

Information collection & accessibility in Mongolia, Inner Mongolia & Xinjiang

The study of twentieth and early twenty-first century Mongolia on the one hand, and Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang on the other hand, necessitates the use of a multitude of oral and written sources in a variety of different languages; thus the first major obstacle for a scholar and an educated audience is the extraordinary diversity of the essential languages. No single person can master such a wide array of languages and scripts. A collaborative effort, which is not always optimal for scholars, would be one way of overcoming this difficulty. More likely, however, scholars will choose individual topics based upon their knowledge of specific languages. A specialist who studies these various works would then be capable of devising an accurate appraisal.

Morris Rossabi

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN the source materials available for Mongolia, and Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang, are readily observable in the possibility and accessibility of data from interviews. In one project, which continues to be translated into English, Professors Yuki Konagaya of the National Museum of Ethnology in Japan, and I. Lkhagvasuren of the National University of Mongolia, set forth initially to conduct "interviews with some [Mongolian] representatives of the socialist political elite, who devoted themselves to bringing the socialist modernization plans to life."¹ English translations of a set of interviews by Lkhagvademchig Jaadamba, of Buddhists in Mongolia, have also appeared.² Lkhagvademchig Jaadamba chose to interview Buddhists who were not part of the elite, in order to depict the course of Buddhist history in the socialist and post-socialist periods. Special attention must also be paid to the University of Cambridge's Mongolian and Inner Asia Unit's 'The Oral History of Twentieth Century Mongolia', which has conducted more than six hundred interviews and has made them available online.³

Personal and oral accounts

Complementing oral history projects, individual Mongolians have written invaluable autobiographies, which offer insights into developments in the pre- and post-socialist eras. Several of these have been translated into English. Bazaryn Shirendev, the First President of the National University of Mongolia (founded in 1942) and of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences (established in 1962), wrote a detailed account of his academic career as well as a description of some of the twentieth-century's leading political figures. In his autobiography, J. Sambuu, Ambassador to the Soviet Union and later President of Mongolia, provided a withering portrait of the oppressiveness of the pre-socialist era and then an analysis of his later career, emphasizing his role as Ambassador to the Soviet Union and North Korea. Ts. Namkhainyambuu, the most renowned herder in Mongolia's socialist period, offered a depiction of life in the pastoral economy and of the development of the *negdels* (or collectives) and of their dissolution in the post-socialist era. Other prominent Mongolians, such as B. Jargalsaikhan, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Ambassador to a number of countries, and J. Lkhagvasuren, the Minister of Defense through much of the socialist period, have also written autobiographies that await translation into English.

Oral and personal sources on Mongolia have been elicited through unsupervised and un-regulated field research. Both foreign and Mongolian anthropologists have had considerable access to sites throughout the country, resulting in an array of informative studies.⁴ The government has not interfered in any way to limit anthropologists in the field or to shape their conclusions.

Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang offer sharp contrasts concerning oral sources. No independent unregulated interviews of a wide swath of inhabitants have been permitted, and the minorities in these so-called autonomous regions have not, for the most part, granted interviews. Foreign anthropologists had a window of opportunity to conduct field research in the last decades of the twentieth century and managed to produce books on aspects of life in Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang.⁵ However, after the publication of *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, a book edited by Frederick Starr,⁶ such opportunities ended and, for a time, led to the Chinese government's refusal to offer visas to the book's contributors.

State archives and libraries

In some categories of written sources, the contrasts are less sharp. The National Statistical Office in Mongolia provides monthly indicators of economic performance as well as

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measures of education, health, and society, which are then gathered together into an annual publication. Much of the information is also online. The Chinese Statistical Bureaus in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia and the Xinjiang Production and Construction Group issue similar data on the economy, population, and social matrixes. Individual cities in these regions, such as Urumqi and Turfan, also have statistical bureaus that publish statistics on the economic and social conditions in their domains. All of these data is online and can readily be accessed. Thus, independent economists can also assess the credibility of these statistics.⁷

The early twentieth-century history of Mongolia, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia reveals the greatest differences in government and public transparency. Mongolia has opened up many archival sources concerning the socialist period from 1921 to 1990, and numerous public discussions by former government and Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) officials have been published. The opening up of Buryat and Russian Federation archives has complemented the Mongolian government's policy of transparency. Dr. Irina Morozova has used these archives to write a recent book on twentieth-century Mongolia and has also consulted the Russian State Military Archives.⁸

The availability of both the Mongolian and Russian Federation archives, the accessibility of primary documents such as collections of the speeches of the dominant government and MPRP leader Kh. Choibalsan and his successor Yu. Tsendenbal, as well as official correspondence concerning the Comintern's activities in Mongolia, will all contribute to research on and understanding of twentieth-century Mongolia. Japanese archives are also accessible, offering valuable glimpses of Japanese efforts in the 1930s to encroach upon Mongolia, culminating in the 1939 battle of Nomonhan (Khalkhyn Gol), with Generals G. Zhukov of Russia, and J. Lkhagvasuren of Mongolia, trouncing the enemy.

A number of researchers have consulted these archives to provide insights into Japanese policy and actions from the late nineteenth century through World War II.⁹

Archives in Inner Mongolia also offer significant insights into Japanese activities in the pre-WWII period. However, as shown by the case of an American researcher trying to access these archives to conduct research for her doctoral dissertation on Japan's involvement in Inner Mongolia in the 1930s,¹⁰ considerable obstacles are presented when seeking to consult the archival resources. A stifling bureaucracy impeded her at every turn, demanding almost overwhelming paperwork to grant permission to use the archives. The slightest error

in filling out the forms resulted in delays; the doors to the archives were frequently opened late; she was denied certain essential materials that appeared to have no current political significance; and costs for microfilms or copies were exorbitant.¹¹ Admittance to government archives of the post-1949 period is also difficult, if not impossible.

Archives in Xinjiang are even more restrictive. The tensions between its inhabitants and the Chinese government and the ensuing violence over the past sixty years have no doubt prompted concern about the Uyghurs and other minorities in this allegedly autonomous region, which has translated into lack of government transparency and extends to the period before 1949.¹² Foreign scholars have, on occasion, been allowed to conduct research in Beijing on pre-1949 Xinjiang, but have generally been excluded from local and regional archives. Specialists on Xinjiang have often been limited to analyses of speeches of government leaders, to the official newspaper *Renmin Ribao*, and to local journals.

The contrasts between State Libraries in Mongolia, and those in Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang, are not as striking. The State Library in Mongolia is accessible but, bereft of sufficient State funding, does not operate efficiently. It has also suffered damage from insect infestation and flooding. I have seen quite a number of water-logged texts, which are almost unreadable.

Hopeful

It may be useful to end with one positive note concerning information collection and accessibility in Xinjiang. In 1996, I traveled with curators from the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Cleveland Museum of Art in preparation of their joint exhibition 'When Silk Was Gold' that was mounted in 1997.¹³ We were permitted access to the exhibits and to the storage areas in the Xinjiang Museum in Urumchi and to the Turfan Museum. In addition, a number of curators have been shown objects and have been allowed loans of objects from the relatively new Inner Mongolian Museum in Hohhot. However, in all of these cases, the foreigners had considerable *guanxi* (or connections), which worked in their favor. One can only hope that the Chinese national and local governments in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia will also start allowing access. Art is not as volatile as history and politics.

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- 4 Among others, see O. Bruun. 2006. *Mongolian Nomadic Pastoralists in Pursuit of the Market*, Rowman and Littlefield; M. Pedersen. 2011. *Not Quite Shamans: Spiritual Worlds and Political Life in Northern Mongolia*, Cornell University Press.
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- 12 See J. Millward. 2007. *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, Columbia University Press, for the historical tensions between the inhabitants of Xinjiang and China.
- 13 See the resulting catalog, J. Watt & A. Wardwell. 1997. *When Silk Was Gold*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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