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## Sinology and Historical Research on Mao's China: Some Personal Observations

Schoenhals, Michael

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LUND UNIVERSITY

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

# **Sinology and Historical Research on Mao's China: Some Personal Observations**

A presentation prepared for  
**Focus on Asia:  
Challenges in Politics and Research**  
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MICHAEL SCHOENHALS  
Lund University, Sweden

Some of us here today are old enough to remember what it was like to do research on “Mao’s China” while it was still in the present – and an aging “Great Helmsman” appeared regularly (if not exactly often) on our own black-and-white television screens hosting the likes of Henry Kissinger and Pierre Trudeau in his study in the Forbidden City. In those days, now some three decades or more ago, we were used to looking for information on Mao (in the hope of gaining in-depth knowledge about his politics, the state he had co-founded and ruled, the revolutionary society around him) in our university libraries. Certainly that was the case in Sweden, where I was. If what was at hand did not suffice, we ventured by train and boat to the United Kingdom and the School of Oriental and African Studies to dig deeper. We sought enlightenment most of the time, in books, newspapers, journals and wireless broadcast transcriptions. The most ambitious and better funded among us may have proceeded to do interviews, in distant Hong Kong in most cases, with persons who had escaped the dictatorship of the proletariat (swimming, staying afloat with the help of ping-pong balls strapped to their bodies, from an impoverished place just across the border called Shenzhen). And, we also spoke to and sought whatever information was to be had from the carefully screened representatives of “the people,” to which our host organizations inside China, when we managed to get there, gave us access – an industrial worker, a poor and lower middle peasant, a revolutionary intellectual who had successfully remoulded his consciousness, a cadre with the Revolutionary Committee of factory A or commune B. But the one source that none of us were able to get close to, much less into, was the archive. Archival sources from and about Mao’s China were strictly out of bounds. *Nothing* was more secret or inaccessible!

Thirty years ago, then, the *reason* those of us who otherwise embraced a historical method or approach to China weren’t historians of Mao’s China was *not only*

because it hadn't yet itself become "of the past," or – to speak in the ironic terms so conducive to sanity in a university environment – been thrown unto the dust heap of history where "the Republic of China on the mainland" was slowly morphing into pure intellectual compost. We also *weren't and couldn't be* historians because our humble endeavour did not involve any *sources* of the kind that graduates of history departments proper would have recognized as belonging on their academic turf. Looking at the 1950s (the Great Leap Forward, the Hundred Flowers, the collectivisation of agriculture and de-privatisation of industry and commerce, the anti-this and anti-that...) from the vantage point of the 1970s, we were to 90% confined to looking at published secondary and tertiary material; and certainly not at archives, dossiers, files, and genuine intra-party documents in their uncensored original form.

How things have changed since! For those of you who are only now joining us and discovering today what doing research on PRC politics, economy and society is like, I have a Lennon & McCartney quote: "You don't know how lucky you are boy!" Now that Mao's China *is* history, finally, and the country and its politics have indeed "opened up," we not only have access to vast repositories of print other than propaganda on the past, but also to real archival material. (Plus, lest we should forget, countless other things that fall outside the scope of this talk, such as the possibility of meaningful interaction and cooperation with PRC colleagues.) Our world has changed fundamentally; and so we and our practice – and academic training – must change with it.

When the Department of Contemporary History in Turku approached me about participating in this event, I was somewhat unsure about what might be a suitable topic for me to address. I finally settled on Sinology and research on the history of the first two and a half plus decades of the PRC – Mao's China, or the years prior to the so-called "landmark" 3<sup>rd</sup> Plenum of the 11<sup>th</sup> CCP Central Committee at the end of 1978 that launched the era of "reform." I chose to speak on this subject for a number of reasons, one obviously being our conference theme: challenges in politics and research. But also not the least because, loosely defined, historical research on Mao's China using archival sources is simply what I do. Hence I like to believe, naively perhaps, that it is a subject on which I have – while my hair has turned greyer and as the years have passed – accumulated a certain knowledge worth sharing with others. I want to speak on this topic because there is at present, it seems to me, little awareness of the full range of exciting archive-centred, primary-source based research that is possible on Mao's China. I want, in other words, to draw attention to one particular "challenge," one that deserves to be better known & understood.

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It used to be the case until very recently that one of the first things a Chinese would ask a stranger (I don't know what it is like here in Finland) on the phone was not "Who are

you?” but “Where are you?” (*ni nar?*) meaning “Where are you calling from?” I have found that in our own academic world there is a similar, call it habit, call it tradition, call it way of establishing a firm ground from which to embark upon a conversation. So I want to begin by announcing that I come from Sinology. I am a Sinologist. At North American universities, in some age groups, this word is today a term of abuse. In an email on the subject sent to an internet discussion group on contemporary Chinese affairs two years ago, a US historian wrote: “To historians under, let’s say, seventy years of age, and many anthropologists, scholars of early China, etc., ‘Sinologist’ is not something they want to be called under any circumstances. A ‘Sinologist,’ to them, is somebody practicing Orientalism.” On this side of the Atlantic, I like to think that we have less of a queer obsession with this label. I for one, have no hesitation about admitting that yes, I practice the dark and sinister art of Sinology... I like to think that I am as sensitive about the problem and bias of Orientalism as the best of the rest, but it would simply be preposterous of me to presume to be a scientist, social or political or otherwise! I am all about China, from a comparative perspective in time and in place. In what follows, I will pronounce the word Sinology repeatedly, not as a term of abuse, but to refer loosely to the academic study of China: its culture, customs, history and language; any aspect of its civilization. For the next twenty minutes, let us dispense with drawing artificial boundaries between Sinology and what I think of tongue-in-cheek as the extra-Sinological disciplines – those from which I should hope all of us routinely and shamelessly borrow research tools and theoretical insights anyway.

I sometimes come across references, most recently in German universities, to “modern Sinology.” It used to be easy (for those who wished to do so) to draw in a single stroke passing simultaneously through two realms, a demarcation line separating modern Sinology from its classical, elder brother. For many years, that line passed across Republican China, where modern Sinology separated both “history” from “the present,” and “classical Chinese” or *wenyan* as a medium of communication from modern spoken and written Chinese *baibua*. Today, everyone who does research on China continues to recognize the conventional demarcation between those who “do” *wenyan* and who therefore count as “classical” scholars, and those who don’t and who are modern Sinologists. Yet, whereas the distinction between “classical Chinese” and the modern Chinese language remains, as one would expect, unaffected in the process, the irresistible logic of time itself has now moved the demarcation line between history and the present from Republican China (1911–1949) up to somewhere around the time of the death of Mao in 1976. The consequences of this move affects us all. Why? Because the Chinese state has chosen *also* to recognize that the Mao era is now history. Accordingly, we are finally gaining access to archival material from the first two and a half decades (or thereabouts) of the People’s Republic.

Finally, it has become possible for those of us so inclined and equipped to approach the early years of the PRC as historians. Gone are the days, only a little more than a decade ago, when the relevant volumes of *The Cambridge History of China* edited by John King Fairbank and Roderick MacFarquhar covering the years 1949–1976 were written, as indeed they had to be then, not by historians but mainly by sociologists, economists and political scientists – all of them indisputably first-rate, but by training inclined to approach issues of historical evidence and the textual criticism of sources very differently from how the contributors to the *Cambridge History* volumes covering the Qing and the Ming might. A new and heavy “chunk” of Chinese history, unexplored as such, has now effectively been added to the dynasties, powers and pre-49 republic of Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek. It is history to the explorers of which, the utility – in research – of classical Sinological training will at best be limited, but where modern Sinology *should* provide the research tools and skills needed. Here, incidentally, is my main challenge to those present who set our academic priorities and university policies.

I say *should* provide, because as yet, few universities and institutes of Oriental/Asian languages/studies actually offer the kind of seminars and training I have in mind; seminars perhaps similar in form to what Harvard University’s students of Republican China enjoy. I am thinking of a recent handbook by Bill Kirby on how to read official documents from the 1910s, 20s and 30s: a work grown out of seminars introducing to students “the structure, organization, and, above all, the variety of available historical materials that exist on similar themes” and assisting them in “making professionally competent readings of these materials.” Ultimately, the aim of those of us whose interest is in Mao’s China, regardless of where we come from, must be to become similarly expert at wielding in front of the classical Sinologists that no less awesome intellectual club that a command of the modern Chinese language amounts to when – but only when – it meets the professional historian’s criteria. As Cambridge’s G. R. Elton put it, in *The Practice of History*, to be capable of living in history not as a stranger or visitor from mars, but as a contemporary equipped with immunity and hindsight, a visitor from the Inquisition, able to read the people of the past, study their creations and think about them “until one knows what they are going to say next.”

Archives or no archives, training or no training: as all of us here know, the PRC – changed as it may have, since the advent of the post-Mao “reforms” – is not yet the “former” this or that. To compare the conditions under which historians of the Soviet Union or the Baltic “people’s republics” are able to work today with those under which historians working on Mao’s China find themselves struggling may be misleading. Still, repositories of records from the 1950s and 60s are today open (albeit only in part) to foreign scholars, and in some places quite remarkably accessible and “user-friendly.” The Beijing Municipal Archive is a good example: maybe some of you have already made use of what can be found there. Archives in China today are peaceful, tranquil *working*

spaces. In a speech from the 1960s never published in full, but available in archival sources, Mao maintained that “I don’t much believe in peace and tranquillity” (*bu da xiangxin taiping*), but I don’t think we have to take everything the man said too seriously.

Less well known to many of you than what I just said about China’s archives is the fact that, in addition, we now have occasional access to caches of archive material and primary sources that come to us courtesy of the messy chaotic forces of China’s booming market economy. In some ways, they constitute an even more valuable research resource for the historian, though perhaps not quite for the reasons Mao gave on another occasion in the sixties namely that “It seems as if where things are really chaotic, that’s where they’re really better.” I have in mind, for example, the discarded contents of filing cabinets in enterprises that have gone bankrupt and Party institutions that have been merged out of existence. This is “raw” material, never intended to be preserved for any particular historian’s future purposes, one way or the other. Something salvaged half-way to the recycling bin by an enterprising Chinese flea-marketer, “put on the market” in the very literal sense of being offered for sale “lying on the ground” in Shanghai or Peking next to fake Ming porcelain and Rolex watches and purchased after a quick glance at the cover by the Sinologist whose mind is already contemplating the best strategy for getting yet another bundle of mouldy, disintegrating reams of faded paper held together by rotting string, cracking hardened glue and rusting staples past his health-conscious family – and safely into his own study – back home.

“Research,” Cornell’s Dominick LaCapra, professor of European intellectual history, suggested in *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language*, may be likened to a “conversation with the past through the medium of its significant texts.” Obviously, it would be close to ludicrous to argue that every text that simply happens to have survived in an archive somewhere deserves to be thought of as “significant.” Criteria of significance will vary immensely depending on what we hope to solicit from the “text.” In social history, for example – a mode of enquiry shaped by a general interest in the way ordinary people experience and shape events, an interest in collective mentalities – the significant source texts through which we may or may not succeed in having a satisfying conversation with the past, are likely to be far removed from those which an intellectual historian might regard as significant. Still, if you bear with me, it is precisely texts of significance to the social historian that I want to turn to. A conversation with a very different PRC “past” is today possible through texts that have remained hidden to us until very recently.

As an example meant to illustrate what I have in mind, let me bring up one “past” that I hold to be particularly interesting and challenging, namely the social history of political communication in the early decades of the PRC. At a fairly early stage, it became possible for Sinologists to analyse in depth and venture to explain with confidence the intentions of the communist party state as far as political communication

and political language-use were concerned. Those of us interested in the subject discovered – in addition to all there was to read in the open Party press – such semi-secret censor’s guidelines as the central authorities’ ten points on correctly citing the words of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin; and the no less than thirty-four points on correctly citing Mao Zedong himself. How “socialist man” was ideally meant to speak, to write, to communicate – and not to communicate – was spelled out in these points and their sister-texts drawn up under the auspices of the Central Propaganda Department. The new linguistic orthopraxis it was meant to constitute could be found in Party guidelines issued to all journalists, speech-writers, secretaries, book editors,... and not surprisingly educators like our Chinese colleagues. Eventually, copies found their way into our libraries.

But for us to research and meaningfully elucidate what happened at the receiving end of the Communist Party’s ambitious attempt to alter and make the communication of political opinion progressively uniform among “ordinary people” presupposes a conversation with the past through a body of fundamentally different “significant texts.” Mao might of course have made all kinds of claims about how his subjects had successfully internalised and learnt a new correct and redder way of expressing themselves, and on the pages of the *People’s Daily* and elsewhere in the Party media, such claims were regularly illustrated. But they hardly constitute the firm ground on which even a modestly solid, credible social history of political communication can be erected.

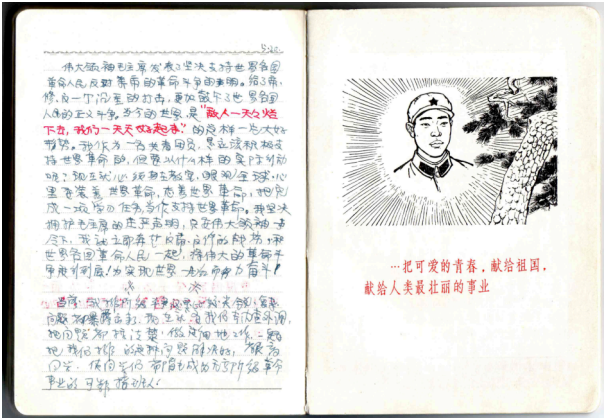
Today, then, it is exciting to realize that we finally have at our disposal the kinds of sources we need, to begin to write what I personally long believed would always remain a close-to-impossible history. Our empirical ground is in China’s increasingly open archives and – perhaps in particular, I should add – in the “chaotic” collections of archival and quasi-archival material that I referred to in passing earlier. These sources include not only statistically significant quantities of old “public diaries” (which have become a popular kind of “collectible” in China, like postage stamps or Mao-badges), but more importantly an even greater abundance of original hand-written denunciations, self-criticisms, autobiographies, slanderous messages, informants’ reports, requests to join the Party, speaking notes, letters, letters-of-introduction – a record of socio-political reality at the grass-roots, richer and more multi-facetted, more exciting than any other known to the Sinologist in me!

Here is the true record of what real people of flesh and blood put on paper and how: not what professionally edited Party propaganda would like us to believe! This is the real stuff – and as such, unfortunately, it often taxes our deciphering skills, trained as most of us are in reading neatly printed and grammatically correct Chinese! Reluctant self-criticisms. Here are the not always fully coherent, sometimes far-off-the-mark attempts of exhausted working-men to atone for their youthful transgressions as strike-

breakers in the “old society.” Caught on paper, the voice of an old working woman who never got the chance to learn how to read and write in the first place, and who has no choice but to let her daughter wield the pen for her as she tries in the “appropriate language” of the Party to denounce a wicked landlord element who had stolen a chicken from the collective at the height of the famine in 1960. The slick Maoist penmanship of the upwardly mobile communist youth league member who submits a denunciation of her criminal father – and the painful prose produced by her oldest brother who refuses! Self-criticisms by the thoroughly demoralized and defeated. The little notes exposing the suspicious acts of next-door neighbours or colleagues in the work-place: notes high on innuendo, sometimes illustrated with an aptly – sometimes less aptly – chosen Mao-quote. And sex! Plenty of it and problematic: sexual content, of course, being almost impossible to fuse without abuse with the formal stylistic requirements of the Propaganda Department.

Obviously, the archival quarry I am describing can be mined for more than just information on what the social history of political communication and political language-use in the 1950s and 60s entailed, although that happens to be one of *my* pet projects and one that lends itself particularly well to spin-offs in the modern Sinological graduate student seminar room. What is so interesting from our point of view, in what we find in these un-mediated primary sources, is how often and how much the stated intentions of the state with respect to popular language-use are left unfulfilled. The presence here is not so much of that which the *People’s Daily* might lead us to expect, but of a curiously distorted language-use in which the proper one prescribed by the Party is forever perverted, altered, augmented, remoulded by alternative traditions and modalities. Take popular uses of *colour* in written communication, for instance, in ways that no official Party directive ever specified, but which suggest the presence of spontaneous metonymical migrations from one realm of symbols and mystical power to another.

In imperial times, red had been the colour in which the Emperor had penned or pencilled his official pronouncements. This association of the colour red with



the highest office in the land and with the semi-divine power of the “son of Heaven” must still have resonated deeply in the psyche of many 1960s diary writers. Spontaneously, we note, some switched pens and ink – from black or blue to red – when citing the words of the Communist Party Chairman. Moreover, there was an almost perfect inversion of this – as it appears – popular taboo whereby potential enemies of the people were called upon to



write their confessions and self-criticisms, not on ordinary Chinese stationery, which tended to have fine lines in red across it, but on paper with black lines or no lines on it. The unavoidable occasional transgression of taboos of this nature were preferably apologized for: in the 1960s, a group of amateur writers based in the Workers' Club of Tianjin decided to print up a poster-size public announcement exposing what they called a "Japanese cultural spy-ring" in their city, an announcement a copy of which has been preserved in the archives. At the bottom of their announcement they apologize for using red rather than black ink ("We were out of black ink," they also explain.). Are we to conclude that of the ordinary men or women in the street who might have seen their announcement, a significant number would at the time have taken offence at the use of the imperial cum revolutionary colour to list the names of spies and traitors in public? That some just might have picketed, rather than bepraised, the Workers Club in response? Or did the apology merely amount to a ritual, performed to ward off the communist party's chromatic police, agents of the state in a society where the "right" colour in the wrong place was no less subversive than the "wrong" word at the right time?

What we encounter in the kind of archival sources finally available to us, then, is no longer merely a social practice described second-hand by the communist party in the public party media, or by writers of fiction, or but a fading memory of the past handed down to us in an interview setting forty-some years later. It is an example of practices recorded seemingly by accident and certainly not with future social historians in mind. And precisely this latter quality (the absence of any kind of *historical* intentionality), I insist, makes these sources so precious to students of a People's Republic clearly obsessed with how posterity will one day judge it. What we have here is a tiny expanse of firm empirical ground of the kind which historians of societies in Europe may take for granted, but which for modern Sinology has until now been the exception – hence the possibility, in the years to come, of independent histories of Mao's China ever so different from what he have seen so far. Most importantly, different from what the CCP itself continues to put out in print.

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I want, at this point, to turn my attention more narrowly to how access to new archival sources impact on modern Sinology's understanding of Mao Zedong. I mentioned at the outset how thirty years ago, we students of China at the time looked in our libraries for Mao. Self-immersion in the sources now at our disposal allows us to relocate him in the archives, almost 28 years after his death, where he is subverting the official history written and put out by his successors. As scholars working on a variety of topics soon discover, any given line of "officially streamlined argument" coming out of China today is fleshed out with much carefully sifted documentation. (A telling example is the flood of literature on Mao the man, Mao the poet, Mao the classical scholar, Mao the uncle (!),

anything & everything, appearing in December 2003 during the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the man's birth.) The aim of what appears in print, including the very first officially sanctioned biography of Mao 1949–1976 is 90% of the time to further add to the credibility and authority of official history. The challenge we face as modern Sinologists is not to be seduced by this pre-figured, pre-periodicized and pre-labelled documentation in our own work. Ironically, from his hide-away in the archive – altogether unintentionally – Mao actually helps us do this. Not because he provides us with “the full record,” but because he provides us with a crucial corrective. What survives where, as he put it, “things are really chaotic” is an earlier record that often supports a history ever so different from today's official one.

I want to take my cue from the work that historian Jan Assman at Heidelberg University has done on canons and transmissions and suggest that what official history in the PRC amounts to today is a rather unconvincing exercise in caring for and keeping a purported true *meaning* alive. An extreme but by no means isolated case is the massive 13-volume collection of texts *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* (Mao Zedong's Manuscripts Since the Founding of the Nation) that according to its Central Committee editors is meant solely to document Mao's political legacy. In it, a number of so-called “manuscripts” left behind by the Chairman are no more than two characters long, but come with explanatory commentary a full 400 to 500 characters in length. Not that as an institution, ensuring the survival of meaning was in any sense more sophisticated in Mao's own lifetime; but an institution that *was* accorded much higher status, and on which significantly greater resources were spent at the time, was *die Textpflege* or concern with the transmission and preservation *verbatim* of the words. Here again, the way Mao appears in the archives is of crucial import to modern Sinologists, forever on guard (as we must be!) against reinforcing mythology rather than writing history proper.

In fact, the Maoist canon as it existed at the height of the deification of the Chairman is surprisingly well documented in China's archives. The finest illustration of this I have seen to date is a massive, classified 2,000-page *Index to Quotations by Chairman Mao*, clearly a by-product of what I referred to earlier as the 1950s- and 60s- attempt to create a new socialist orthopraxis of speech and writing. A remarkable gnomological hybrid from a different era, it lists approximately 20,000 isolated statements by Mao in quasi-alphabetical (number of strokes in first character-) order. So conscientious were its compilers that even statements that are otherwise identical save only for the presence or absence of a comma (!) are listed separately, and sourced accordingly. When an otherwise complete sentence occurs (for some reason) without a full stop at the end in the *locus classicus* identified by the compilers, it is also reproduced without a full stop at the end. In other words, the *Index* is a perfect example from Mao's own times illustrating what Jan Assmann wrote in [\*Kanon und Zensur: Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation II\*](#) about

“the institution of caring for the text, whereby in the case of the sacred the wording is surrounded by a taboo so powerful as to fix even such singular details as pronunciation, and in writing even the most trivial of details.” Outside China’s archives and certainly not on the shelves in even the best-stacked book stores, nothing comparable any longer exists for Mao. Mao-in-the-archives turns out to be something of a subversive character since, needless to say, oh so many of the 20,000 statements in the *Index* are ones that today’s official China would more than anything want future generations simply to forget.

So, finally: I have spent the better part of the time allotted to me holding forth on what I regard as a both *stimulating* and *important* challenge to research. Hopefully, I have managed to convey to you at least some of my own enthusiasm for the difficult subject of “Mao’s China as history”. Let me end with a few words relating it to our current university system, curricula and training. Firstly, it seems to me, we need to foster and train historians proper (by which I mean graduates of departments of history) who are qualified to apply to Mao’s China the same rigorous criteria of scholarship upheld by those studying parts of the world closer to home. As far as Sweden is concerned, we neither have been nor are at present doing this, which I regard as lamentable to say the least. Secondly; let us at the same time not for a moment underestimate the importance of language training and the need to continue to improve and invest resources in it – including in cooperation with Chinese universities. Among some social scientists in Sweden, there is still a belief that when researching and analysing say the politics and economics of the PRC, including the Mao years, one can actually do just fine with English. Those who hold this view are unfortunately, in my view, no less short-sighted than were those conservative Mandarins of the declining Qing dynasty who saw no reason to master the alien tongue of the barbarians, believing that having internalised the Confucian classics already in itself and by itself made one eminently qualified to pronounce on the affairs of the world. Disciplinary training is a crucial tool without which one always remains a dilettante of sorts; but no less crucial is a solid command of the medium of communication, in our case the Chinese language. Where to strike, realistically from the university policy-makers position, the balance between the necessary funding for both disciplinary training and linguistic proficiency; and realistically from our students’ point of view, the balance of time to be devoted to each subject, is also a major challenge, no less important. But I will leave it for another speech, another day, another setting. My time is up: thank you for listening!