a good thing, as it supports the long-term preservation of documents and facilitates e-government initiatives, but at archives such as the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefectural archives, it is being lumped together with an “appraisal” (鉴定 *jianding*) process. As files are digitized, they are reviewed by archives staff in order to determine suitability for public viewing. Many files at the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefectural Archives, unfortunately, will not be made available, even after digitization is complete.⁵⁵ In Shanghai, the Changning District Archives and the Baoshan District Archives are also presently undertaking an effort to “appraise” all files, even though digitization initiatives are not ongoing at these institutions. In both cases, they are actually re-appraising many files that

⁵³ For example, the staff at the Hangzhou Municipal Archives would not let me view a file titled “中共中央、国务院批转农业部外贸部关于蚕茶生产会议的总结报告,” despite being published in volume 43 of *Selected Documents of the CCP Central Committee*.

⁵⁴ Weibing Xiao, *Freedom of Information Reform in China: Information Flow Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁵⁵ Another research informed me in early 2016 that similar “digitization” and “appraisal” projects are ongoing at county-level archives in Southwest China.

were previously open to the public (at least nominally). The deputy director at the Baoshan District Archives candidly told me that “China is not like the United States;” just because something is declassified now does not mean it will still be declassified one-year from now.⁵⁶

Reclassification of documents is pervasive, taking place at even China’s most research friendly archives, such as the Shanghai Municipal Archives. In some instances, this includes documents which have been published in book form and are still easily accessible at libraries around the world.⁵⁷ Of course, the most egregious case of reclassification is that which took place at the Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives in Beijing. Previously, the Foreign Ministry Archives enlivened the study of Chinese foreign policy history by making accessible some 80,000 folders worth of materials.⁵⁸ The archive was not only a good place for research, but it was also celebrated as an example of China’s growing commitment to transparency and political openness.⁵⁹

In late 2012, however, the Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives abruptly closed down. When the Foreign Ministry Archives re-opened in spring 2013, visitors discovered that the reading room database had dramatically shrunk in size. According to some estimates, only 8,000 folders were accessible to the public.⁶⁰ The quality of materials had also greatly depreciated. Instead of high-level records of conversations between Chinese and foreign leaders or formerly secret embassy communications, the bulk of the documents available in 2013 were congratulatory telegrams commemorating holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries. The types of materials available were largely insignificant or irrelevant for research on the history of China’s foreign policy.

⁵⁶ Although re-classifications do occasionally occur in the United States, I agree with the staff person’s sentiment. See Matthew M. Aid, “Declassification in Reverse: The U.S. Intelligence Community’s Secret Historical Document Reclassification Program,” National Security Archive *Briefing Book* (February 21, 2006), <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB179/> (accessed March 8, 2016).

⁵⁷ For example, B127-1-359, 40-47, is no longer available at the Shanghai Municipal Archives, but it was published in a book in 2003. See 新疆生产建设兵团史志编纂委员会 *Xinjiang shengchan jianshe bingtuan shizhi bianzuan weiyuanhui*, ed., 《支边知识青年专辑》 *Zhibian zhishi qingnian zhuanji* (Album on the Youth Who Aided the Borderland and Educated Youth), vol. 12 of 《新疆生产建设兵团史料选辑》 *Xinjiang shengchan jianshe bingtuan shiliao xuanji* (Historical Selections of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps) (Wulumuqi: Xinjiang renmin chubanshe, 2003), 35-41. Several other documents included in this collection are also no longer accessible in Shanghai.

⁵⁸ Yafeng Xia, “The Study of Cold War International History in China: A Review of the Last Twenty Years,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 81-115.

⁵⁹ Jamie P. Horsley, “Toward a More Open China?” in *The Right to Know: Transparency for an Open World*, ed. Ann Florini (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 54-91.

⁶⁰ Ghosh, “Urgent Update on Foreign Ministry Archives, Beijing.”

To my knowledge, the Foreign Ministry has not provided an official explanation for the reclassification; informally, the staffs of the reading room have told researchers that the problem is a database malfunction, not censorship. Amongst Chinese and foreign researchers and journalists, however, many different explanations have circulated. Many individuals believe that the Foreign Ministry was reacting to the publication of documents on the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute by Jiji Press in Japan in late 2012.⁶¹ Other scholars hypothesize that the worsening research environment is connected to politics. Xi Jinping came to power in November 2012 and a new Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party was installed at the same time. Since then, there has been a widespread crackdown on civil society and freedom of information in China. The shifts in archival access, at the Foreign Ministry and elsewhere, may be part of this general retrenchment. Much as the Chinese media is now supposed to serve the interests of the Party above all else, archives are to “defend the archives for the Party; defend history for the nation” (为党守档, 为国守史 *wei dang shou dang, wei guo shou shi*).⁶²

Reclassification of archival materials in China has created serious roadblocks for scholars, especially Ph.D. candidates in the planning and research stages of dissertations. At the same time, reclassification undermines a critical aspect of the historical method and the scholarly enterprise: reproducibility. Other researchers should be able to verify a scholar's data and interpretations by accessing the same sources, but when documents are removed from public access in an archive, citations cease to function like a roadmap. Footnotes which lead to nowhere are thus going to be a significant problem in PRC studies now and in the future.

There is not an adequate solution to this issue, in part because many archives in China restrict the duplication of documents. Even if they do allow printing, copying, or (in exceptional cases) photography, there are many stringent rules in place on the quantity of materials which can be requested each day as well as on the content allowed to be printed. The Shanghai Municipal Archives, for example, allows researchers to request to print only 50 pages per day and, allegedly over the researcher's life time, to print no more than one-third of a folder. The Shanghai Municipal Archives is also quite conservative and will often deny print requests due to “objectionable” content. Other archives with excellent collections related to PRC history, such as

⁶¹ “As far back as 1950, China referred to Senkakus as part of Ryukyus,” *The Asahi Shimbun* (December 28, 2012), accessible at http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201212280079 (accessed March 8, 2016).

⁶² Maura Cunningham, “Denying Historians: China's Archives Increasingly Off-Bounds,” *China Real Time Report* (August 19, 2014), accessible at <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2014/08/19/denying-historians-chinas-archives-increasingly-off-bounds/> (accessed April 1, 2016).

the Tianjin Municipal Archives and the Jiangsu Provincial Archives, do not permit any documents to be photocopied. In most instances, then, if a researcher wants the full text of a document, they must transcribe it character-by-character. But due to limited funding, time, and patience, this is not always practical or possible.

Understandably, a scholar may not be able to share a copy of a reclassified record which they cite in their work if asked to do so, simply because they do not have a copy themselves. But, in circumstances when it is possible and appropriate, scholars should be willing to share their sources. In PRC history, there is a dangerous tendency to market one's scholarship on the basis of how many now inaccessible sources one cites.⁶³ This makes for good book jacket fodder, but the field of PRC history cannot continue to grow if the sources can be read by one (and only one!) person. Historical inquiry by its very nature must involve a dialogue over the same sets of documents by different peoples; it is through debates over these sources, after all, that our knowledge of the past is both preserved and improved. fGiven the tenuousness of researching PRC history, facilitating such a dialogue is the imperative of every scholar who is a part of the community. Should you cite a document if you are not prepared to share it? If it is in your possession, I think not.

Conclusion: Mitigating Restraints and Exploiting Opportunities

If this *Working Paper* has shown anything, it is that researching the history of the People's Republic of China *in* China remains difficult. There are serious bureaucratic bottlenecks—from letter of introduction requirements to inaccessible catalogs and widespread reclassification of archival materials—standing in the way of painless and unencumbered research. Yet, as I stated in the opening passage, more and more scholars are using unpublished archival sources in their research about the history of the PRC. How have scholars mitigated all of the abovementioned challenges and identified and exploited new opportunities for research? What strategies should scholars employ now and in the future?

The constraints on archival research are in part (but not fully) responsible for pushing more researchers into flea markets and onto online book shops in search of rare historical materials.⁶⁴ Because the used “book” market is still relatively unregulated, it is now quite easy to

⁶³ See, for example, Friedman, *Shadow Cold War*.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Sandrine Catris, “The Cultural Revolution from the Edge: Violence and Revolutionary Spirit in Xinjiang, 1966-1976” (Ph.D. diss., Indian University, 2015). To be sure, many scholars utilize unconventional sources simply because they are interesting and historically valuable.

purchase items such as personal diaries and dossiers, grassroots Party and state records, Cultural Revolution-era manifestos, and propaganda tracts.⁶⁵ Many valuable sources related to China's history since 1949 are available on the market, just as long as one has the cash to pay for them. The use of extra-archival sources has already significantly enhanced knowledge of PRC history, but I am still not persuaded that relying on the market is a complete solution to the challenges of conducting archival research in China.⁶⁶ From a research perspective, individual documents purchased on the market are often divorced from their archival context. Unless a researcher has access to draft versions, the final text, and other errata associated with a specific document, materials purchased on the market may entail some of the same problems as the officially published collections of documents. From a legal perspective, buying official government records—even though they have been discarded—may be against the law. According to Article 17, Chapter III, of the Chinese Archives Law, “the sale of archives owned by the State shall be prohibited.” Articles 16 and 24 add that “selling archives for profit or selling or giving archives to foreigners” is also illegal. I cannot comment whether or not the Chinese government has grounds to enforce this rule and target researchers buying, for example, documents produced by low-level offices in the 1950s, but the risk still exists. Finally, although hardly unique to PRC history, there are also ethical issues associated with using sensitive personal information, such as individual dossiers, in one's research.⁶⁷ The use of some sources purchased on the market will necessarily need to be done in compliance with the ethics guidelines at one's institution and under the supervision of an institutional review board (IRB) or a similar entity. Owing to these issues, sources purchased on the market are probably best thought of as a complement to archival research, not as a substitution for it.

Archival roadblocks in China have also pushed many researchers to employ the methodology of international history and explore materials relevant to PRC history available in international archives. This is sensible and possible because the archives of several of China's former socialist allies, such as the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany), are

⁶⁵ Jeremy Brown, “Finding and Using Grassroots Historical Sources from the Mao Era,” *Dissertation Reviews* (December 15, 2010), accessible at <http://dissertationreviews.org/archives/310> (accessed March 8, 2016).

⁶⁶ See, for example, Michael Schoenhals, *Spying for the People: Mao's Secret Agents, 1949-1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁶⁷ Konrad H. Jarausch and Volker Gransow, eds., *Uniting Germany: Documents and Debates, 1944-1993* (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1994), 246.

remarkably open.⁶⁸ The archives of China's main patron and ally in the 1950s, the former Soviet Union, are also fairly accessible, at least at the time of writing this *Working Paper* (archives in Russia are prone to major shifts in terms of accessibility).⁶⁹ The Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) has explored and published Russian and Eastern European archival records, often times in English translation, relevant to PRC history since the early 1990s.⁷⁰

Beyond the borders of the socialist bloc, the archives of several Western European nations which established relations with the PRC in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, such as Switzerland, France, and Italy, are also easily accessible, at least relative to the current situation in China.⁷¹ Finally, the archives of many international organizations, such as the United Nations Archives and Records Management Section (UN ARMS) in New York, the International Olympic Committee Archives in Lausanne, and the International Red Cross Committee Archives in Geneva, can usually be accessed by researchers with little or no fuss. Whether or not the sources found in international archives are useful or relevant depends entirely on one's specific area of research in PRC history. Nevertheless, researchers must be conscious of the levels of accessibility which foreign diplomats had to the Chinese state as well as Chinese society, and the biases, stereotypes, and preconceived opinions—positive and negative—which foreigners brought forth in their writings about China. Drawing on international archives can complement archival research conducted in China, but should not fully replace it.

Besides utilizing unconventional historical sources and documents from foreign archives, the best solution to the many challenges described above is to simply cast a wide net, barring an even more draconian downturn in the ability to access archives nationwide. China's massive geographic size, the complex layering of administrative divisions, and the expansiveness of its bureaucracy are the unwitting allies of the researcher. In addition to having 33 provinces or autonomous regions, China has thousands of prefectures, counties, cities, and municipal districts.

⁶⁸ Zhong Zhong Chen, Bernd Schaefer, and several other scholars have made ample use of the Bundesarchiv (Federal Archives) as well as the resources of the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Records (BStU) for explorations of Chinese history since 1949.

⁶⁹ For past examples of work using a mixture of Russian and Chinese sources, see Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center Press; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁷⁰ See, for example, Enrico Fardella, Christian F. Ostermann, and Charles Kraus, eds., *Sino-European Relations during the Cold War and the Rise of a Multipolar World* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2015).

⁷¹ See the work done by Ariane Knuesel, Garret Martin, and Enrico Fardella, respectively.

Nearly every single administrative unit in China, including and above the municipal district (区 *qu*), has an archival repository associated with it. The network of Chinese archives is so large that researchers can always expect some level of success in their research, even more so because no two archives are the same.⁷² Although casting a wide archival net is more costly than staying put at one archive in one locality (and, moreover, not every research project would benefit from multi-archival research), this is still an important tactic in the researcher's toolkit.

Besides canvassing archives far and wide, researchers should make ample use of the "safe bets": the Shanghai Municipal Archives and the Beijing Municipal Archives. While both institutions have become more restrictive in recent years, they are still the largest and most easily accessed archives in China today. Several other provincial and municipal archives have also established good reputations in the scholarly community for consistently allowing researchers to access documents related to PRC history.

A third strategy researchers must employ is to simply not give up. Getting stonewalled at a Chinese archive is extraordinarily discouraging and frustrating, but it should not erode one's drive to utilize archival materials to write about PRC history. Similarly, researchers should keep the situation in China today in perspective. Like Russia since 1992, the conditions on accessing archives in China have changed frequently, both for the better and for the worse.⁷³ No one, for example, anticipated that the Chinese Foreign Ministry would, in 2004, suddenly open up many of its archives covering the PRC's first 15 years of existence. Although the current political climate in China today is not conducive to an honest and thorough pursuit of the past, archival conditions do not always mesh neatly with political trends.

Finally, researchers should consult information easily found on the web in order to stay up-to-date on archival developments in China. For example, PRCHistoryResources.org, a wiki administered by Amanda Shuman, offers links to reviews of many different archives in China as well as other information on databases, libraries, and reference works related to the history of the People's Republic of China. H-PRC, the H-Net presence of the PRC History Group, also routinely has updates about specific archives in China. H-PRC also provides a forum for the discussion of important historiographical, conceptual, and methodological issues in the study of PRC history. Finally, the "Fresh from the Archives" series on DissertationReviews.org (to be

⁷² Anne F. Thurston with Karen Turner-Gottschang and Linda A. Reed, *China Bound: A Guide to Academic Life and Work in the PRC*, revised ed. (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1994), 92-93.

⁷³ Kramer, "Archival Policies and Historical Memory in the Post-Soviet Era."

reincarnated as “Navigator,” in 2016-2017) contains dozens of reviews of archives on Mainland China. These online resources are tremendously useful when planning one’s research in China.

It is undoubtedly true that it is now easier to research the political, economic, social, and cultural histories of the People’s Republic of China than it is to research China’s diplomatic history. While provincial and municipal archives do contain some materials related to foreign affairs, these documents tend to focus on low-level exchanges taking place between China and other nations. Until the Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives reopens in full, researchers studying the foreign relations of the PRC may need to temper their expectations of accessing “high-level” documentation, such as records of conversation between Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai and foreign leaders. Nevertheless, if scholars are willing to change their approach slightly, I am convinced there are still rich opportunities to study China’s foreign relations on the basis of provincial and municipal sources. Austin Jersild, while using primarily Chinese Foreign Ministry materials, has shown the value of studying “low-level” exchanges between China and its socialist allies,⁷⁴ while Michael Szonyi’s study of Quemoy has demonstrated how scholars can adopt the methodology of social history in order to localize the Cold War and its impact.⁷⁵ Scholars may still be able to offer innovative and fresh approaches to the study of Chinese foreign policy during the Cold War even though they cannot access the Foreign Ministry Archives in Beijing.⁷⁶

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⁷⁴ Austin Jersild, *The Sino-Soviet Alliance: An International History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

⁷⁵ Michael Szonyi, *Cold War Island: Quemoy on the Frontline* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁷⁶ See Yangwen Zheng, Hong Liu, and Michael Szonyi, eds., *The Cold War in Asia: The Battle For Hearts and Minds* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

Appendix I

List of Chinese Archives Consulted by the Author

	Name (Chinese)	Name (Pinyin)	Name (English)	Location	Date(s) Visited
1	北京市档案馆	Beijing shi dang'anguan	Beijing Municipal Archives	Beijing	05/2007; 09/2015; 11/2015
2	长宁区档案馆	Changning qu dang'anguan	Changning District Archives	Shanghai	07/2013; 06/2014; 10/2015
3	常熟市档案馆	Changshu shi dang'anguan	Changshu Municipal Archives	Changshu, Jiangsu	11/2015
4	广东省档案馆	Guangdong sheng dang'anguan	Guangdong Provincial Archives	Guangzhou, Guangdong	12/2015
5	广州市档案馆	Guangzhou shi dang'anguan	Guangzhou Municipal Archives	Guangzhou, Guangdong	12/2015
6	杭州市档案馆	Hangzhou shi dang'anguan	Hangzhou Municipal Archives	Hangzhou, Zhejiang	09/2015
7	黄浦区档案馆	Huangpu qu dang'anguan	Huangpu District Archives	Shanghai	07/2013; 06/2014; 12/2014; 10/2015
8	湖北省档案馆	Hubei sheng dang'anguan	Hubei Provincial Archives	Wuhan, Hubei	11/2015
9	江苏省档案馆	Jiangsu sheng dang'anguan	Jiangsu Provincial Archives	Nanjing, Jiangsu	11/2015
10	嘉兴市档案馆	Jiaxing shi dang'anguan	Jiaxing Municipal Archives	Jiaxing, Zhejiang	09/2015
11	静安区档案馆	Jing'an qu dang'anguan	Jing'an District Archives	Shanghai	07/2013
12	龙井市档案馆	Longjing shi dang'anguan	Longjing Municipal Archives	Longjing, Yanbian, Jilin	09/2015
13	南京市档案馆	Nanjing shi dang'anguan	Nanjing Municipal Archives	Nanjing, Jiangsu	11/2015

14	宁波市档案馆	Ningbo shi dang'anguan	Ningbo Municipal Archives	Ningbo, Zhejiang	11/2015
15	上海市档案馆	Shanghai shi dang'anguan	Shanghai Municipal Archives	Shanghai	07-08/2013; 06-07/2014; 12/2014; 08-12/2015
16	苏州市档案馆	Suzhou shi dang'anguan	Suzhou Municipal Archives	Suzhou, Jiangsu	11/2015
17	天津市档案馆	Tianjin shi dang'anguan	Tianjin Municipal Archives	Tianjin	11/2015
18	图们市档案馆	Tumen shi dang'anguan	Tumen Municipal Archives	Tumen, Yanbian, Jilin	09/2015
19	温州市档案馆	Wenzhou shi dang'anguan	Wenzhou Municipal Archives	Wenzhou, Zhejiang	11/2015
20	武汉市档案馆	Wuhan shi dang'anguan	Wuhan Municipal Archives	Wuhan, Hubei	11/2015
21	无锡市档案馆	Wuxi shi dang'anguan	Wuxi Municipal Archives	Wuxi, Jiangsu	11/2015
22	延边朝鲜族自治州档案馆	Yanbian Chaoxian zu zizhizhou dang'anguan	Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture Archives	Yanji, Yanbian, Jilin	09/2015
23	闸北区档案馆	Zhabei qu dang'anguan	Zhabei District Archives	Shanghai	07/2013
24	浙江省档案馆	Zhejiang sheng dang'anguan	Zhejiang Provincial Archives	Hangzhou, Zhejiang	09/2013
25	中华人民共和国外交部档案馆	Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiao bu dang'anguan	Archives of the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Beijing	05/2007; 06/2010; 07/2013