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Researching the Cultural Revolution:

Impressions from a summer in the Beijing University Library

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Under an academic exchange agreement between Stockholm University and Beijing University ("Beida") and as the recipient of a NIAS Asia grant, I recently spent two months at the Beida Department of International Politics doing research on the topic of public discourse on culture in revolutionary China. In the course of my research, I was able to read many Red Guard publications from the Cultural Revolution - something that in the past, to the best of my knowledge, has been very difficult if not impossible for Western scholars. As a small service to those colleagues who share my interest in the years of great turmoil and who might be interested in the steps taken to gain access to Beida's excellent but well-hidden holdings of Red Guard tabloids, I decided to write down the following brief impressions and practical hints.

The Beida Library has a very sizeable collection of Red Guard tabloids, far exceeding in scope and completeness anything known to exist anywhere in the West. It includes complete or almost complete runs of the "big five": *Xin Beida*, Qinghua University *Jinggangshan*, Beijing Geology Institute *Dongfanghong Bao*, Beijing Aeronautical Institute *Hongqi*, and Beijing Teachers' University *Jinggangshan*. In addition, there are many issues of lesser tabloids like the China People's University *Renda Sanhong* and *Xin Renda*, etc. Tabloids put out by Red Guard factions opposing Nie Yuanzi (i.e. *Beida Jinggangshan*) are, however, conspicuously absent.

Tabloid holdings are not listed in the main library catalogue and merely having a library card or reading room card does not give access to them. Somewhat inexplicably, they are stored together with pre-1949 periodicals in the

so-called "old library" (*jiuguan*) next to the old administrative office. When I first went there and asked to see them, I was told by a surprised but friendly member of staff that "I am not entitled to give you access to them. You need a letter of introduction from the University Party Committee."

I was a student in China in 1975-76 and in those days I would simply have been told a lie, e.g. "We don't have the things you are asking for!" Certainly things had improved a lot, and I showed the staff that I was suitably impressed. Having been told what the formal procedure was, I wrote a letter to the Beida Foreign Affairs Office listing roughly the tabloids I wanted to read. In my letter I requested that they "submit a report" (*da baogao*) to the University Party Committee, explaining my situation and that they "ask the leadership for instructions" (*qing lingdao pishi*). The next day, the man at the Foreign Affairs Office promptly wrote such a letter, addressed to the Party Committee, and handed it to me. I then took the letter to the Director of the Department of International Politics. He now wrote a third letter, addressed to a certain secretary on the Party Committee, explaining in greater detail who I was and why in his opinion it was OK for me to be given access to the tabloids in question as part of our academic exchange agreement. My original letter, the letter from the Foreign Affairs Office, and my academic host's letter were then all passed on to the University Party Secretary who was kind enough to promptly write (with his brush, not a fountain pen!) his comments/instruction (*pishi*) at the top of the Foreign Affairs Office letter: "Will Comrade so-and-so (the Director of the Library) please see to it that Mr. Schoenhals gains access to the materials he has asked for."

The original letters, together with the *pishi*, were all returned to the Foreign Affairs Office, where I was able to pick them up a few days later. With the letters in hand, I then went to the office of the Library Director, where one of his secretaries wrote a final letter of introduction - this one addressed to the Director of the old Periodicals Department - saying that it was OK for the staff working there to show me the tabloids. When I returned to the Old Periodicals Section with my paperwork completed, the staff there were as friendly as ever and they began looking in the card catalogue for the titles I had listed.

The card catalogue, it soon turned out, was not of much use. Finally one staff member simply asked me to follow him to the stacks where he knew the tabloids from Beijing were ("We don't keep anything secret back here anyway!"), and then have me point at the ones I wanted. The dust covering the bound volumes lying there was thick enough to make it difficult to identify titles. I was quite certain nobody had looked at this material for quite some time. From a conversation among the library staff which I later overheard, it would appear as if the newspapers in the "old library" are all arranged by locality. Presumably, if I were to have wanted to read *Weidong* I would have been taken to a stack of miscellaneous tabloids from Tianjin. When I asked if making photocopies of selected items was possible, I was told no, but copying articles etc. by hand was allright.

My experience at Beida shows that it is indeed possible for foreign scholars to do serious research on the Cultural Revolution in China today. For our Chinese colleagues, however, the situation is more difficult. While they can do research, they have almost nowhere to publish their findings and analyses. Certainly this might be where in our open intellectual climate - and as publishers of various Asia-related "Occasional Papers," books, and journals - we are under a moral obligation to be of assistance in exchange for all the fascinating raw data that is now being shared with us.