



LUND UNIVERSITY

Doing PRC Social History: On Research Methods, Sex, and the Decomposition of Paper

Schoenhals, Michael

2004

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Schoenhals, M. (2004). *Doing PRC Social History: On Research Methods, Sex, and the Decomposition of Paper*.

Total number of authors:

1

General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Doing PRC Social History: On Research Methods, Sex, and the Decomposition of Paper

A presentation in the
Scottish Centre for Chinese Studies
Research Seminar Series 2003/04
The University of Edinburgh
School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures (Asian Studies)
7 May, 2004

MICHAEL SCHOENHALS
Lund University, Sweden

In his classic 1967 work *The Practice of History*, Cambridge historian G. R. Elton wrote as follows: “Ideally the student should never consider less than the total of the historical material which may conceivably be relevant to his inquiry. Though in many circumstances this will be an impossible counsel of perfection, it remains the only proper ambition. One of the demands embodied in it can, in any case, always be observed: the historian must know the range and type of sources available to him, and he must have done his utmost to learn what has been written in and around the topic with which he is concerned.” Today, I take my cue from Elton. Ideally, I want to discuss with you “the total of the historical material conceivably relevant” to your inquiries—all of it. In view, however, of how long that might leave us all sitting here, I will not aim that high. What I intend to do is address some hands-on issues relating to what Elton called the “range and type of sources” currently available to those of us who are interested in, or expect one day to write, PRC *social history*, loosely defined. I want to discuss with you not so much “what has been written in and around” this subject, which actually is not as much as one might perhaps believe. Rather, because it is of more immediate relevance to you as students, I want to focus on what now can be, yet so far hasn’t, been written.

Prior to the 1990s, and to some extent still, students (and here I am using the term inclusively to refer simply to all of us who study, be it for a living or not) of the history of PRC society were highly dependent on (1) secondary sources and (2) interviews. This held true almost regardless of precisely what it was we were interested in. Carefully edited, neatly printed, highly selective collections of archival material from the early years of the PRC had become available on some topics. In some local archives, materials post-dating the 1949 divide were no longer entirely off-limits to foreign students (cf. *CCP Research Newsletter*, No. 8, Spring 1991, pp. 29–45). Possible interviews inside China were no longer *only* of the kind those of us old enough to have been there in Mao’s lifetime

remember, when carefully coached informants under the watchful eyes of our minders repeated close to nothing but the official line.

Today, almost fifty-five years after the founding of the PRC, the situation we face is very different and has, which is very nice indeed, changed a lot for the better. Perhaps one reason is simply the fact that more time now separates us (and the Chinese Communist Party) from whatever politically sensitive and historically significant events did occur in the 1950s and 60s. An official moving 30-year timeline separating “present” from “history” has been defined. It appears in state regulations guiding the declassification of archival materials, we know, and we also suspect that it is used as a rule of thumb by China’s public security sector to assist in deciding which foreigner is a mere nosy historian, and which foreigner just might be a “spy.” Search for and leave China with the truth and not mere propaganda about something that happened in, say, 1966 and in principle you’re merely a damned good historian, someone your colleagues in Beijing or Shanghai may even salute. Search for and attempt to leave China with the real story behind what happened in Tiananmen Square only fifteen years ago and, well, you might on the other hand be in big trouble...

The major change that has taken place in the last ten or so years and the one that gives me something to talk about today has to do with the relaxing of controls over primary sources. What I have in mind here—when I say “sources”—are original archival, ex-archival, and ephemeral textual material from the years, roughly, 1949 to 1974. In significant quantities, it is now, for the first time, available to foreign students. What this means for all of us is that, assuming we have the training that makes it possible for us to actually make use of it, we can move beyond the kind of research that always had us depending on a pre-selection of sources carried out by some arm of the PRC state. Yes, you may say to yourself, but aren’t we still dependent (in archives for example) on what the state has chosen to preserve and *declassify* or not? You are right, but not entirely. The difference, as I hope to be able to illustrate soon with a few examples, is real.

I mentioned training making it possible for us to actually use the material. I have nothing fancy in mind here, simply two things: the first is a very good ability to read Chinese handwriting, handwriting of every conceivable variety and quality. In Sweden, physician’s signatures and what is scribbled on prescriptions are sometimes held up as the finest examples of illegibility; one of the first things I discovered as I set out to read a discarded original 1970 case file about a corruption and embezzlement scandal involving a pharmacy employee in Jintan county, Jiangsu province, was that Chinese physician’s handwritings are just as bad. Here you will have been taught, as part of your Chinese language training, how to read and write proper *hanzi*, with all the right strokes in all the right places. That is the elementary part. Once your interests advance to a point where they make you want to pick up just such a case file or attempt to decipher the diary notes of a teenage “sent down youth” from the mad years of the Cultural Revolution, a diary

that he or she perhaps never intended anyone else to read (and understand), you also need to become a master at *hanzi* that are more like cipher than anything else. Training, in this respect, comes only through practice, and a lot of it. It's like Chairman Mao put it once, "You learn to swim by swimming!" and though "the water may at first feel cold, but once you've become used to it, it feels warmer!"

The second important thing to be aware of and ultimately master are contextual matters, including above all the *conventions* that apply to what you will be looking at and for. This is slightly less elementary and more intellectually taxing than merely memorizing variant handwriting styles. What I have in mind is roughly the following: in order to be able to not just read but truly "understand" your sources, to interpret them with something approaching sophistication, you must have a grasp of context. Sometimes (very often, to be honest) what is important in a source is not merely what is said, but *how* it is being said or—if worse comes to worst—the fact that it's *not* being said (where you've come to expect it to be). In primary sources, as distinct from secondary sources (including convenient, annotated, printed collections), this all assumes dimensions we may never even have thought about before. As the naïve outsider-observer, we may at first not realize that something is amiss with a particular self-criticism written by a sad condemned bourgeois Rightist and, as far as we can make out, all but brimming over with seemingly "politically correct praise" of the party, Mao Zedong, and socialism. But as we become gradually more expert, we learn to spot it, and are prepared for it when it suddenly becomes an issue, a few miscellaneous documents later: the Rightist had, on this occasion, and in this context, written on the wrong kind of paper, namely ordinary stationery on which the pre-printed lines are in red! And in the hyper-politicized context of the "cleansing of the class ranks" movement of 1968, from which the source I have in mind dates, that was wrong, inappropriate, something that had to be explained and apologized for. With what right did an enemy of the people defile the bright red colour of revolution? It was not by coincidence, comrade, that the lines on the kind of paper (otherwise identical) used in labour camps and PRC prisons had lines in black. My only purpose in citing this example is to draw your attention to the fact that the information contained in the kind of sources I want now to turn to is sometimes invisible to those who lack the right training. If and when convention dictates that a person is to be referred to as a "great, great" leader, simply calling him "great" may have implied that he was not great, that he was but an ordinary fallible mortal. And that, at one time (but not at just any old time) would have been very inappropriate conduct! Someone should write a paper on sins of omission in Mao's China!

The broad categories of new—to us as foreign researchers interested in society and politics, that is—primary sources I shall be focusing on today are three in number. They are to be found in abundance in, but far from exhaust, what constitutes the most remarkable repository of information on ordinary (and not so ordinary!)

people's lives in Mao's China there is, namely the dossiers kept on countless millions of urban Chinese as part of what has been called a "dossier dictatorship"—the system whereby "the organization" under Mao exercised social control through confidential records on ordinary citizens' actions and utterances, private and public. The broad categories of sources are:

- Autobiographies
- Confessions
- Informer's statements

In each instance, I shall attempt to convey to you a sense of what these sources are, their historical context, how we may want to use them, and what may be problematic about them. Note that for ethical reasons, I am withholding or concealing the real names of the individuals—with the exception of well-known public or historical figures—mentioned in the sources.*

AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Though one might at first not have expected it, auto-biographies and autobiographical sketches are in fact everywhere in the dossiers. They may be missing from the basic 1950s worker's employee file from a small-size factory, but they are certainly a must in every cadre's file, not to mention in police files or so-called "special case files." An official manual from the early 1980s on what a personnel file (*renshi dang'an*) is meant to contain—be it a cadre's file, a worker's or a student's—lists autobiographies as the standard item no. 2 in such files, after the "listing of personal details" (*juli*) and preceding an additional eight other categories, the final one being as one might have expected, "other materials" defined as anything of potential "reference value" to "the organization." (See Wang Faxiong, *Renshi dang'an guanli gailuan (An introduction to personnel file management)* (Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 1984), pp. 15–16)

In the 1950s, shortly after it had come to power and at a point in time when the way in which it intended to rule the country was, to many ordinary Chinese, a novelty, the CCP drew up and distributed to those concerned a set of instructions on what a proper autobiography ought to contain—an autobiography, that is, of the kind that the CCP hoped would fit its ambitious class analysis of Chinese society and attempt at social transformation. In early pre-printed forms for writing one's autobiography, these instructions are reproduced on the inside of the front cover. One of the things they

* At the time of preparing this paper in 2004, I was not yet familiar with the work of Sheila Fitzpatrick on the "fashioning of 'file selves' in Soviet life." Her book *Tear off the Masks: Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) contains a wealth of information and insights from which I have since benefitted. I have, however, chosen not to make any retroactive changes to the paper as I prepare (in September 2006) to "put it out on the web."

stress is that no-one should feel constrained by them: by far the most important thing, in the end, is that one's autobiography include

everything that the party and the state should, and indeed must, be made aware of. It should be faithfully put in writing—especially matters of crucial political and historical import, all of which must be faithfully and in their entirety spelled out in a way that is both clear and reliable.

As one would have expected, over time, the definition changed of what that elusive “everything” of “political and historical import” really was. An entire apparatus eventually evolved that at times seems to have done little else than check, double-check and check again that nothing was being held back. The two other broad categories of sources referred to earlier—the confessions and the informer's denunciations and accusations—do in this respect relate closely to the autobiographies in that they are the almost inevitable “correctives” and “challenges” to them.

What, then, did the CCP's instructions expect one to bring up in one's autobiography? Here are some examples:

- How did your family's economic situation change before, during, and after the revolution, and what is it at present?
- Account for the principal past and present members of your family, their names and occupations, political affiliations and attitudes, religious affiliations. What influence have they had on you? Where are they now? What are your relationships like?
- What are the principal social relationships that your family and you as an individual have? Account for their names and occupations, political affiliations and attitudes. What influence did they have on you in the past? Where are they now? What are your current relationships like?

Where a surviving dossier (say, that of an illiterate factory worker) does *not* contain an autobiography proper, information like that solicited here will nonetheless have been asked for and be present in some other, simpler variant, e.g. a point-by-point, item-by-item listing (the “listing of personal details” that was meant to be item no. 1). To list one's relatives and “principal social relationships” or connections was something one would in fact be asked to do repeatedly in Mao's China. The ensuing lists survive in any number of places. So, for example, do we find one in the dossier of a middle school teacher in Zhenjiang municipality, Jiangsu province, at the beginning of a 14-page form from 1952 labelled “Summary of My Ideological Remoulding Studies” (*sixiang gaizao xuexi zongjie*). We find one in the “Convict's Entry Registration Form” (*yafan rusuo dengjibiao*) of a one-time translator for the American F.B.I.S. on Okinawa who in 1959 was sentenced to ten years of hard labour for alleged counter-revolution. We find one in the 1962 employment registration forms of workers in a knitting mill in Nanjing. And we find one in the so-called “Cadre Class Status Determination Registration Forms” (*ganbu hua jieji dengjibiao*)

filled out—“in triplicate,” please, “if you are a cadre managed by the provincial authorities,” so the instructions state—by a deputy section chief in the Jiangsu Agricultural Machinery Corporation at the height of the Socialist Education (aka “Four Cleanups”) Campaign in 1964.

In narrative autobiographies proper, as one can imagine, the amount of space devoted to, for example, one’s economic situation prior to and since “revolution” may have varied tremendously. In the case of some former members of the Chinese bourgeoisie, for example, one encounters the most remarkable and hard-to-follow listings of constantly changing employment circumstances as families move from one end of China in a futile search for safety and normalcy and away from warlords, Japanese invaders, KMT tax collectors, and advancing communist armies. In the case of the poor and the downtrodden, the story told is again different. In the title of today’s seminar I promised you sex: let me begin with a few passing references to this subject as it may relate to one’s economic circumstances. Here is the moving tale of a Nanjing textile worker, as put on paper in 1953:

My older brother had gone off to become a soldier while I stayed behind and worked as a prostitute. Every day I was able to give my father 20 cents to live on... I had managed to break my opium habit, but [in 1949] I started again. Within two months, I had sold all my clothes. I had nothing to put on and looked more like a ghost than a human being. Since nobody would have me and I had a [venereal] disease, the manager [of the brothel] refused to keep me on any longer. I was out on the street with nothing to eat and nowhere to live. Then came Liberation... I was caught stealing a number of times [and finally] I was sentenced to three years of labour reform.

Eventually she got married and found employment, as her dossier reveals. In 1959, she and her husband, who was however unemployed, lived on her total monthly income of 38 Yuan. The Cultural Revolution was a very difficult time for both of them. Finally, in 1974, she retired on a worker’s pension.

In an absolute majority of cases, the life stories told by ordinary workers turn out to be ones in which the CCP organization or the state in the end are unlikely to have taken much interest. The stories rarely intersected with politics in a way that seemed to matter. The same, however, cannot be said about the life stories of cadres, be they CCP members or not. The party’s instructions to the auto biographer continue with a request for information on what one did “prior to the revolution” and the names of any

people that might be able to verify that information. Specifically, if this was relevant, one was asked to provide the following information:

- What motivated you to join the revolution and/or join the Communist Party? What work-related activities (including studies) have you taken part in since? List times, places, organs, positions, as well as the names and positions of persons able to verify the information provided.

Also asked for under the overall rubric of what one had been doing with one's life so far was an account of "changes in ones ideology experienced in the course of the revolution."

Remembering and accounting for discrete, concrete events such as the death of a relative or one's own entry into the CCP is one thing; explaining "changes in one's ideology" is something rather different. Which is where what we may want to think of as discursive conventions become important. All of these autobiographies were written with a very specific audience in mind, under very specific historical circumstances, and not in any sense out of a sudden spontaneous impulse to commit to paper ones memories of a life for the revolution. Whoever the original audience may have been, it certainly never included historians, Chinese or foreign. But just because it does not reflect the *same* discursive conventions that we might today confront in an interview situation, this of course does not mean that it is devoid of such conventions of a different sort. It is up to us to train ourselves to see and see through them.

So, for example, one's own experienced reality, on its own and by itself, may not always appear to suffice to make the point about meaning that one wants to make. Many years ago the US president and former actor Ronald Reagan was asked to talk about what his experiences in WW2 had meant to him: apparently, if my own memory serves me right, he ended up confusing some things that he may or may not actually have experienced himself with parts he had really acted in some war movie or other. (This according to newspaper reports at the time.) In the case of a public person like Ronald Reagan, such accidents may be easy to spot, but what about our Chinese autobiographers about whom we rarely know anything other than what they themselves share with us, entirely by chance? What is, for example, going on in the following extract from the autobiography of one Nanjing city district CCP secretary, written in 1968, and purporting to describe his feelings and more upon entering the big city for the first time in his life, as a young Liberation Army cadre nearly two decades earlier:

We arrived first in Suzhou, then in Shanghai. I had for a long time been active in the countryside, so when we entered these large cities I was overcome by a sense of victory and joy. Everything seemed to new and strange to me, I wanted to go everywhere and take it all in. At the time, the regulations of our armed forces were very strict: my being a confidential clerk meant that I was not allowed to go

out on my own. At the same time, I also found it very hard to get used to city life. Everything was so inconvenient, including going for a crap or taking a piss. Sometimes when we were able to venture out as a group, I came face to face with the bright lights and the big city, and I simply could not get used to it. I really felt the countryside was superior.

In some sense, the experience and the feelings described here are of course true. But in another, they could well be a kind of unconscious fictionalization, the borrowing of a proven successful script. In 1968, they would have been only too familiar to all Chinese from the 1964 blockbuster movie *Sentries Beneath the Neon Lights*, in which a group of PLA soldiers from the countryside experience “liberating” Shanghai in precisely this fashion.

Nothing in the autobiographies of cadres and CCP members was more important than the information concerning one’s political past. Here the instructions were very precise and uncompromising. Had one ever been a member of or worked for reactionary political parties and organizations? Had one ever done anything that was detrimental to the interests of the people? A string of detailed questions followed. And if one was a member of the CCP, had one

ever withdrawn from the party? Ever withdrawn from the revolution? When? Where? For what reason? For how long? How did you behave subsequently? Who is able to verify this? How did you again find the party, reactivate your membership or enter the party anew? How did you come to rejoin the revolution? Were you investigated, and if so when, where, and by what unit? What was the result?

Even more important, one senses, because even more space is devoted to it in the instructions to the auto-biographer, was information concerning arrests or time spent in enemy prisons and correctional facilities. Had one ever surrendered to the enemy? Betrayed the revolution? Tell! Tell all!

With some regularity, usually during major political campaigns, dossiers became subject to in-depth examination and autobiographies were checked and re-checked for possible “inaccuracies.” The document spelling out the results of the investigation of cadre X or CCP member Y would eventually find its way into his/her dossier. Sometimes, in addition, a separate file would be held by the party organization containing only copies of these re-examinations, possibly to document the work of the re-examining body. What the documents provide are the “readings” of the autobiographies at the time by their intended/ratified audience. These readings are, as one would expect, very different from what they might be today. They provide some of the much-needed context, as the following example is meant to illustrate.

A special file of typed-up reports on the re-examination of verdicts passed on cadres with the municipal administration of Beijing in the course of the Cultural Revolution tells the story of, among hundreds of others, one Ma x x, male, Muslim, born in 1923, who had begun working for the communist party in June 1949 and eventually was made a party member in March 1953. In the course of an inquiry into Ma's past, the discovery was made that his autobiography was far from "truthful." Apparently, he had joined the KMT in March 1946, while in an area of Hebei province then controlled by the communists. The typed-up report (handwritten last-minute additions and crossed-out passages as in the original) states:

After the liberation of Beijing, Ma x x withheld the truth about his ~~reactionary status~~ *the aforementioned matter*. He created a false personal history and after having wormed his way into the revolutionary ranks wormed his way into the party as well. Only in the course of the Great Cultural Revolution movement did the matter come to light of his having joined the KMT underground and held a post as member of one of its county *party* district sub-branches.

The conclusion of the original report illustrates the divergence of opinion that evidently existed among those who were to looking into his case and attempting to formulate an opinion on it:

The aforementioned matter is recorded in original enemy and puppet archives, in addition to which there is collateral evidence. ~~It can be regarded as certain that~~ Ma *indeed* joined the KMT underground. *According to the enemy and puppet archives, Ma was a member of one of its party district sub-branches. As far as the matter of his having been a party district sub-branch member is concerned, it turns out he was assigned to this post by his superiors but investigations show that Ma actually never assumed it. During the period in question, Ma is not found to have carried out any major criminal acts. His attitude is bad.* On the basis of research and ~~in accordance with the spirit of point 2 in paragraph 2 of the Supplementary Explanations by the CCP Centre's Ten-Member Group Governing the "Temporary Regulations Spelling Out Policy Demarcations for Explaining and Disposing of Counter-Revolutionary Elements and Other Bad Elements"~~ which refers to "elements engaged in the clandestine recruitment of members into reactionary parties and political organizations and engaged in counter-revolutionary destructive activities in our liberated areas. Elements of this kind should be treated and punished as counter-revolutionary

~~elements. Those who allowed themselves to be recruited into the underground reactionary parties and political organizations and took part in their underground reactionary activities should be treated and punished as counter-revolutionary elements.~~—*in accordance with the relevant regulations formulated by the Ten-Member Group*, Ma x x should be designated a historical counter-revolutionary and dealt with as a contradiction among the people by being expelled from the party and by being demoted two administrative ranks.

To summarize, what the autobiographies and the official investigations and examinations sometimes attached to them provide us with as historians is a considerable amount of information not really available anywhere else. Obviously, they tell us something about the lives of “ordinary people” that—of this we can be certain—would hardly find its way into any memoir or biography appearing today, inside or outside China. Less obviously, but as I have tried to show, they also tell us what no other source does about the relationship between individuals and the local state at the time, in the confrontation between the CCP’s theories of social transformation and revolutionary change and the representation of reality that auto-biographers actually put on paper. But, to repeat a point made earlier, they do this in a political and rhetorical context that it is imperative for us as historians to grasp. As Jochen Hellbeck said about autobiographical texts from Stalin’s Soviet Union very similar to the ones just dealt with, “self-narratives can be fully understood only if situated in the context of historically specific conventions of how to conceive of oneself and present oneself.” (“Working, Struggling, Becoming: Stalin-Era Autobiographical Texts, *The Russian Review*, No. 60 (July 2001), p. 345.

CONFESSIONS

Let me turn now to confessions and admissions of wrongdoing. These were documents produced under duress, sometimes written, sometimes spoken and recorded by someone else. Even more so than in the case of the autobiographies just dealt with, they must be read with a thorough understanding of context—social, political, personal, rhetorical, and what not. If ever there was a historical source in which things aren’t mentioned just “by coincidence” then it is this one.

The first thing that has to be said is that much of that which was being “confessed to” in Mao’s China and then found its way into people’s files had limited political substance. Life among ordinary people was, as one should expect, mostly about small things, localized, personalized problems. Politics only entered the picture, much of the time, as a *rhetorical* strategy that could more or less successfully be superimposed on the “actual events” in an attempt to explain, retroactively, their meaning. But, when it

did, it sometimes did so with a vengeance. Here is a quote from a real-life confession preserved in the file of an elderly Nanjing worker:

Admission of Criminal Guilt: On 10 August I suddenly had to shit in the middle of the night when it was all dark. As I went out the door I grabbed a newspaper and headed for the courtyard behind the factory where I shat. The newspaper had in it the image of and quotations from the Chairman. To have used it as toilet paper is my crime, a crime even bigger than heaven. For having been disrespectful of the Chairman, I must myself kowtow respectfully in front of the Chairman three times and go down on my knees, facing the image of the Chairman, admit my guilt and ask for punishment.

Thankfully, China has come a long way since. Something like this is no longer the raw material of political persecution, but rather that of jokes. Note this man's habit of starting a new line (a traditional way of showing respect) each time he mentions Mao Zedong, and also the fact that he actually never writes down Mao's name which leads one to suspect, possibly, some form of taboo, reminiscent of what had would have applied in imperial times to the name of the emperor, again perhaps motivated by respect (and fear?). (See Wang Yankun, ed., *Lidai bibui zi huidian* (Collected taboo characters from consecutive dynasties) (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1997))

The worker just quoted also had a history of what today would be called sexual misconduct, reflected in his file. Many of us who studied China back in the 1970s and 80s admittedly looked for—but were unable to find—information on what one might call the seamier side of society. The party media (as well as virtually all of the people we were in a position to interview) conveyed an image of something rather sex-less, crime-less and vice-less. What the confessions found in worker's files in particular end up doing is provide us, finally, with a powerful corrective to this, as it turns out, skewed image. I promised sex in the title of my talk: and it is in the confessions that we find it, and surprisingly much of it, mostly hinted at, but sometimes very explicit. Again, I am not going to quote the next passage merely in order to stimulate your imagination—I want to make a point of relevance to research and to our assumptions, those that we bring with us as we look at society under Mao. There was clearly only a tiny zone of privacy left to people at the time where politics in general did not penetrate and define or determine what took place. But this did not mean that a *specific* political movement (e.g. the anti-Rightist campaign, the Cultural Revolution, etc.) always amounted to the defining context. To put it differently, not everything that happens in 1968 happens as part of the

Cultural Revolution and should be dealt with as such. On the contrary, alternative fields, alternative chronologies unfold on a local level that may intersect with the Cultural Revolution but aren't necessarily part of it.

This quote is lifted from the file (a so-called special case file) compiled on a group of mostly younger workers in a Nanjing factory. Clearly these were not your finest representatives of the industrial proletariat; in fact, from the factory leadership's point of view, they were nothing but hooligans and petty criminals. For some reason, a rather convoluted one, explained in the material but not important here, the group was labelled the "Youth Choir." Here is one of the leaders of the "choir" confessing:

When the men in our counter-revolutionary group--the "Youth Choir"--got together, either we talked about how to give the factory leadership a hard time or we simply talked about the most vulgar things... Liu X X used to spend all his spare time out by the entrance to the female workers' lavatory and he would say things like: "We're paid less because we work in the rear of the plant, but each day we get to see a lot of women. Women who look like this; women who look like that--this place has really good fengshui!"... When he had night duty, he would sometimes ask me not to return home but keep him company and sleep in the plant. In the morning he would wake up, pull away the quilt, point at his hard-on and say: "What do you think? Think those women like my tool? None of you has one as big as mine!" I would say: "What's the point of having a big one? You'll just scare them off!" Sometimes when I wasn't paying attention he would crawl on top of me from behind. Each time, when I finally managed to shake him off, I would swear at him: "You horny bastard!" Now and then he would say things like: "Awgh! Life is really boring nowadays. What I want is for a woman to come around every morning for me to poke. I heard that in the past, in Shanghai, you could pay someone to supply you with women to look at and enjoy. They would strike all kinds of poses. Now that's all gone."

The file on the "Youth Choir" does not record a final decision on what actually happened to its members; only a request from their factory's leadership to the local police authorities that they be arrested, interrogated, and punished as "active counter-revolutionaries." The request is supported by the city district Revolutionary Committee's

industrial department by way of a comment (“*Agreed...*”) and the impression of its chop on the cover. One must assume that the police acted in the end, though what kind of punishment they meted out is not known.

It should be emphasized, then, that confessions like the two just cited are rather more common than ones that really touch upon serious political matters, be they cases of genuine dissidence or trumped up charges of “conspiring to overthrow the dictatorship of the proletariat.” Which is not to say that confessions of these latter kinds cannot be found in some files. None of them, of this I am convinced, better illustrate the lengths to which the “organization” was capable of going in order to secure the right *kind* of confessions—those that would prove that Mao Zedong, Lin Biao, Zhou Enlai etc. were “entirely correct” in their assessment of the political situation in China—than the early 1970s witch-hunt for the persons involved in the so-called “May 16th Conspiracy.”

According to a cadre with the CCP Discipline Inspection Commission, the witch-hunt targeted no less than ten million people nationwide (see *Wang Li fansi lu*, 2 vols. (Hong Kong: Star North Books, 2001), Vol. 1, p. 386). Senior party ghost-writer Wang Li (accused of being a mastermind of the “May 16th Conspiracy”) estimated in 1981 that it had involved the persecution of altogether three million people. In 1983, he reformulated his estimate to say that it led to the arrest of 3.5 million people (Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 1023). The embarrassing consensus among the CCP’s own historians today is that the particular “class enemy” that it sought to identify and purge had in fact been altogether non-existent. There never was a conspiracy in the first place.

As had been the case during the Spanish Inquisition, the people expected to confess to involvement in the “May 16th Conspiracy” were not told beforehand that this was what they were meant to confess to. In fact, the one thing that more than any other was seen as proof of the amazingly sinister, fiendishly clever, and extremely dangerous nature of the conspiracy was the apparent ignorance of even some of its core members of its very existence. That, in any case, is what one concludes from the accusations that followed. It took more than the usual amount of **carefully administered “persuasion”** by determined interrogators to make a suspect arrive at a “correct” understanding of the nature of his or her “crimes”. The final items in the massive dossier of one fairly well known “16 May element”—Wang Naiying, the wife of Lin Jie, an editor with *Red Flag*, the theoretical organ of the Party Centre—makes this abundantly clear. After having produced over a period of more than three years since her arrest in the autumn of 1967, pages upon pages of accounts of her every activity, her every relevant remark, her every everything of even the slightest possible interest to her interrogators, she was in December 1970 finally called upon to admit her guilt. Her first admission is the most telling one, ending as it does in the following way:

I was a follower of the 16 May counter-revolutionary bosses Zhou Jingfang et al. and was involved in a string of criminal 16 May counter-revolutionary activities, but prior to August 1967 when the Party Centre publicly exposed the counter-revolutionary 16 May conspiratorial clique, I did not know of the existence of the counter-revolutionary organization that was the 16 May, nor did I know of the existence of its counter-revolutionary programme, plans, and membership. Nor had I become a member of it. I am [therefore] unable to confess to being a core member (gugan fenzi) of the counter-revolutionary 16 May conspiratorial clique.

Needless to say, this confession of hers did not make the grade. Nothing is known about what exactly transpired during the next twenty-four hours, but on the following day she produced a new confession, this one ending in the following way:

... there are indeed huge numbers of exposure materials that show that I am a counter-revolutionary 16 May core member and extensive investigation and research has shown these materials to be reliable.

Finally, after yet another twenty-four hours and probably as a kind of formality—since the narrow, specific label “Counter-Revolutionary May 16th Core Member” was not one that had as yet found its way into the relevant laws and statutes governing counter-revolution and its punishments—she wrote a third and final confession which she ended in the following way:

I admit to being guilty of crimes and to being, myself, an active counter-revolutionary guilty of 16 May counter-revolutionary activities. I admit these things to the Party and to the broad revolutionary masses and ask of them to punish me. I am determined to sincerely mend my ways, forsake evil and do good, thoroughly remould myself, and become a new person.

Before you react to this last confession by saying that it strikes you as painfully predictable and formalistic, not to say dull, I must add something that further foregrounds some of the differences involved in using secondary, printed sources, and using this kind of first-hand material. Because, I discovered this myself in the process of my own translating and writing, in order to get the full spectrum of what goes on here one really has to confront the text not just aurally, but with the help of one’s visual, tactile, olfactory even, senses. How to do this lies outside the scope of today’s talk, but ultimately our difficult task as social historians attempting to make the past “come alive”

involves applying not just our factual knowledge—if I may call it that—but also our imagination, poetic skills, and capacity to empathize.

As I read Wang Naiying's confessions, I know, but she did not then, that her husband was being held in Qincheng maximum security prison north of Beijing on similar charges. He never really *had* a chance become the “new person” he may have wanted to be.

Informing Against...

As Robert Gellately noted as he looked back upon histories of Europe written in recent decades, “denunciations as a theme or topic of historical investigation was ignored by most social historians who studied history ‘from the bottom up’... For complex reasons, the many varieties of social history... did not focus specifically on the denouncers, but overlooked them.” (“Denunciation as a Subject of Historical Research,” *Historical Social Research*, Vol. 26 [2001], No. 2/3, p. 19.) His observation is even more true for the work social historians have done on the history of the PRC. Almost nothing has, to the best of my knowledge, been done specifically on the role that denunciations and of informing against others played in politics and in shaping society in Mao's China. Certainly no book is available in print comparable to, for example, Herbert Dohmen's and Nina Scholz's book *Denunziert: Jeder tut mit. Jeder denkt nach. Jeder meldet.* (Vienna: Czernin Verlag, 2003) about the informing against, predominantly, Jews in the capital of Austria during the years of the Nazi “Anschluss”. What this relative dearth of scholarly research should *not* lead one to assume, however, is that the practice was somehow not common. The contents of many a dossier suggest the opposite. We also have the late CCP Chairman himself endorsing the practice in the strongest possible terms: “For members of the masses to inform [against counter-revolutionaries] is very effective and should be encouraged on a grand scale” Mao Zedong remarked in July 1955, in the course of a conversation on how the *People's Daily* might best contribute to the “extermination of counter-revolutionaries.” “And you should write an editorial to further encourage the masses to inform,” Mao went on to suggest to the paper's editors (see *Mao zhuxi Lin fuzhuxi guanyu baokan xuanchuan de zhishi: Mao zhuxi zhishi (Chairman Mao's and Vice-Chairman Lin's instructions on newspapers and propaganda: Chairman Mao's instructions)* (N.p., 1970), p. 87).

As one would expect (human beings in different places in different times not being, in the end, all that different), the practice of informing against others was a controversial one, much as the CCP wanted to pretend otherwise in its propaganda. *When* this happened I do not know, but there quickly evolved a terminological distinction between the official term *jianju* (which kept its quasi-positive connotations as targeting, after all, greater or lesser enemies of the revolution) and references in ordinary language to people “passing on little reports” (*da xiao baogao*). Few were held, it appears,

in as much contempt locally as those who did the latter, which typically meant neighbours informing against neighbours, family members, even, informing against other family members. For the convenience of everyone involved, so-called *jianjuxiang* or special mailboxes for informant's letters were maintained in many workplaces and neighbourhoods.

We know little about how common the practice of informing against others was during “normal times.” We do know, however, that it was a regular part of political campaigns, in particular those that targeted economic corruption, waste, crime, etc. At the start of such campaigns, local authorities might even print up special forms for the purpose. The forms were sometimes combined with those meant to be used for self-criticisms and confessions, in which case they would have headings and sub-headings of the “cross out the not applicable” type: on line one it might say “[Name of campaign] Confession/Informant's Form,” while elsewhere on the form it might say “Name of person confessing/informing”. Additional information asked for would include the work unit, position, and “political circumstances” of the person confessing, of the person informing against someone as well as of that latter person. Of course, a lot of the time, denunciations were made on just any paper available, not excluding the back of “disassembled” cigarette packs and toilet paper.

As an illustration and for the sake of giving you a “feel” for what kind of texts we might be looking at here, let me give you four examples. The first is from a Nanjing construction company and dates from the winter of 1964. At the time, the company was in the midst of a campaign directed at graft, theft, and speculation. One local target of this campaign was a 41 year-old worker of poor peasant stock who was suspected of having embezzled 3.50 Yuan (equal to roughly 0.35 Euro). In the end, it turned out that he almost certainly had, but attempts were in the course of investigations also made to discover more “stuff” on the man and his family. Hence the following “letter of denunciation” on a specially provided form, from a colleague at work:

In 1961, in the general workshop of the 1 May Factory, I saw the son of Yang x x, called little Yang, at around six o'clock in the morning, stuffing firewood into a gunnysack in the general workshop of the 1 May Factory, maybe four or five times. Back then, workers weren't even able to buy a sack of kindling, so what was he doing making off with firewood at that early hour when the workers had not arrived for work? Had this been OK'd by materiel officer? Did he pay for it? You should ask Yu x x who handles these things in the 1 May Factory workshop.

At this point, I have not yet been able to determine on the basis of Yang's file whether or not this particular accusation "stuck." The actual physical quality of the paper in the file is part of the explanation—it is about to disintegrate and what is written on it is only partially legible. For what it is worth to a discussion of research methods, I want to add that it was most definitely not meant to be preserved or accessed by historians forty years after the event. It was to highlight problems of this practical nature that I added to the title of today's talk the reference to decomposing paper.

None of the examples here deal with that wicked specimen of humanity to which Mao had referred, the counter-revolutionary. Even in files in which the contents document political movements targeting counter-revolutionary activities specifically, the matter, behaviour or person being denounced is almost always trivial. Most of the time, it gets no more explicitly political than in this second example which dates from 1970 when the ongoing "one strike and three antis" campaign was intended as to crack-down on "counter-revolutionary destructive activities" and on "graft and embezzlement; profiteering; extravaganza and waste." It is preserved in the file of one Zhang x x, a Nanjing worker:

In August 1968, after [I had finished] eating [my] lunch, at around one o'clock, [I saw] Zhang x x bring the four-kinds-of-element Jing Hengxiang home for a meal. She often eats and drinks with four-kinds-of-elements, as if it made no difference.

She instigates the masses against the leadership and to me she said: "Your children are small and you have a hard time making ends meet. You should ask the leadership for a subsidy."

During the air raid [shelter] digging, someone said the four-kinds-of-elements will get their own separate air raid shelter and she went ahead and leaked this [secret] information to the four-kinds-of-elements.

Zhang x x often says: "It's really sad that Jing Hengxiang should [still] have to wear the label [four-kinds-of-element]. If she didn't have to, she'd have no problem." And she says: "Four-kinds-of-elements who committed errors in the past but who aren't committing any now should be [treated] the same way we are."

Zhang x x uses the nutrition funds for the four-kinds-of-elements. She buys eggs, prepares them at home and gives to four-kinds-of-elements to eat.

The expression “four-kinds-of-element” used here was a broadly all-inclusive way of referring to anyone who was either a landlord “element,” a rich-peasant “element,” a counter-revolutionary “element,” or a bad “element.”

On this particular occasion, the denunciation had not been submitted in writing, but orally. Hence a note at the bottom of the piece of paper on which we find it to the effect that “*The above is a record of what Cui x x has said, and it may be used for reference. 24 December 1970.*” Next to the note is Cui’s clumsily scribbled signature, her fingerprint, and an impression of the chop of the Political Group of the Revolutionary Committee of the Nanjing factory where she worked.

I should point out, just in case “common knowledge” and the texts I have cited so far have given you a different impression, that there were in Mao’s China quasi-“professional” agents of the state similar in their role to East Germany’s so-called *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* (IM) (see Christian Bergmann, *Die Sprache der Stasi: Ein Beitrag zur Sprachkritik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999) and Nazi Germany so-called Gestapo *Vertrauensmänner* (V-Männer). A detailed analysis of how they operated is at the centre of a research project I have only recently embarked upon, and in view of its complexity and my ignorance at this stage, I prefer to postpone a discussion of it to another time. But I want here to draw your attention, all the same, to the widespread additional presence in Mao’s China of so-called “eyes and ears” (*ermu*), i.e. low-level activist informers serving the local police.

Qin x x was a grass-roots level cadre in a Nanjing urban residential area in the early 1960s. In her file, kept in the local police station, is a letter from 28 April 1963, sent to that same station by a police officer Zhang X working elsewhere in Nanjing. The letter is unofficial in the sense that it is neither stamped nor written on police stationery (in fact it is written on the back of a slip of paper torn from a municipal district voter registration form). Strictly speaking, it is not a denunciation of Qin herself but rather a letter informing against her husband. It reads in full:

C Police Station;

This is to let you know that one of our eyes and ears reports that at 65 Fresh Fish Alley, over which you have jurisdiction, there is one Ji x x who listens to enemy [and] Voice of America radio broadcasts. We are now passing on the relevant documentation to you to let you stay on top of this. We ask you to protect and not reveal [the identity of] our eyes and ears.

B Police Station

Zhang X

The anonymous “eyes and ears” referred to here, then, was a local police informer. The documentation mentioned is not in Qin’s file and one can only assume that it was added to one maintained on her husband.

The charge made against Qin’s husband was a serious one, but it appears to have prompted no action on the part of the police as far as Qin herself is concerned. Merely listening to the *VOA* and radio broadcasts from Taiwan, but not discussing what one heard with others may at the time have been something which the Nanjing police merely noted rather than acted upon. A file compiled on a dentist elsewhere in the city during the so-called “One Strike Three Anti” Campaign in 1970 records countless instances between 1958 and 1968 on which he supposedly listened to “enemy broadcasts”; but action against him appears in the end have been prompted mainly by the fact that he not only liked to discuss what he heard with a circle of friends, but even went so far as to let them listen in. By his own admission, “*We said a lot of reactionary things. When [the broadcast] said anyone returning to Taiwan with an aircraft will receive a lot of gold, Wang x x said that would really be something and Li x x laughed. I said give it a try...*” It was supposedly subversive conversations like these that landed the dentist and his friends in trouble. Assuming Qin’s husband kept what he heard to himself, the “eyes and ears” and the police may well have decided that the information warranted to immediate action.

Even denunciations that did *not* involve the “eyes and ears” of the neighbourhood police would set a fair amount of bureaucratic and administrative activity in motion if and when they were acted upon. Knowledge concerning activity in response to denunciations is obviously what we need to develop further in order to understand the “dossier dictatorship” of the Mao era more fully. My fourth and final example is meant to illustrate this. In the case of the Nanjing workers’ files quoted from earlier, we had very little to go by concerning how the denunciations “made their way into,” if you wish, the files of the persons being informed against. What, if any, action they prompted is also very unclear. This next denunciation, part of a set from Beijing, is slightly more substantial in these respects. In the late summer of 1955, one Liu x x, a non-CCP member working in Beijing’s No. 16 Middle School for boys, informed against a 26-year old language teacher (also a non-CCP member) by the name of Fang x in the No. 6 Middle School for boys. This is what Liu said about Fang, whom she had first known five years earlier when they had attended the Foreign Languages School together:

[Fang] used to slander the leaders, comrades Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi, and distort the policies of the communist party. He said: “Comrade Mao Zedong would constantly fool around with women. Nobody knows how many secret mistresses he keeps!” Comrades Liu

Shaoqi and Ye Jianying divorced [their wives] just like that, and then got themselves new partners. It's just a tiny group of people that controls the policies of the communist party, and having grasped political power, this tiny group (the heads of government) is able to behave at will in any way it sees fit.

Now, anyone assuming that trivial notes like this one never activated the CCP's supposedly ever-vigilant public security authorities is mistaken: a paper trail, that much is certain, it most definitely generated. For a whole slew of transgressions not all of them similar to this one and including (probable) theft and sexual harassment, as well as maintaining suspiciously close and unexplained contacts with members of the Soviet and Indian embassy staffs, Fang was in the end labelled a "bad element" and taken into custody.

On 31 August 1955, the information from Liu concerning Fang's alleged irreverent remarks about Mao's and Liu Shaoqi's morals was duly recorded on a standard Informant's Documentation Registration Form (*jianju cailiao dengjibiao*) provided expressly for such purposes by the party authorities in her residential area, in eastern Beijing, and passed on to and registered (as *Investig. #929*) with the CCP Eastern Suburbs District Middle and Elementary Schools Office. On 3 September, the office passed the form together with a cover note on to the CCP Beijing Municipal Middle and Elementary Schools Office where an *ad hoc* Five Member-Group in charge of leading an ongoing campaign to "exterminate counter-revolutionaries" received it and gave it an additional number. Two or so weeks later it ended up and was registered in the Dongdan city district Public Security Sub-Bureau together with a cover note. In the Dongdan Sub-Bureau it remained sitting for some four weeks before, on 13 October, it was sent (now bearing an additional/different registration number) together with a second item concerning Fang that had arrived in the interim, to the director of the local Police Station responsible for public security in his residential neighbourhood. In a pre-printed cover note, the station director was called upon to:

We herewith forward to you two Informant's Documentation(s) and ask you to investigate and clarify the existence of the person mentioned, what his present circumstances are, whether the information is true or not, whether his status [as someone being informed against] is public knowledge or not, and what kind of action you intend to take. We expect you to submit to our Sub-Bureau, within the next ten days and on a standard Report Form the outcome of your investigation. Note: Do not affix the chop of the Police Station on the Report Form.

On 19 October 1955, the station director ordered one of his officers to “Investigate and verify; and retain [the information] for reference.” Ultimately, the outcome was what I just hinted at, that Fang was labelled a “bad element” tending toward “hooligan behaviour.”

As will now have become abundantly clear, this has been not so much a talk introducing you to some grand new research *findings* as a seminar intended to make you enthusiastic about the research *field* of Maoist society (if you wish). My aim has been to inspire you to look closer at that field—should you not already know precisely to what you want to turn your own research energies, or on what subject you will be writing your next paper. What I have *not* done today is ask one or two specific research questions and then attempt to answer those questions, using this increasingly more abundant material. But what I hope I have done—it has certainly been my intention—is to hint at what kinds of questions can now fruitfully be researched/answered and what kind of problems and dangers one needs to be aware of. Let me conclude by saying just one more word about something hinted at in my title but not really discussed—the decomposition of paper. Because, it may seem as if we have plenty of time ahead of us, and that there is no sense of urgency to research on Mao’s China. In fact, the opposite is in many ways true. Interview subjects are not getting any younger, memories are fading—that’s only too obvious. And, the kind of sources on paper that I have talked about are literally turning to dust in front of your very eyes. *Now*—not tomorrow—is the time to collect and preserve this kind of material!