Beyond Bias: Critical Analysis and Layered Reading of Mao-Era Sources

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Undergraduate students often enter my history courses primed to identify and then dismiss sources tainted by all kinds of "bias": political bias, cultural bias, gender bias. If all else fails, the bias introduced through the process of translation threatens to disqualify any source I can offer these Anglophone students. Professional historians cannot afford to be quite so picky, but they sometimes express similar attitudes. Soon after the publication of my book *Red Revolution, Green Revolution*, I had dinner with a fellow historian of the PRC. He had glanced through the bibliography and delicately shared his concern that I seemed to be relying on many unreliable sources—newspaper articles, propaganda booklets, and the like. I have heard similar cautions from other colleagues: one went so far as to suggest that a library subscription to the full-text searchable *People's Daily* would be an unwise investment since it offers little beyond government propaganda.

What then constitutes good sources for the study of PRC history? For many historians, archival documents continue to represent the gold standard.[1] Others have questioned the sanctity of the archive and instead collect materials from flea markets—or better yet, garbage piles: they identify their collecting philosophy as *garbology* and privilege what they call *grassroots archives*.[2] Still others favor oral history interviews—though how

1 See, for example, Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–62* (New York: Walker & Co., 2011).

2 Michael Schoenhals is widely acknowledged as the founder of the garbology school of research on Mao-era China, with Jeremy Brown as a highly regarded and widely cited spokesperson. Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 4; Jeremy Brown, "Finding and Using Grassroots Historical Sources from the Mao Era," *Chinese History Dissertation Reviews*,

they conduct and analyze those interviews and what meaning they find therein varies so much that they arguably cannot be placed in a single category of historical scholarship.[3]

I prefer an eclectic approach to source collection and what I think of as a layered approach to source analysis. I tell my students that if we discard every flawed source we will end up with nothing at all: oral histories are shaped by current paradigms, by the effects of trauma on memory, and by the many experiences of the intervening years; archival documents reflect state priorities and collecting practices; flea markets have their own filters, and the scraps salvaged from garbage piles can be difficult to assemble into accounts that transcend individual cases.[4] Still more important, I submit that "bias" is often the most interesting aspect of a source: it helps us understand what mattered most deeply to the people we are studying. I go so far as to prohibit the use of this distracting word in my classes (except perhaps in certain senses, such as selection bias); I encourage students to think instead about the "perspectives" that sources reflect.

In other words, I argue that how we read our sources is more important than which sources we keep and which we throw away. Moreover, I emphasize the benefits of engaging directly with our sources in our narratives and analyses. We should not treat our sources as received wisdom; but neither should we adopt an attitude of seeking and destroying bias to arrive at objective facts (what Aminda Smith in this volume calls the "falsification method").

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https://dissertationreviews.wordpress.com; Yiwen Yvon Wang et al, "Grassroots Documents and PRC History Methods: A Roundtable Discussion," *Association for Asian Studies Conference*, 17 March 2017.

3 For a sense of the range of approaches to oral history research on PRC history, consider: Edward Friedman et al, *Chinese Village Socialist State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), in which interviews constitute the core source materials and are woven invisibly into a historical narrative with little explicit analytical discussion; Xiong Weimin, *Dui yu lishi, kexuejia you hua shuo* [Scientists Have Something to Say about History] (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 2017), which takes the form of direct (excerpted) transcripts of oral history interviews; and Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), in which the author engages directly and analytically with the interview process and transcripts to probe how people experienced the past and what shapes the ways they have (and have not) remembered it, and the ways they communicate (or do not communicate) those memories.

4 Elizabeth Perry has called upon historians of the PRC to "rise above" garbology and "paint their interpretations on a broad canvas." "The Promise of PRC History," *Journal of Modern Chinese History* 10.1 (2016): 113-17.

By engaging with the sources and making visible the contexts in which they were produced and have circulated, we can offer a richer understanding of their many layers of significance. To that end, I will explore some of what may be gained through a layered and self-reflexive analysis of three sources I have collected in recent years.

Not Fearing Shameful Things Like Propaganda

Historians often "fetishize" archival sources (see the Introduction to this volume) with the assumption that such materials offer a truer account than the propaganda found in published materials. When we gain access to a rich archive, that is indeed a great boon. But materials found in archives are not always better than (and sometimes not even all that different from) materials found elsewhere. And, wherever we find them, sources that smack of propaganda can be valuable on multiple levels, as evidenced in the first source I will share: an article titled "Not Fearing 'Shameful' Things, Courageously Changing the World," credited to Wu Lanxian, the vice director of the "Four Sisters Veterinary Station" in rural Jiangxi Province, and published by the Scientific and Technology Office in Nanyang, Henan in an April, 1966 collection that I found on the used book website kongfz.com.[5] The volume, *Collected Experiences of the National Rural Scientific Experiment Movement*, presents stories shared at a national conference held in Fujian province in March of that year. It is held together by two staples and marked on the title page as *neibu* (that is, for internal use only); the preface indicates that the recipients were intended to be political and scientific cadres at or above the

5 Jiangxi sheng Nancheng xian Guanzhen si jiemei shouyi zhan fuzhanzhang Wu Lanxian, "Bu pa gan 'chou' shi, ganyu huan xintian" [Not fearing "shameful" things, courageously changing the world], in Henan sheng Nanyang zhuanqu kexue jishu xiehui, ed. *Quanguo nongye kexue shiyan yundong jingyan huiji* [Collection of national experiences in the agricultural science experiment movement], vol. 1, 17– 23 (N.p., 1966). I would like to be able to provide as interesting a discussion of the experience of collecting materials in China today as Craig Clunas offered in his essay on collecting posters in Beijing, "Souvenirs of Beijing: Authority and Subjectivity in Art Historical Memory," in Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald, ed. *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

commune level. The contents of such conference volumes, as it were, are frequently found in state archives throughout China and (the tantalizingly restrictive "neibu" label on this edition notwithstanding) also in properly bound books published by state presses and circulated as reading materials for general audiences, and especially for "educated youth."[6]

"Not Fearing 'Shameful' Things" is a celebratory report on a group of "housewives" (家庭妇女) *cum* peasant technicians. Their community had reportedly suffered an outbreak of swine disease in 1961. Folk veterinarians were charging high prices and failing to resolve the problem, so local housewife Wu Lanxian approached the party secretary and volunteered to study veterinary medicine herself. With his support, Wu and three other housewives received training at the county level and then returned to open the "Four Sisters Veterinary Clinic." Despite the valuable services they aimed to provide, they faced much resistance from fellow villagers who mocked the notion of women engaging in science, from family members who objected to the impropriety of women handling the breeding of swine, and from local folk vets and boar keepers who resented the Four Sisters for undercutting their business.

(This is one of those points where skeptical readers might ask whether I am "relying on unreliable sources." Must I litter my writing with scare quotes or use the word *reportedly* in every sentence to demonstrate my critical lens? Or can I expect the reader to understand that I am interested in knowing what story the Science and Technology Office sought to tell? While I recognize the need to distinguish between the voices of our sources and our own authorial voices, the constant pressure to distance ourselves from our shamefully propagandistic sources bothers me: it sometimes feels not that different from the requirement in PRC publications to place every instance of the term *Cultural Revolution* in quotation

6 For an example from an archive, see Beijing shi nongcun kexue shiyan xiaozu jiji fenzi huiyi wenjian [Documents from the Conference of Activists in Beijing Municipal Rural Scientific Experiment Groups], Beijing Municipal Archives, 15 November 1965, 2.22.31. For an example of a published "conference volume," see *Nongcun zhishi qingnian kexue shiyan jingyan xuanbian* [Selected experiences of rural educated youth in the scientific experiment movement] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1974).

marks—a perpetual reminder that it has been officially discredited, unlike, say, the term *Reform and Opening* [改革开放], which is not so marked.)

Of course, the report on the Four Sisters Veterinary Clinic is limited in many ways. It is formulaic, politically correct, and aims above all to provide an inspirational model of revolutionary technological practice. It thus cannot help demonstrate the degree to which state efforts to modernize veterinary medicine succeeded; nor can we necessarily even believe that the specific events it relates truly occurred. However, I am not ashamed of this source, for it does reveal a great deal: about state-endorsed values regarding science and modernity, about the social tensions that worried the state and without doubt produced at least some peasant resistance to new technologies, and about fundamental assumptions regarding the gendered division of labor in the countryside. The key to using this source is to analyze it as a state-produced narrative, with special attention to dialogue, and to see what emerges when we read both with and against the grain—or as Aminda Smith proposes in her contribution to this volume, when we first "map the grain" and then read against it.

Among the most frequently encountered components of stories like these are the derisive comments made by those who failed to respect the protagonists' revolutionary undertakings. Here, and in many other cases, highlighting the sexist language of conservative forces was an especially potent way of underscoring state revolutionary values. The narrator, Wu Lanxian, told of how she "took a bamboo switch and drove the boar out the door and to the crossroads where many villagers and small children surrounded me jeering." A child shouted, "Women driving boar studs lose face and are disgraced" (妇女牵猪牯，丢脸也丢丑). A man then sarcastically added, "Liberated women can do all sorts of feats, they can drive boar studs all through the streets" (妇女翻身真能干，牵着猪牯满街串). Later, after

the Four Sisters had proven themselves, the villagers' scorn changed to praise: "Women really are something, they can do anything" (妇女不简单，样样工作都能干).[7] The story of overcoming sexist attitudes about technical knowledge linked the state's technological modernization program with the transformation of social relationships, enhancing both the revolutionary credentials of new agricultural technologies and the scientific credibility of the attack on conservative values.

The conversations in this and similar propaganda pieces may well be faked, but on another level they represent a real dialogue between the vision of socialism the state wanted to convey and the state's understandings of its audience—officials struggling to simultaneously transform both material reality and political consciousness in the rural areas. And the propaganda spinners knew what they were doing. In the original Chinese, both the insults and the praise take the form of rhyming, rhythmic couplets. The language is deliberately evocative of patterns that resonate with people throughout many regions of China, urban and rural alike.[8] And so we gain from this source an appreciation not just for the revolutionary values that state agents sought to promote, but also for the strategy they adopted in inserting those values into specific speech forms with aesthetic power.[9]

If we look below the surface rhetoric and read against the grain, we find clues as to the duties women were expected to perform in rural China. When the protagonist first began providing vet and breeding services, her mother-in-law waved her finger in her face and shouted, "If you really aim to do this work, you will never darken my door again!" But Wu

7 Wu Lanxian, "Bu pa 'chou,'" 19-20.

8 Perry Link and Kate Zhou's study of such "shunkouliu" ditties offers an academic analysis of their widespread popularity in China, and specifically how they have been used in the Reform era to criticize the state. See "Shunkouliu: Popular Satirical Sayings and Popular Thought," *Popular China: Unofficial Culture in a Globalizing Society* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).

9 An anonymous reviewer of this article noted the distinctly different topolects spoken in the Jiangxi community where this story takes place, the Fujian community where the conference was held, and the city of Nanyang, Henan where the volume was published. How much effort state officials put into ensuring that the dialogue in such stories would be local enough to sound authentic but generic enough to travel across diverse linguistic communities is a fascinating question for further research.

Lanxian's determination won her over, and she soon changed her tune, saying, "Don't worry about the household chores. I'll cook the food and wash the clothes so you can focus on your work."[10] Here again, we do not need to believe that this conversation actually occurred, or that it hewed so closely to the classic narrative trope of tension and redemption in the relations between a woman and her mother-in-law.[11] However, and despite itself, the account reveals the diverse burdens women in Mao-era China were expected to shoulder, a form of gender imbalance that the state by no means explicitly endorsed but whose elimination this state-circulated article did not prioritize. Indeed, in falling back on such familiar discourse and narrative forms even in an account meant to contrast revolutionary and backward values, the Science and Technology Office demonstrated just how deep the assumptions about women's labor continued to run, not only in rural society but within state offices as well.

So, if we can read this source for evidence regarding state assumptions about rural divisions of labor, does it also speak at all to actual rural divisions of labor? This represents a still deeper interpretive layer—murkier, less certain, and, in some researchers' minds, of questionable value. One of the anonymous reviewers of this article when it was in draft form asked pointedly, "Why does the author so want to see in this source the 'plausibility' of reflections of social reality?" An honest question that deserves a direct answer: As much as I will defend the study of party rhetoric as significant in its own right, I am at least as committed to learning about lived experiences. That is, I stand with Jeremy Brown (not to mention the scholars who advised us both[12]) in valuing questions about what actually happened to Chinese people and what Chinese people actually did (see Brown's contribution to this volume). And here it is further worth noting Brown's temptation to put the phrase

10 Wu Lanxian, "Bu pa 'chou,'" 18.

11 To my ear, the narrative echoes some of the Song-dynasty materials that Patricia Ebrey analyzed in *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

12 Jeremy Brown and I were both students of Joe Esherick and Paul Pickowicz at the University of California, San Diego in the early 2000s.

what actually happened in quotation marks, and his ultimate decision not to. The pressure to distance ourselves from propaganda through the use of scare quotes is apparently mirrored by the pressure, at least in certain intellectual circles, to distance ourselves from a belief in social reality.

Fortunately, evidence from oral history testimonies can provide corroboration for the social reality of the gendered division of labor depicted in this document. However, even if I had no other sources on this subject, I would suggest that we provisionally accept the source as evidence that women were in fact performing most if not all of the cooking and cleaning labor in 1960s rural China. I would defend this interpretation based on the logic that it was not in the interest of state propaganda to emphasize the continuity of traditional and unequal gendered division of labor. This slipped into the background of the story because to present it in any other way would ring so false as to discredit the entire account.

Similarly, at this layer a picture also begins to emerge of social relationships inside and outside of the collectivist economy, and thus sheds some (albeit modest) light on what Alexander Day in his contribution to this volume calls “the emergence of categories and social forms from the real material limits and tendencies of rapidly changing PRC society.” Local resistance to gender equality and technological change was not just rhetorical, and it stemmed not just from patriarchal ideology. It also came in the form of boycotts and arose from the economic interests of marginalized people. The women in this account faced their greatest opposition from those whose business they threatened to undermine: local folk vets and boar keepers operating outside of the collectivist economy promised to terminate their relationships with any clients who tried the Four Sisters' services. Looking just at this source, should we believe that these relationships really existed? Again, I would argue provisionally yes, based on the logic of the propaganda. On the one hand, the ongoing Socialist Education

Movement did provide a context that favored criticism of non-collectivized economic relationships. On the other hand, the boar keepers were not the kind of people the state would prefer to identify as class enemies: traditionally they were poor men, often disabled, without the ability to support themselves through farming their own land.[13] In other words, if boar keepers were not presenting a real problem for state agents introducing new agricultural technologies, they would not be the best candidates for the role of villain in this story. The source thus strongly suggests that state agents had practical reasons to see their program of technological modernization as dependent on the transformation of traditional social relationships that had thus far survived the transition to collectivism.

Lost in Translation, Found in Analysis

The second source I will examine is of an entirely different type, but it similarly speaks to gendered divisions of labor and battles against patriarchy, and it similarly offers an opportunity to analyze dialogue. In 1973, a group of leftist scientists from the United States who belonged to the organization Science for the People (SftP) traveled to China to learn how science and technology worked in a socialist country. Among the artifacts from that trip is a small stack of audio cassette tapes documenting some of their many interviews with scientists, cadres, workers, and peasants. Reasons for discarding the tapes abound. To begin with, the quality of the audio is so low that many words and phrases are simply incomprehensible, and even when we can make out the words it is often unclear who is speaking. Moreover, none of the members of the delegation could speak Chinese; they relied on a translator to relay their questions and convey the responses of their interlocutors. Their itinerary was carefully planned and their visits choreographed by PRC state agents. Even with

13 Sigrid Schmalzer, "Breeding a Better China: Pigs, Practices, and Place in a Chinese County, 1929-1937 Breeding a Better China: Pigs, Practices, and Place in a Chinese County, 1929-1937," *Geographical Review* 92. 1 (2002): 1-22, 14-15.

perfect acoustics, the recording would not present anything worth analyzing as a Chinese "soundscape." Unreliable? Yes. So why did I pay to have these tapes digitized, and why did I spend hours fiddling with the files, playing them repeatedly, and transcribing every possible word?

To justify this investment I will share one of my favorite moments from the recordings. In a visit to Red Star Commune (where politically stalwart "foreign friends" Joan Hinton and Erwin Engst were then living), several members of SftP delegation had the chance to interview a peasant woman. After asking many questions about the woman's life and the material conditions of the commune (how long had they had glass windows, did all the homes have electricity, etc.), one of the women delegates asked, "What do you think still needs to be done to continue to liberate women?" The translator attempted to relay the question using the phrase "women's economic liberation" (妇女的经济解放), but the interviewee found this incomprehensible. He then turned back to the delegate, saying, "Actually, the words 'women's liberation' are not used here very often, so [chuckle] I'll keep trying."

The translator next tried the term "equality between men and women" (男女平等). Tellingly, the woman interpreted this to relate to participation in labor. She said, "We get paid for labor the same as men. What men can do we can do by ourselves." The delegate pursued the subject further: "Do you think it's important for men to do women's work as well?" The translator laughed still more openly as he began translating. The interviewee took it in stride, but again interpreted the question in terms of women being able to do just as much of the farm work as men. To her, a liberated woman was a woman who was able to pull vegetables alongside her husband. The delegate pressed again: "What about taking care of children, cooking, cleaning... Should men do that as well as women?" Here at last the woman

seemed to understand what the delegates wanted to hear.

> Peasant woman: We all take part in the labor. Whoever comes back earlier will do the cooking.
>
> ...
>
> SftP delegate: What do you do when some men refuse or find it hard?
>
> Peasant woman: [spirited voice] We just criticize them [laughter]... If the men refuse to cook, women also will refuse to cook. [lots of laughter]
>
> SftP delegate: Women in our country have a very hard struggle to get men to help us out. We do not have day care centers and nurseries for our children, as many of them.

What does this exchange capture? If we want to understand the experiences of rural Chinese women in the Mao era, the extensive oral history interviews conducted by Gail Hershatter, Gao Xiaoxian, Jacob Eyferth, and others provide far deeper and more reliable insight.[14] Even the "Four Sisters" propaganda piece probably offers better evidence about the actual division of domestic duties than does this portrait of rural life in a showcase commune sketched from a set of loaded, leading, and multiply translated questions.

What the SftP interview offers is something apparently quite different: a snapshot of diverse social actors with widely divergent perspectives and priorities attempting to make some type of connection. Having said that, Hershatter's admirable transparency often opens similarly revealing glimpses into the "crossings in mist" that occur when Western scholars,

14 Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory*; Gao Xiaoxian, "'The Silver Flower Contest': Rural Women in 1950s China and the Gendered Division of Labour," translated by Yuanxi Ma, *Gender and History* 18.3 (2006): 594-612; Jacob Eyferth, "Women's work and the politics of homespun in socialist China, 1949-1980," *International Review of Social History* 57.3 (2012): 365-91.

Chinese scholars, and Chinese rural women sit down to talk about the past.[15] Her analytical approach to oral history provides not only a fine-grained empirical understanding of the material conditions under which rural women labored, but also a sophisticated analysis of the workings of memory and the dialectics of oral history practice—tools that can help us unpack meaning even from the densely wrapped package presented by SftP's interview at Red Star Commune.

Unlike the "Four Sisters" text, the SftP tape records a "real" conversation. Nonetheless, it is still bound by the scripts each participant was ready to perform. The recording thus adds to our understanding of the vision of socialism that the state sought to project to the wider world; of the language available to rural Chinese women to communicate their political knowledge and perhaps also some of their lived experiences; and of the priorities of Western leftists visiting China in the 1970s.

Nineteen seventy-three was early for American delegations to be visiting China. Science for the People's special treatment arose because the members not only possessed valuable scientific knowledge but also held explicit political commitments that made them very likely to present Cultural Revolution-era China in a good light when they returned to the US. Chinese state agents cared deeply that these visitors appreciate what "liberation" had brought China, and they had much to say as well about improvements in the status of women since 1949. These themes and many others come through with great clarity and consistency in the book the SftP delegation wrote upon their return, and more broadly in the considerable corpus of travel literature produced by Western visitors to China during this period.[16] And

15 Hershatter borrowed the phrase "wrinkle in time" from science fiction author Madeleine L'Engle for her analysis of rural Chinese women's memories. Here I borrow "crossings in mist" from science fiction author Ursula Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* to capture the partial communication possible across the chasms that separate people with vastly differing experiences of the world. Gail Hershatter, "Forget Remembering: Rural Women's Narratives of China's Collective Past," in Lee Ching Kwan and Yang Guobin, ed. *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: The Politics and Poetics of Collective Memories in Reform China*, 69-92 (Stanford: Stanford University, 2007).

16 Science for the People, *China: Science Walks on Two Legs* (New York: Avon Books, 1974); Sigrid

yet, the phrase "women's liberation" produced a surprising derailment—it was close to the PRC state's own ideological commitments but still somehow off-script.

Part of the problem may have been that the SftP delegate asked what *further* needed to be done to liberate women; a truthful answer might have suggested dissatisfaction with current conditions and so posed political risks for the interviewee. But more seems to be going on here. Interviews with rural women in China today can certainly produce spirited discussion of struggles against sexism: we see a glimpse of this at the end of SftP's exchange and much more in oral history interviews by scholars and film makers.[17] However, I suspect that most of us have experienced a phenomenon similar to what the SftP delegate encountered, in which the interviewee's preoccupation with labor and renumeration crowds out the more ideological or value-oriented concerns of the interviewer. We learn from this push-pull process the deep importance, in both material and rhetorical terms, of the work point system in the every-day lives of Mao-era peasants.

The laughter recorded on the tapes also speaks volumes. Ruth Rogaski put her finger on something important when she called on scholars to "link those giggles" recorded in Mao's speeches on birth control "to the production of science."[18] During the 1970s, Americans traveling to China often took the laughter they encountered as evidence of widespread cheerfulness—a refutation of the grim portrayals of Chinese society dominant in the Cold War US. In part, no doubt, their perception stemmed from an auditory version of the rose-colored glasses phenomenon, but it also betrays a lack of understanding of the cultural significance of laughter among the people they were interviewing.[19] To a researcher with

Schmalzer, "Speaking about China, Learning from China: Amateur China Experts in 1970s America," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 16.4 (December 2009): 313-352.

17 See, for example, Carma Hinton, dir. *Small Happiness: Women of a Chinese Village* (Long Bow Group, Inc., 1984).

18 Ruth Rogaski, "Addicted to Science," *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences* 42.5 (Nov., 2012): 581–589, 588.

19 Sigrid Schmalzer, "Speaking about China," pp. 334-45.

experience living and working in China, the audio recordings preserved by Science for the People suggest a very different interpretation. In this and in other SftP interviews, laughter typically accompanied politically awkward moments. For example, when members of the SftP delegation interviewed insect scientist Pu Zhelong, he frequently chuckled as he discussed peasant participation in scientific decision making. Based on other sources, I am confident that Pu Zhelong in fact had a deep respect for peasant knowledge and a genuine commitment to peasant participation in science. However, the intensity of the politics surrounding peasant-scientist relations in 1973 China, combined with the uncertainties produced by transnational exchange with Western leftists (who were on the one hand partners in global struggle, and on the other hand culturally bizarre and sometimes ideologically shaky), made such topics distinctly awkward. Similarly, the laughter in the recording at Red Star Commune points to a profound sense that difficult questions were being broached across uncharted cultural and political gulfs. That said, the laughter toward the conclusion of the excerpt sounds freer, and I interpret it as a moment where both sides felt they had reached a shared political and even personal understanding.

Beyond the PRC state's interests and rural women's voices, the tapes speak most loudly to the SftP delegates' own political priorities and commitments. It is significant that the exchange ended with the SftP delegate voicing a criticism of gender relations and the splitting of household labor in the United States. While the SftP delegates had a genuine interest in Chinese people's experiences in revolution, the political context of women in the US loomed very large, setting the terms of "liberation" and framing the significance of rural Chinese women's experiences. At the end of the day, SftP's mission in China was to bring back a story of revolution that could inspire radicals, including feminists, in the US.

As a final layer of analysis, I have had several reasons to consider my own

preoccupation with these tapes. For one thing, I am involved in the newly revitalized Science for the People movement, so anything related to the original organization is interesting for me—and this commitment has grown in the Trump era, when most people seem to be choosing between two positions that both SftP and the Mao-era state would have found untenable: either to reject science outright or to defend it as "apolitical." Moreover, while preparing a collection of diverse sources to practice analyzing with graduate students, I stumbled on another opportunity for self-reflexivity. Juxtaposing the SftP recording with an excerpt from an interview I had conducted in 2012, I could not help but notice a shared tendency to press questions of gender equity in ways that clearly did not resonate with our informants. The similar clumsiness in the SftP delegation's interview and my own was humbling to contemplate. However, that demonstrated lack of resonance (the "crossings in mist"), together with the stories our informants insisted on telling, gave me new insight into how concepts of gender and sexism do and don't translate across space and time.

Sacrifice an Archival Document before Sacrificing a Peasant-Scholar's Reprint

The third source I will share is on the surface the most mundane: it is an ordinary published book from 2013, hardly what historians usually get excited about. A still more serious apparent strike against it is its promotional nature: like many other publications of its kind, it is designed to advance local economic interests by presenting a particular community as rich in cultural heritage, and thus worthy of state and commercial investment. Biased? Yes. And yet this book has become one of the most meaningful, door-opening sources for my research on the history of agricultural terracing in Mao-era China.

In October 2016 I attended a conference on agricultural heritage in She County, Hebei, on the eastern edge of the Taihang mountains. The conference attendees had the

opportunity to visit the dry-land terraces in the nearby village of Wangjinzhuang. As we climbed the steps of one spectacularly terraced hill, a local man accompanying the tour asked if he and I could become friends. He showed me a book he had co-edited; we had our picture taken together (Figure 1); and we shared contact information on the social media application WeChat. I was already becoming fascinated by the landscape and local terracing culture, and I was quickly deciding to pursue the history of terracing as a research project. Before the conference was over, I managed to secure a copy of the book co-edited by my new friend, Wang Linding.

She County is in the midst of a deliberate attempt at transformation from an industrial economy into one focused on eco-agricultural, historical, and heritage-based tourism. The county's terraces have gained recognition at the national level as a paramount example of China's "agricultural heritage" (农业文化遗产) site, and the county government is now pursuing similar recognition from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN. The academic community coalescing around the study of agricultural heritage represents an impressive interdisciplinarity, but the concept of "heritage" they employ has not come to terms with the significance of recent history. And for understandable reasons. The impetus to preserve "traditional" farming against the behemoth of agro-industry makes the recognition of modern developments problematic at best. And yet, Mao-era history is inscribed in Wangjinzhuang's terraces (figuratively, and also literally in the form of slogans carved into the stone retaining walls). Moreover, local people and county government agents alike are enthusiastic about having this history studied and propagated.

I began my study of Wangjinzhuang with little beyond Wang Linding's volume, which he co-edited with another villager and which had been published with the assistance of local officials. The book contains many interesting tidbits of local history and culture, but to

my eye the most exciting inclusion is the text of a January 20, 1971 document by the She County Revolutionary Committee's Command Department for Grasping Revolution and Promoting Agriculture, originally printed in the *Study Dazhai Digest*. The article, titled "Study Dazhai, Catch up with Xiyang, the Whole County Studies Wangjinzhuang," explained that since December, 576 local leaders from 167 brigades and 16 communes had come to Wangjinzhuang to receive training from the local party secretary and labor model, Wang Quanyou. They came carrying their own food, drink, and other necessities on their backs, much like the members of the Eighth Route Army during the Anti-Japanese War. The participants studied the building of terraces and reservoirs during the day, and in the evening they listened to Wang Quanyou talk about his experience learning from Dazhai how to be self-reliant, work hard, and struggle to "transform the face" of Wangjinzhuang. Participants testified to the impact of the training on their political thought and on their ability to help their own communities make similar progress.[20]

During a subsequent trip, in July 2017, I managed to locate the original document in the She County archives—a satisfying result to be sure, especially at a time when access to Chinese archives has become more difficult. I attribute this success not only to the kindness and generosity of local administrators but also to their active interest in developing tourism by encouraging research and dissemination of local history.[21]

The archival document carries the bold red-script heading *Study Dazhai Digest* and includes inked-in additions and corrections that add to the aesthetic appeal for any historian trained to appreciate archival materials. And yet, the "authenticity" of the document and the fact that it exists in a government archive by no means diminishes the significance of the

20 Wang Shuliang and Wang Linding, eds., *Wangjinzhuang* (Shexian: Shexian wenhua guangdian xinwen chubanju, 2013).

21 She County Archives (Hebei Province), 68.1.3: 31-32. Tremendous thanks to He Xinglian and Wang Liye of the She County Agricultural Bureau and to the staff at the She County Archives for all their help.

version included in Wang Linding's book. To the contrary, the 2013 version possesses layers of historical significance that the original document could not replace.

The contents of both versions testify to the Cultural Revolution-era vision of agricultural modernization through revolutionary self-reliance as exemplified by Dazhai, underscore the emphasis placed on knowledge circulation through the exchange of revolutionary experience and the emulation of labor models, and hint at the local history of the Eighth Route Army. However, the 2013 version further testifies to the meaning that recent history holds for local people and state officials today. The document appears in a chapter on the "Spirit of Quanyou," which further includes photographs of Wang Quanyou's heroic leadership when terracing the forbidding precipices of Yan'ao Gulch and moving testimonials as to his selflessness and his contributions to the "greening" of Wangjinzhuang through tree planting, water works, and soil conservation. The chapter is nestled among diverse offerings including legends about local people and geography, literature and art, descriptions of popular customs, and "red memories" (that is, accounts of Wangjinzhuang's place in revolutionary history). With respect to this last category, a historically layered analysis again proves essential, since the Eighth Route Army's achievements in She County have gained still more glory in the Reform Era because the young Deng Xiaoping was stationed there.[22]

The book must be seen as co-produced by popular and state actors: Wang Linding and his fellow co-editor would not have been able to publish it without the active interest and support of local state officials, and a team of people clearly contributed to its content. The combination of cultural heritage (including what in the Mao era would have been regarded as "superstitious" beliefs and practices), party history, and stories about local people had to

22 I encountered similar emphasis on She County's "red culture" in the county party secretary's remarks at the 2016 conference on Agricultural Heritage and in 2017 on a trip to a museum dedicated to the history of the 129th Regiment of the Eighth Route Army, among other places.

satisfy the vision that She County leaders are crafting for its future, which in turn must remain true to the larger vision dictated by the national leadership. But Wang Linding and his co-editor were responsible for collecting the core materials; their role in creating this artifact is thus highly significant. Moreover, the very fact that the state sees value in the promotion of local history and culture by "peasant-scholars" says something important about the continued (or perhaps, renewed) resonance of this concept so familiar from the Mao era.

As with any source, the document as reprinted in the 2013 book is best considered not on its own, but rather in connection with other sources. The interviews I was able to conduct in July 2017 confirmed what the document strongly suggested: the far greater emphasis on political over technological education in Wang Quanyou's training sessions.[23] When I asked what kinds of terracing methods were introduced in the sessions, I consistently heard that it was the "spirit" of Wang Quanyou and Wangjinzhuang—and by extension, Chen Yonggui and Dazhai—that was imparted rather than any specific terracing technologies. Moreover, according to one informant, the political lectures that Wang Quanyou delivered each evening were memorized from a script provided the day before by a party functionary dispatched from Handan City. If Wang Quanyou missed a beat, the party functionary was ready at his elbow to prompt him.

And yet we should not dismiss the significance of such scripts and slogans for local people. One woman I interviewed complained about the hardship of the terracing work she performed but testified sincerely as to the inspiration she received during the noon rest period from reciting Chairman Mao's quotations: they made her feel she "was not tired anymore." Moreover, many other aspects of the interviews suggest a strong resonance between the knowledge and values handed down over generations in Wangjinzhuang and the priorities

23 All interviews cited in this section were conducted by me with local assistants in group settings between July 11 and July 13, 2017.

promoted through Mao-era state propaganda. I was especially struck by the shared emphasis on protecting scarce soil and water resources and the shared commitment to frugality and self-sacrifice expressed in a local saying: "Sacrifice a Communist Party member before sacrificing a single sweet-potato sprout." This ditty, a variation on a theme more widely heard in those years, resonates strongly with an older local adage collected in the 2013 volume, “Let your mother starve to death before you eat next year’s seed.” According to Wang Linding, this jarring reminder of the realities of scarcity and survival dates from the Daoguang reign of the Qing dynasty, when a woman actually died of starvation rather than eat the grain stored for seeding the next crop. Local culture has clearly been influenced by state priorities, and on the other side state priorities have been shaped by (or the state has actively coopted) local culture.

The 2013 source gains still further significance when we understand more about Wang Linding. Wang's moniker on WeChat, often referenced also in ordinary conversation, is "农民秀才"—that is, "peasant-scholar." Wang has been passionate about local history since he was a young man, and his knowledge is genuinely respected by county-level administrators and academics alike. Based on a Republican-era hand-written geneology he collected, supplemented by his own knowledge of village families, he has reconstructed the history of the Wang lineage in Wangjinzhuang since its founding more than twenty generations ago. He has also preserved his family's land deeds dating back to the early Qing dynasty—land his grandfather sold to support his opium addiction. In a twist of fate, these financial losses led the family to earn the favored classification of "poor peasants" in 1955: the records of the classification—including the specifics of what his grandfather owned before property was collectivized—have also made it into Wang Linding's collection of what Brown and others have termed *grassroots archives*. His preservation of such important

historical records, along with his hard work publicizing Wangjinzhuang's history, is what makes Wang Linding not just a "peasant scholar" but more specifically a local historian; understanding Wang Linding's role in his community and the significance the past holds for him is what makes the 1971 document as it appears in his book a richer source than the archival record offers. As the term *grassroots archives* suggests, it is not just the materials themselves (which may not be different from officially collected materials), but the social contexts of their collection, preservation, and propagation, that should matter in our analysis.

Finally, this source presents another opportunity for self-reflexivity, and specifically for recognizing the significance of the relationships that foreign scholars may form with the Chinese people whose history we study. These relationships are never simple, but rather fraught with the tensions of unequal power relations, cultural differences, and conflicting gender norms. From the first act of posing for a photograph together, possibilities for misunderstanding, objectification, and exploitation emerge. And yet, no foreign scholar (and few Chinese scholars either) gets far in China without risking these entanglements, which may go beyond “crossings in mist” into the realm of personal discomfort or danger.[24]

Wang Linding was not able to give me a copy of his book the first time we met (a member of the county Propaganda Bureau provided it to me in his stead), but the book figures prominently in the photograph taken of us on that day. As WeChat friends, he and I began sharing photographs and short notes about happenings in our families and communities. And on my second trip, Wang gave me two presents. One was a Sprite bottle filled with millet he had grown on his own terraces using organic fertilizer: this is the good stuff typically grown for family and friends, for quality rather than quantity, and thus provided me with a highly material appreciation for this aspect of local agricultural history. The second was a notebook dedicated to me and inscribed with a short poem—a gift tradition

24 Schneider et al, forthcoming

that is familiar to me from the similarly inscribed notebooks (some empty, some full or half-full) that date from the Mao era, were typically exchanged by students and scholars, and today can be purchased at flea markets. The friendship and professional relationship that Wang and I have formed is thus a part of history even as it is producing historical knowledge. It would not exist apart from the active efforts of the She County government to promote heritage tourism; it is shaped by deep, complicated, historically layered, reinvented, and renegotiated understandings of intellectual friendship across cultural contexts; and it is playing an active role in the way each of us is participating in the production of knowledge about Wangjinzhuang's recent past.

Layering, Self-Reflexivity, and the Social Production of Knowledge

What are the benefits of moving beyond bias in our approach to historical sources? The sheer number and variety of usable sources is the most immediate benefit. Libraries, bookstores, journal and newspaper databases, archives, flea markets, the bookshelves of people we're visiting (to the extent decency allows), online used book markets, blogs and other web materials, social media, interviews and casual conversations, and our own photographs and journals all become valid places to find materials for historical inquiry.

The sources themselves also become more interesting. Conducting a layered analysis of the sources means considering the contexts of their production and circulation. Explaining those contexts for every source would get in the way of our narratives. However, the contexts should at the very least inform our analysis, and in many cases sharing the contexts and our reasoning will greatly add to the richness of the stories we tell. Who produced the sources and for what audience? What did the producers intend to communicate? What linguistic, visual, formatting, or other strategies did they employ, and what is significant about those

choices? Do the producers protest too much (e.g., do they reveal tensions by attempting too forcefully to deny them)? What evidence do incidental details in the sources provide on questions beyond the scope of the producers' interests? How do the sources echo earlier sources, and what echoes are found in later sources? Whose hands have the sources passed through, and what new layers of significance have they accumulated in the process? How did we find (or even help produce) the sources, and to what extent is our role significant in the meaning the sources now hold?

Once we start making a layered analysis central to our methodology, not only do we find uses for the quirkiest or most ephemeral sources, but the most apparently dry and straightforward sources gain new meaning. Statistical yearbooks become not just repositories of more- or less-reliable numbers, but also windows into the analytical categories their creators used to make sense of the world, along with clues as to institutional networks and circuits of knowledge—that is, they offer insight into what Alexander Day in this volume calls the "dialectical relationship between form and content." The signed copy of a "framework-laden doorstop devoid of footnotes" on the China Dream that Brown's colleague ceremoniously gave him becomes a source for understanding the complicated mix of academic and political pressures and opportunities facing our Chinese colleagues, along with an artifact in the history of transnational scholarly friendships.

A layered analysis also permits us to pursue, without fearing accusations of gullibility, an inquiry into what the producers of a source intended their readers to learn from it. I believe this is part of what Smith means when she says, "Before we attempt to read against the grain, we must map that grain." It is similar to the rule I ask my students to follow when interpreting propaganda sources: "I want you to *see* the source before you *see through* it." In the example I shared above, when we *see* the recurring motif of sexist villagers in propaganda

narratives about the rural scientific experiment movement, we recognize the significance of the connection between science and social revolution for party ideology. In Smith's account, when we *see* the mass line, we recognize that it always, unapologetically, contained a profoundly authoritarian rationale.

Finally, a layered approach invites, or even demands, self-reflexivity. When Matthew Johnson (in this volume) points to the "shared theories of causality [that] amount to meta-rationality of what actors, actions, and outcomes matter," he immediately follows with, "To whom do they matter? Why do they matter?" For his part, Jake Werner urges us to avoid succumbing to that "dream of modern scholarship, that the subjectivity of the observer would be removed to secure the objectivity of the fact," since the subjective inevitably "finds expression elsewhere and in ways that move us further from understanding the history than would bringing it to awareness and confronting it directly." I never want my writing on China to become mere navel-gazing: like Jeremy Brown, I am committed to keeping *Chinese people* at the center of Chinese history. And yet, when we adopt a self-reflexive position and make visible the dialectical processes through which researchers and historical actors produce questions, concerns, and categories, we come to clearer and more honest understandings of why certain things matter and to whom.

With self-reflexivity, perhaps especially feminist self-reflexivity, comes a recognition of relationships. In 1994, I was twenty-two years old in a Chinese town newly popular among backpacker-tourists. A young woman approached me offering her guide services and her friendship. My American desire to be independent and three years of Chinese language classes made me almost too proud to accept. Fortunately, I made the right choice: after a quarter-century of letter writing, visits to her home, and travels together, I cannot think of a decision with more profound consequences for my connection to rural China. In 2016, when

Wang Linding asked if we could become friends, I overcame my initial reluctance by reminding myself why I got into this game to begin with. Knowledge is a social product; friendships are fundamental.