

Oral Sources and PRC History: Best and Worst Practices

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My title promises to shed light on best and worst practices in conducting oral history on the Mao Zedong era. Identifying best practices is an easy task: look no further than Gail Hershatter's *Gender of Memory*, which uses oral history interviews to reshape scholarly understanding of the Communist revolution and the Mao years, with new insights and surprises on almost every page. Hershatter's method—conducting multiple interviews with 72 women over the course of ten years, with the help of a Chinese collaborator who facilitated official permission and logistics—is a model worthy of emulation. But what if you don't have ten years to spend on a project? What if your research topic is so sensitive that there is no way to successfully secure official approval? This essay will discuss my foibles and successes in finding interviewees, and will compare ethnographic and journalistic methods with more conventional oral history approaches.

May I Have Permission?

I did not seek official permission to conduct oral history interviews for my project about rural-urban difference because I was afraid the answer would be no. I have not bothered seeking official permission to interview people about the

Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 because I know what the answer will be. The risk of seeking official permission is that officials might insist on sending minders or monitors to sit in on interviews, which for me is a non-starter. But it is difficult for people who cannot pass as locals to wander around Chinese villages without drawing notice from authorities. In fact, the appearance of any outsider, no matter what he or she looks like, might be enough to spark a visit from police or a local Party official.

Because I lacked official permission to conduct interviews in 2004-2005, I had to build my own networks so I could travel in the countryside without getting my interviewees or myself in trouble. I started going to my rural field site by asking a Chinese friend teaching in Tianjin if any of her students happened to be from the county I wanted to visit. The three of us—me, my friend, and her student—made the first trip together, with logistical and nutritional help from the student's parents. Once the student's parents figured out what I was interested in learning, they introduced me to other people in their network, who then introduced me to their friends. I was off and rolling and was able to put together a local history featuring multiple perspectives on how the Xiaojinzhuan model village rose and fell.

This system worked pretty well. Because I knew where people lived, I could travel straight to their homes—either by jumping directly out of a local taxi or by walking a very short distance from a bus—without attracting much notice. Things only went awry when I felt bad about repeatedly imposing on my interviewees during mealtime. I took the bus to a restaurant in a local township and planned to return to a different interviewee's house in the afternoon. What I

had failed to anticipate was that students from the local middle school would be heading home for lunch at the same time I was standing around waiting for a bus. A large group of happy, curious, boisterous teenagers quickly surrounded me. I extricated myself and walked around the corner to wait for a bus in a less exposed location, but it was too late. Two minutes later a police car slowly rolled up. They asked where was I going and what I was doing. I said that I had been visiting friends, which was technically true. “Who?” they asked. I was stuck. I told them the name of the person I had just visited, but not the person I was planning to see next. I crossed the street and caught the next bus going back to the county seat, my interviewing done for the day. What did I learn from this? When in a village, never turn down a lunch invitation.

When my research project evolved from looking at a single village to studying rural-urban relations in a larger region, I asked everyone I met about their experiences moving between city and countryside. One friendly taxi driver insisted that I talk to his father. This felicitous introduction led to my discovery of the Worker-Peasant Alliance State Farm, which featured prominently in one of my book chapters. The taxi driver’s father was a retired state farm worker. He lived in a village but frequently visited Tianjin to socialize with his retired friends. I became part of a network of retired state farm workers, many of whom were willing to be interviewed; one even let me borrow a *neibu* copy of the farm’s official history.

I became such good friends with the retired farm worker that on occasion I would spend the night in his village home, where he introduced me to his neighbors; our conversations could go late into the night. One overnight stay led

to my second run-in with the police, who drove by on the main road one morning when we were looking for a driver to take me back to the county seat. The police car drove by quickly, but a minute later backtracked to investigate my presence. The officers asked what I was doing, where I was staying, and wanted to see my passport and visa. I had to explain each part of the visa to them—it seemed like the first time they had ever laid eyes on such a document. I had registered and paid for a hotel room in the county seat, so technically I had a valid place to stay.

All the officer could say to me was, “for your safety, you need to leave now. Don’t come back unless you’re accompanied by a county official.” I said that I felt quite safe, thank you, but I was willing to leave (in fact, I was in the process of leaving when the police drove by!). I later learned that while one officer was speaking to me, another had pulled my friend aside to tell him, “If anything about this comes out in the newspaper, you’ll be responsible for the consequences.” Nothing came out in the newspaper—and my book came out years later, using a pseudonym for the state farm worker—and as far as I know, nobody got in trouble. But I learned to stay inside while my friend went out to find a driver, who would enter the village so I could stay away from the main road.

Connecting Names in Archival Documents to Real People

Sometimes a tidbit of information from an interview would prompt me to search for a written source (or even better, an interviewee might share a rare written source with me). Other times, the opposite happened: written sources led me to seek out someone to interview. In the Hexi District Archive in Tianjin, I found thick dossiers about two individuals who I wanted to track down to hear

their side of the story and to learn what had happened to them after the archival paper trail petered out. One dossier focused on a young man, to whom I eventually gave the pseudonym Wang Kaiwen. Wang had been “downsized” from Tianjin and sent to a suburban village in the aftermath of the Great Leap Famine. The file contained a few petition letters from Wang scrawled in childlike handwriting; the last document was from 1965. The other was about a person who had been removed from the city later in the 1960s—I don’t remember all of the details because I was never able to find him. Both files contained each individual’s name and address.

To find Wang, I started by consulting an old map of urban Tianjin from the 1960s. I compared it with a new map and set off on my bicycle. I found a typical gated high-rise community—Wang’s old neighborhood had been razed and rebuilt. I asked around and was directed to the local residents’ committee office, where I explained to a clerk that during my research I had come across the story of a former resident. I said that I wanted to ask him some follow up questions about his experience. When I mentioned the man’s name, the clerk said, “Oh, he was just here yesterday.” She told me to go to the nearby street office, where someone would be able to help me get in touch with Wang. I told the same story to someone there—he knew who I was talking about, wrote down my phone number, and said that he would give me a call the next time he saw Wang.

A few weeks later, my phone rang while I was making photocopies at the Tianjin Library. It was the man from the street office. “Wang is here right now, you can come and talk to him.” I dropped what I was doing and went straight to

meet Wang. His story explained why he had been so easy to find—he was a habitual petitioner, still seeking justice and a state pension. All of the clerks knew him well because they saw him every week when he came to check on the status of his petitions. Wang wanted his years in the countryside to be counted as government service, but because the post-Leap downsizing program had never been repudiated, and because he had “voluntarily” agreed to his transfer, he was considered a peasant. Peasants don’t get pensions.

I have tried similar strategies to find people named in archival documents, but with much less luck. Most people don’t interact with local officials on a weekly basis, fifty years after an event that set things in motion. I wandered around a desolate street in Hexi District in a futile effort to find the address of the other “sent-down” person whose file I had seen in the district archive. I finally ended up at the neighborhood police station, where I told the same type of story I had used to find Wang: name, old address, possibly helpful to my research. The police officer I spoke to was helpful. She searched her database, but did not find any record of the person I hoped to find.

Several years later I tried and failed to find Ma Shurong, a policeman who had served as Party Secretary Wan Xiaotang’s bodyguard during the 1960s. Ma was the first person to discover Wan’s body in a bathtub on September 19, 1966. Wan’s death was first attributed to a heart attack, but in 1967 rebels alleged that Wan had committed suicide and betrayed the Party. Controversy about Wan’s death was central to how the Cultural Revolution unfolded in Tianjin—Mao Zedong criticized Wan’s memorial service as “using the dead to oppress the living.” In several different Cultural Revolution-era documents I collected, Ma

Shurong gives conflicting testimony about what he saw and found in the bathroom: one version supports the heart attack explanation, another version provides evidence in support of the suicide claim. My hope was to find Ma, make friends, show him the documents, ask him to explain the discrepancies, and hear his memories about 1966.

I actually had a connection inside the Tianjin Public Security Bureau: my landlady's brother, who I knew as "Big Brother Wang," was a martial arts instructor who coached PSB bodyguards. But Wang Dage's inquiries went nowhere. I had a university student to ask around on my behalf, but she also struck out.

When I interviewed Wan Xiaotang's son, I started by showing him English-language scholarly works about the Cultural Revolution written by professors from Harvard and other elite universities, all stating unquestioningly that Wan had killed himself. Wan's son had published a commemorative book supporting the view that his father had died of a heart attack. I told him that I thought that Western scholarship was not based on reliable sources, but that I lacked solid evidence to present an alternative explanation. I also told him that my own father had died of a heart attack when I was a toddler. Wan's son recounted how he learned about his father's death and spoke at the memorial service, but he was unwilling to get into the specifics of the controversy, nor was he willing to introduce me to people who had been on the scene in September 1966. Later I heard from another Tianjin scholar that before Wan Xiaotang's wife died, she had instructed her children not to reopen, reinvestigate, or get into the details of Wan's death.

Ma Shurong was in his twenties during the 1960s. Every year that passes, my chances of finding and speaking to him dwindle. If I do get a chance to talk to him, I will jump at it. His memories and testimony would add valuable detail to my story. But they would not be the end of the story or the final word. Nor would they be any less constrained by political pressures and reputation burnishing than Ma's conflicting statements from the 1960s were. Whether or not I find Ma, Wan Xiaotang's death will remain mysterious, contested, and worth studying.

In this section I have discussed nine individual people. I have used two real names (Wan Xiaotang and Ma Shurong). I have used one pseudonym (Wang Kaiwen). For the other five people, I have used descriptive language, mostly vague and anonymizing ("a person who had been removed from the city," "another Tianjin scholar," "a university student"), but in other cases more specific (Wan's son, Wan's wife, "Big Brother Wang").

Wan Xiaotang was a prominent public official whose photograph and name appeared frequently in newspapers. Naming him is straightforward and uncontroversial. The pseudonymous Wang Kaiwen is an ordinary person whose real name has never appeared in a newspaper. We can appreciate and learn from his story without knowing his real name. Naming Ma Shurong is slightly more complicated. He is not a public figure like Wan Xiaotang, but his name and position as Wan Xiaotang's bodyguard has appeared in print many times in Chinese. He is already an identifiable part of public discourse about Wan's controversial death, and it would be confusing and even misleading for me to choose a random pseudonym for him. In the end, my decisions about when to

use real names, when to use pseudonyms, and when to use vague descriptors are governed by my university's policies about research involving human subjects, combined with common sense.

Interdisciplinary and Journalistic Models versus Oral History Compilations

The concept of what constitutes a “sensitive topic” is a moving target that changes over time. The protests and crackdown of 1989 are a forbidden zone today, but someday they might not be. A topic that today seems anodyne might suddenly become sensitive in the future. Politically sensitive research topics are inherently interesting to me because I sense a cover-up. I don't like cover-ups because they usually involve politically powerful people screwing over already marginalized individuals and groups. Cover-ups exacerbate an original injustice or act of violence.

What my mentor Paul Pickowicz has written about the “politically sensitive” nature of the history of China's film industry can be applied more broadly to many other aspects of Chinese society:

I have encountered many people who want to cover up and conceal important but controversial aspects of China's film history, as well as many who work openly or behind the scenes to tear down barriers and eliminate taboos. Over the decades I have gotten entangled (willingly and unwillingly) in the sometimes bitter political struggles that pit people who are determined to conceal against people who want to reveal.¹

¹ Paul G. Pickowicz, *China on Film: A Century of Exploration, Confrontation, and Controversy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 1.

Whether they like it or not, critical academics working on China (and, in Timothy Cheek's wonderful parlance, "working with China" by collaborating with Chinese colleagues)² are forced to pick sides. Do you accept the narrative of the concealers, or do you find and cooperate with the revealers?

Pickowicz draws our attention to the "many who work openly or behind the scenes to tear down barriers and eliminate taboos." These are the people who make it possible to write about forbidden zones, about topics as sensitive as the June Fourth Massacre. In recent years two excellent books have drawn on oral history interviews to shed new light on the events of 1989: Canadian author Denise Chong's severely underappreciated *Egg on Mao* and journalist Louisa Lim's *People's Republic of Amnesia*. Chong interviewed her protagonist, Lu Decheng, in Calgary, but she also traveled to China and stealthily conducted interviews there. Lim was living in Beijing while doing research for her Tiananmen book. Both Chong and Lim had to be careful to protect themselves and their interviewees, but both found people willing to tell their stories.

The main strength of Chong and Lim's approaches is that they mostly focus on obscure or understudied individuals rather than on prominent protest leaders who have told and retold their stories many times. Last week my students debated the strengths and merits about Lim's chapters, which profile different people involved in the Tiananmen protests: a soldier, a forgotten student leader, prominent student leader Wu'er Kaixi, Tiananmen mother Zhang Xianling, a patriotic youth, and Bao Tong (Zhao Ziyang's "right-hand man"). Students' opinions were divided about which chapter was strongest, but an

² <http://www.iar.ubc.ca/aboutus/iarfacultystaff/faculty/timothycheek.aspx>

overwhelming majority thought that the chapter about Wu'er Kaixi was weak because he came across as so self-serving and unlikeable.

In my own interviews about 1989, I have also moved away from prominent names toward more obscure figures. When Han Dongfang, who led the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Union in 1989, visited Vancouver, I told him that I was researching 1989 and hoped to speak with him. He said, "You don't want to talk to me, I've already told my story too many times. Talk to people who haven't been interviewed before."³ Soon thereafter my Tiananmen seminar held a Skype interview with Chai Ling. The experience confirmed Han Dongfang's point. My students had read Chai's memoir⁴ and had assiduously prepared critical questions, but we learned nothing new. Only four students had the chance to ask questions over the course of an hour because Chai turned each answer into a long discourse about the power of Jesus.

In addition to journalistic and non-fiction accounts about sensitive topics, oral history practitioners have much to learn from ethnographic studies of recent history. I learned far more about recent Chinese history from three stellar books by anthropologists who were doing their own type of oral history than I did from Zhou Xun's self-labeled "oral history" of the Great Leap Famine.⁵ Mun Young Cho's study of urban poverty on the outskirts of Harbin, Jon Osburg's book about

³ Han's testimony in *The Gate of Heavenly Peace* is incredibly powerful.

⁴ Chai's memoir does not shed much new light on the Tiananmen protests, but it is well worth reading for its gut-wrenching accounts of sexuality and abortion in the shadow of the one-child policy during the 1980s. Chai Ling, *A Heart for Freedom: The Remarkable Journey of a Young Dissident, Her Daring Escape, and Her Quest to Free China's Daughters* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2011).

⁵ Zhou Xun, *Forgotten Voices of Mao's Great Famine: An Oral History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

anxious rich men in Chengdu, and Tiantian Zheng's portrait of Dalian sex workers answer important research questions and portray the complexity of lived experience during the 2000s.⁶ Cho, Osburg, and Zheng succeeded because they spent long periods of time getting to know their subjects, observing and listening carefully to them, and asking questions about things that puzzled them. This ethnographic method is different from oral history. Usually the anthropologists did not sit down for an interview, ask a list of preset questions, or even ask an open-ended question like "tell me your life story." They found that spending time observing and interacting with people yielded "life stories" more effectively than straightforwardly asking someone to tell a life story could. Journalist Peter Hessler employs a similar method in *Oracle Bones*, which contains lots of historical content.⁷ Ethnographers and journalists can do oral history better than oral historians.

Historian Zhou Xun and her interview subjects are exemplary "revealers" in the Pickowiczian sense of the term. Zhou's oral history of the Great Leap Famine is a fantastic achievement because it drives another nail in the coffin of famine deniers (concealers).⁸ Zhou's book contains testimony from one hundred survivors and witnesses who tell stories of hunger and repression. Their voices

⁶ Mun Young Cho, *The Specter of "The People": Urban Poverty in Northeast China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Jon Osburg, *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality Among China's New Rich* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); Tiantian Zheng, *Red Lights: The Lives of Sex Workers in Postsocialist China* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

⁷ Peter Hessler, *Oracle Bones: A Journey Between China's Past and Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

⁸ Sadly, famine denial is again ascendant in China's current political environment, as evidenced by the travel ban on author Yang Jisheng. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/17/world/asia/yang-jisheng-tombstone-harvard.html>

are an important rejoinder to those who deny or downplay the severity of the famine. Zhou's presentation and approach, however, undermine the book. Zhou's editorial introductions and interjections often run longer than the primary source excerpts. The short paragraphs of quotes often contain ellipses indicating excised material, but Zhou does not explain what was cut or why she removed it. And although Zhou provides plenty of political context for the interview data, the book lacks human, personal context about the interviewees, whose stories are so focused on a single thing—hunger—that each individual seems defined by his or her suffering. Even Zhou's chapter titles suggest that her predetermined agenda—to document a disaster—likely caused selection bias. She needed stories about “The Tragedy of Collectivization” (Chapter 1) and she found them, even though plenty of other testimonies present collectivization in varied ways, sometimes tragic, sometimes not.⁹

In her introduction, Zhou writes, “Following the publication of this book, the transcriptions and recordings of the original one hundred interviews will be made available in an oral history digital archive online.”¹⁰ Three years after publication, the archive is not yet online. Getting such a project up and running must be extremely costly and time consuming. If Zhou delivers on this promise, providing open access to unedited, unexcised oral history data would ameliorate many of her book's shortcomings.

⁹ For stories of people who lived through collectivization and remembered it as something other than a tragedy, see Hershatter's *Gender of Memory* and Chen Huiqin, *Daughter of Good Fortune: A Twentieth-Century Chinese Peasant Memoir* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Zhou, *Forgotten Voices*, 11.

Conclusion: Oral History by Historians

It is somewhat sobering to me that many of the best oral history works focusing on recent Chinese history have been written by people who do not hold history PhDs. But only somewhat. Historians can act like journalists and journalists can act like historians. Historians and journalists alike are better off when we are unconstrained by disciplinary labels. In the end, professional historians do have something unique to offer when conducting, compiling, digesting, and writing about oral history. As *The Gender of Memory* shows, conducting multiple interviews with many subjects over a long period of time, unconstrained by the journalist's tight deadline, allowed Hershatter to masterfully carry out the historian's main task of explaining change over time. And as Zhou Xun's proposed digital archive promises, historians can make a major contribution by collecting, compiling, and sharing stories with future generations of scholars, striking a blow in favor of openness in the battle of revealers versus concealers.