

Working with Primary Documents in Chinese Politics: Theory and Practice

Course Description:

This course focuses on developing the practical and analytical skills necessary to work with primary source materials, with a focus on China. Drawing on the work of historians and both quantitative and qualitative social scientists, it emphasizes a series of critical thinking skills about source materials, information curation, and the study of politics when surveys, interviews, participant observation, or other forms of access to the thoughts and behavior of research subjects are impractical or impossible.

Learning goals:

Students who are successful in this course will leave able to:

1. Characterize the source base of materials for the study of Chinese politics, and expand it creatively.
2. Place documentary evidence in historical and political context to interpret it properly.
3. Analyze the use of source information and its (in)ability to support certain inferences.
4. Create data collection plans for projects based on Chinese data.

Evaluation:

Every student will submit 3 “document in context” assignments.

Each of these should be about 1200 words, and should never exceed 1500 words (not counting citations). Each DIC should address, at minimum, the following:

- a summary of the document’s main points and why they are interesting;
- the political and historical context of the document, including relevant precipitating events;
- a thoughtful discussion of the possible audiences for the document, including where it was found and what that says about it;
- an analysis of the author (institutional or otherwise) and what that can tell us about the document;
- how this document compares to other documents by that author, for that audience, and from that time period.
- Citations to the scholarly literature on the subject, in English and Chinese, are **required**.

I have no firm definition of a “*document*,” except to encourage students to find things that feel “important,” either in the sense that their author, the event to which they are related, the practice they embody, or otherwise. Students are encouraged to consult me if they are unsure if a piece of media qualifies.

Project Proposal:

Each student group will propose a research design and project pitch.

When lucky, analysts are allowed to propose the production of analytical “products” that will produce value for their organizations on a relevant topic. Imagine yourself in this position, and propose your topic to your *immediate supervisor*. Imagine that this person is a generalist in Chinese affairs with some familiarity with your topic area.

Your assignment should briefly and clearly explain your research question clearly (e.g. “how have different provincial organizations reacted to China’s net-zero goals”), explain the stakes (“these goals have largely been delegated as targets to provinces, which will make provinces the necessary level to assess performance and progress”). This should not exceed 1 page. Further, and most crucially for our purposes, the projects must **propose a data collection strategy**.

Where will you find documents upon which to base your findings? Who collected them, who wrote them, and for whom were they produced? How will your analysis strategy account for this background? How will you communicate uncertainty to your audience? Why these sources and not others? If those sources are unavailable, what other sources can provide analytical leverage for your question?

Course Schedule and Readings:

Week 1: Where to find primary source materials?

- **Meet with the Chinese / Asian Studies Librarian.**
- **Document Lab:** listing everywhere you can find anything.
 - Leaks, a certain California-based publisher, and a few special Chinese websites.
 - Databases, yearbooks, and gazette(er)s.
 - ISR databases (e.g. surveys); Wilson documents in translation; asking historians nicely; asking social scientists nicely; [the historical papers of China scholars](#).
- **Reading:**
 - Glenn D. Tiffert, “Peering down the Memory Hole: Censorship, Digitization, and the Fragility of Our Knowledge Base,” *The American Historical Review*, Volume 124, Issue 2, April 2019, p. 550–568.

Week 2: What is the point of looking at documents?

- Document: “On the 10 Great Relationships”
- Document: Transcript of Mao + Khrushchev meeting
- **Reading**
 - Michael Schoenhals. *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics: Five Studies*. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies University of California, 1992.

Week 3: **By** whom?

- Document: April 26th Editorial
- Case study–People’s Daily Editorials.
- **Reading:**
 - Gitter, David, and Leah Fang. “The Chinese Communist Party’s Use of Homophonous Pen Names: An Open-Source Open Secret.” *Asia Policy* 13, no. 1 (2018): 69–112.
 - Tsai, Wen-Hsuan, and Peng-Hsiang Kao. “Secret Codes of Political Propaganda: The Unknown System of Writing Teams.” *The China Quarterly*, no. 214 (2013): 394–410.
 - Wu, Guoguang. “Command Communication: The Politics of Editorial Formulation in the People’s Daily.” *The China Quarterly*, no. 137 (1994): 194–211.

Week 4: **For** whom? [1: Why is information collected, and why does it matter?]

- **Document:** Qing memorial from Maura’s book.
- **Case studies:** Qing archival practice & Maoist statistics
- **Reading:**
 - Maura Dykstra, *Anxiety in the Empire of Routine*, theory chapter and 2 empirical chapters.
 - Arunabh Ghosh, *Making it Count*, theory chapter and chapter on statistics journals.
 - Jeremy Brown, “[Finding & Using Grassroots Historical Sources from the Mao Era](#)”, *Dissertation Reviews*.
 - Charles Kraus, “[Researching the History of the People’s Republic of China](#),” Wilson Institute Cold War History project.

Week 5: **For** whom? [2: Who is the audience and what are the effects?]

- **Document:** Chinese judicial ruling, one up and one removed.
- **Case study:** Chinese judicial rulings
- **Reading:**
 - Liebman, Benjamin L., Margaret E. Roberts, Rachel E. Stern, and Alice Z. Wang. “Mass Digitization of Chinese Court Decisions: How to Use Text as Data in the Field of Chinese Law.” *Journal of Law and Courts* 8, no. 2 (2020): 177–201.
 - Liu, Zhuang & Wong, T.J. & Yi, Yang & Zhang, Tianyu, 2022. "Authoritarian transparency: China's missing cases in court disclosure," *Journal of Comparative Economics*, vol. 50(1), 221-239.

Week 6: Document types and Source Types [Chinese]:

- Document: Bring your first document to class.
- Survey:
 - **Meetings and speeches:** reprints, newspapers, internal sources.

- **Public writing:** research reports, writings in magazines, etc.
- **“Private” writing:** diaries, recollections, etc.
- **The Gray Zone:**
 - Summaries of events and “important event” records.
 - Biographies, histories, and document collections.

Week 7: Document types and source types [English language]

- Document: Bring your second document to class.
- Survey:
 - US government reports:
 - FBIS and other projects
 - State Department releases
 - FOIA requests
 - Presidential Libraries
 - US think-thank etc:
 - Wilson Center translations
 - National Security Archive releases
 - University Libraries and Archives
 - Worldcat, worldcat, worldcat!
 - Foreign Archives
 - E.g. British Foreign Service in pre-1949 China.
 - Journal repositories
 - China Law and Government (journal)

Week 8: Ways of reading: “Close”

- Reading like a **busy person:** learn to skim, get organized, take notes.
 - Kim, Diana S. “Taming Abundance: Doing Digital Archival Research (as Political Scientists).” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 55, no. 3 (2022): 530–38.
- Reading like an **historian:** context, meaning, argument, timelines.
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- Reading like a **social scientist:** sample, selection, bias.
 - Alexander Lee (2022), “The Library of Babel: How (and How Not) to Use Archival Sources in Political Science”, *Journal of Historical Political Economy*: Vol. 2: No. 3, pp 499-526.

Week 9: Ways of reading: “Distant”

- Reading like a **data scientist:**
 - Nelson, L. K. (2020). “Computational Grounded Theory: A Methodological Framework.” *Sociological Methods & Research*, 49(1), 3–42.
 - Ding, Iza, and Michael Thompson-Brusstar. “The Anti-Bureaucratic Ghost in China’s Bureaucratic Machine.” *The China Quarterly* 248, no. S1 (2021): 116–40.
- Tour of models:
 - Keywords. Topic models. Word Embeddings. LLMs.

Week 10: Presentations [1]

- Document: **all** documents for presentations today.
- **Reading skills (for fun):**
 - Cursive [for non-native Mandarin speakers]:
 - Meeting notes of an unknown official, my collection [1984?].
 - Bureaucratese [for everyone], especially outside the PRC
 - Taiwanese 公文 glossary.