

How to Read a Mao-Era Diary

Shan Windscrip¹

Keeping a journal was a widespread practice under the Maoist Communist regime. Yet to mention Mao-era diaries today is often to invite scepticism. Mainstream views about the period often call into question the value of the diary as a reliable historical source, seeing the medium largely as the product of state propaganda, and hence as evidence for little other than the destruction of individual autonomy and the “private self” by a mass “totalitarian” dictatorship.² Underlying this assumption is—aside from an obvious Cold War liberal essentialism³—a conceptual tendency to posit “privacy” and “autonomy” as natural features of, and criteria for, “authentic” journal-keeping.

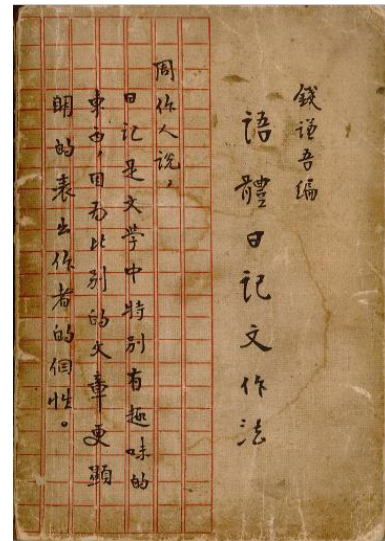
This essay proposes a more fruitful methodology for approaching Mao-era diaries, one that treats the medium not as a fixed form with definitive, timeless boundaries, but as a historical *problematic* that must be dealt with in consideration of its cultural and political conditions of production. Like many other genres of life-writing (autobiography, memoir, and letter), the diary defies stable, trans-historical definitions. Since the cultural and linguistic turn, many literary scholars and historians have emphasized the diary’s elastic, hybrid, and historically contingent nature, rejecting conventional tendencies to essentialize the genre as embodiment of the private sphere.⁴ As Desirée Henderson argues, the modern diary, structured by and large around principles of “dailiness” and seriality, emerged out of the “nexus of individual experience, historical and cultural context, and literary tradition.”⁵ A more productive and critical point of departure for reading a Mao-era diary would be to contextualize and historicize what it meant to keep a journal under Communist rule.

In what follows, I survey the changing and contested meanings of the diary in modern Chinese history, followed by a discussion on two useful interpretive approaches to Mao-era diaries, each of which is underpinned by distinct theoretical and historiographical orientations. A complex yet capacious genre, the diary offers historians of Maoist China new possibilities and challenges, from the empirical quest for reconstructing social history “from below” to the discursive pursuit of theorizing revolutionary subject-formation.

Revolutions in Diary

The popularization of diary-keeping in Maoist China can be viewed as a product of the country’s ongoing search for modernity, born of revolutionary upheavals at the turn of the twentieth century. In the late imperial period, many educated men and women used the diary for purposes of life-recording and moral self-cultivation. In the late Qing and Republican era, however, the meaning of the diary underwent a radical change. Many progressive writers and educators of the time, inspired by similar trends elsewhere, began to link diary-writing with

China’s national exigency of cultivating new, modern citizen-subjects as the country underwent tremendous cultural and political transformation.⁶ They began to see journal-keeping as a literary and pedagogical tool for emancipating the individual’s creative self-expression from the shackles of traditional cultural conventions (Figure 1). Around this time, the first-person genre acquired an individualistic and “intimate” character in China. Keeping a journal was now closely linked to notions of psychological interiority, self-reflexivity, and creativity, although “privacy” was not much of a critical concern.⁷



目次	
第一章	日記史的意義及其作者..... 1
第二章	日記文的分類..... 29
第三章	日記文的形式與內容..... 57
第四章	日記文的作法..... 93
第五章	日記文與生活記錄..... 135
第六章	日記文與心理描寫..... 169
第七章	日記文與自然描寫..... 197
第八章	讀書記的作法..... 213

(1)

Figure 1: Front cover (left) and table of contents (right) of Qian Qianwu’s *Methods of Writing a Vernacular Diary* (Shanghai:

Nanqiang Bookstore, 1931). A quote from Zhou Zuoren adorns the book's cover: "The diary is a very interesting thing in literature. It reflects more clearly than does any other genre the individuality of its writer." Author's collection.

Sitting at the intersection of personal and social transformations, the diary was well suited for the Maoist regime's purpose of social transformation according to state-socialist ideals of modernization. From the 1950s through to the 1960s, the parameters of how to write a diary shifted (Figure 2). The "old diary" was now denounced as a "bourgeois" medium that fostered unrestrained individualism and self-interest—symptoms of the decay of the "old society"—within the diarist. The liberated "new Chinese masses"—those belonging to the proletarian and peasant classes—were to use the journal for improving literacy, organizing their work and lives, and cultivating socialist consciousness. To keep a journal in the Communist "new China" was to link the self with society, the state, and history through conscious engagement with revolutionary ethics and politics in everyday personal writing.

Not everyone wrote a diary in accordance with the new political imperatives, of course, but the idea of being able to claim a historical and political subject position using such an ordinary form became increasingly attractive in the early 1960s, thanks in no small part to the state's systemic propagation of "red diaries" written by revolutionary role models (e.g., *Lei Feng's Diary*). By the time the Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966, diary-writing was widely regarded as both a technology and a symbol of radical political and class identification, especially among the youth. Yet such conflation of the diary with its writer's worldview also gave rise to the practice of publicizing "black diaries" of convicted "class enemies" so as to expose their "counterrevolutionary crimes." Nevertheless, most people approached diary-writing without fuss about the possibility of ideological incrimination. Many indeed scrupulously exposed their incorrect "bourgeois" thoughts and behaviors as part of their revolutionary self-criticism, and voluntarily exchanged diaries with their comrades for critical feedback on how to improve their ideological outlook.⁸ Even when the mass political campaign waned in the late-1960s as the "Down to the Countryside" movement commenced, the socio-political significance of the diary for proletarianizing the "self" continued to influence the ways in which many young people related to history, politics, the state, and the world communist revolution on the agricultural fields in their narrations of daily life.



Figure 2: Author's collection of guidebooks on diary-writing and "model diaries" published in twentieth-century China.

As this brief history of modern Chinese diaries shows, what it meant to keep a journal, and how to do so *properly*, were contested and historically contingent questions whose answers depended on shifting cultural and political parameters of expression of everyday life and selfhood. This shows the limit of the methodological concern with "privacy" and "autonomy" for determining the historical value of Mao-era diaries. Rather than serving the purpose of cultivating the liberal "private self," diary-writing under Mao was to produce a conscious subjectivity in opposition to the inward-looking "private self." How, and to what ends, should we read a Mao-era diary?

Finding "People" in Diaries: The Empirical Approach

The dominant interpretive approach to diaries in history is by-and-large empirical, treating the medium as a repertoire of intimate and microscopic social experiences. This analytical method corresponds with "people's history" (or microhistory) as a methodology to studying the past. It seeks to reconstruct social histories "from below" by excavating information from diaries about "ordinary people's" perspectives, the minutiae of their day-to-day "lived experiences," and small-scale events unfolding at the grassroots.⁹

This approach requires careful and critical execution of established historical methods of source analysis: investigating the biographical background of the diarists, evaluating their intents and purposes, asking who their audience might be, triangulating and corroborating with other sources to situate the diarists and their narratives within wider contexts, and close reading of the diary content to locate a research focus and main themes. For Mao-era diaries, especially those produced during the Cultural Revolution, empirical diary analysis often also requires reading against and despite the presence of ideological language.

One example to illustrate this approach is Sha Qingqing and Jeremy Brown's analysis of the diary written by a high school student in the second half of 1976. Setting aside the diary's "unsurprising political content" and "revolutionary language," Sha and Brown explore the student's "personal thoughts and painful experiences" unencumbered by the party-state's

ideological discourse.¹⁰ Similarly, in another recent example, Guobin Yang uses sent-down youths' diaries, along with other first-person materials, to illustrate what he claims to be the "the affirmation of the values of ordinary life among the Red Guard generation" at the rural grassroots. Purposely brushing aside revolutionary language, Yang focuses on young people's narratives of scarcity and hardships, arguing that former rebels underwent a humanist awakening to the "bare necessities of life" and the value of "personal interest" as the revolutionary horizon receded.¹¹

The empirical approach to diaries has offered historians of Mao-era China a productive avenue for correcting orthodox historiographies' oversights of the individual and grassroots as topics of historical inquiry. Using the diary as evidence for personal and local particularities, historians of the period have highlighted the limits and unintended consequences of hegemonic political order in people's daily lives while restoring agency to social actors overlooked by top-down and state-centered historiographies.¹² But the appeal to the diary as a repertoire of "experience"—"experience" here is treated as the origin and foundation of knowledge—leaves vital epistemological issues unaddressed.¹³ What constituted the parameters and functions of diary-writing under Mao? What cultural and political conditions gave rise to specific modes of life-narration and self-expression in diaries of the time? How did journal-keeping shape and influence the *construction* of "experience" and identity in relation to state socialist discourses? Without attending to these questions, the empirical approach to Mao-era diaries risks reifying the diary as a genre of the "authentic private self" and essentializing the autobiographical "I" as a unified entity with a stable, transhistorical identity.

Diary-Writing and Subject-Formation: The Discursive Approach

The past 30 years have seen growing methodological interest across academic disciplines in researching diaries as instruments for the construction of modern subjectivities. Following the poststructuralist turn in the humanities and social sciences, many scholars, especially in the field of Sovietology, have embraced the diary as a practice of identity-formation *within* specific historical and discursive contexts.¹⁴ Instead of mining diaries for factual and biographical information, scholars have focused on historicizing the conditions as well as the processes of subject-positioning, treating the diarists as both actors and products of their writing whose identity and "experience" are narrated within certain textual conventions and "structures of self-becoming."¹⁵

This approach still requires the utilization of conventional methods of source analysis, as mentioned above, but its focus is primarily on reading the diary *in dialogue with*, not in spite of, available cultural and ideological frameworks. This entails interrogating the historical meanings, functions and content of diaries in relation to politics of identification and everyday life (as well as to dominant discourses such as class, race, ethnicity, the nation-state, and gender). Concerning Mao-era diaries in particular, this approach calls for taking seriously the diarists' inclusion of political language in their narratives as constitutive

to their self- and life-narration rather than as mere mechanical or cynical reproduction.

One of the few ready examples to illustrate the discursive method of diary analysis in the Maoist context is Sigrid Schmalzer's use of the diaries of sent-down youths in the two concluding chapters of her book, *Red Revolution, Green Revolution: Scientific Farming in Socialist China* (2016).¹⁶ Here, Schmalzer takes ideology and language, as well as individual experience seriously, reading sent-down youth's life-narratives in relation to messages about scientific modernization and self-improvement propagated by the state. This allows her to analyze the complex effects of ideology in everyday context, and to shed insights on the productive dimension as well as the limits of hegemonic discourses in influencing the youths' self-conceptualization.

All this does not mean that we should treat Mao-era diaries as insincere or as simply determined by the language of propaganda. In fact, as my research on the diaries of sent-down youth shows, critical commentary about back-bending work abounded; diarists did not fabricate their experience of physical hardships or mindlessly reproduce authoritative language for the sake of proletarian self-fashioning. But a discursive approach to the diary recognizes that these complaints were not expressed outside of, or in opposition to, state socialist ideals. Rather, they were articulated in, and enabled by, normative frames specific to the Maoist society. For instance, in writing about clearing weeds in the rice field, one sent-downer expressed dissatisfaction in her diary over arduous, menial labor, seeing it as an obstacle to timely rice-planting:

Looking at this huge land of wild grass, I felt a little resentful and bored. I thought: "So much wild grass! When will we be able to pull them all out? We don't have any tools, relying on our bare hands to pluck them one by one. At such a rate, when will we be able to plant down the rice seeds?"¹⁷

The problem here for the diarist was construed not as harsh physical labor *per se*, but as inefficient, underdeveloped farming methods. The correct approach, in her opinion, was not to avoid "working hard" [苦干, *kugan*], but to also apply the method of "working skillfully" [巧干, *qiaogan*]¹⁸—a concept popularized since the Great Leap Forward connoting the modernization of the "rural" by integrating "creative ideas into manual labor."¹⁹ Only in this way, the diarist wrote, can one seize the "opportunity for production" while advancing towards the dual goal of "conquering nature" and tempering one's body and soul.¹⁹ Here, we can see how Maoist developmentalist language of rural modernization and self-transformation provided a framework both for the diarist's articulation of her experience in the paddy field, and for her identification with the state's agenda as a modern and revolutionary subject in the countryside. At the same time, the diarist narrative also produced a differentiation and disarticulation of herself from the "rural environment," deviating from the norm that youth should "take root" in the countryside.

A discursive approach to diaries would benefit historians of Mao-era China who seek to challenge and move beyond the long-entrenched paradigm of liberal-totalitarian, state-individual, and private-public distinctions.²⁰ Not only does this approach permit a deeper and more critical exploration of the workings of Maoist culture and politics in people's everyday lives; it also rejects the liberal sovereign subject as the foundational category of analysis, opening up new possibilities for exploring epistemological questions concerning the individual's relationship with state ideology. It posits that the individual's expressions of "experience," identity, and selfhood are historically and culturally specific, contingent on the contexts and conditions in which the autobiographical "I" emerges. This allows a theorization of why and how revolutionary subjectivity was formed, contested, resisted, and transcended in relation to both individual "experience" at the everyday level, and the Maoist political economy and the wider international geopolitical order at large.

Conclusion

Personal diaries of Mao-era China constitute a complex but rewarding historical source. When approached appropriately and critically, they can offer rich insights and fresh perspectives lacking in many other types of sources on life and society under the Maoist regime. In this essay, I have argued that the diary

should be read in light of the broader historical circumstances and public discourses of modern China. Approaching the diary in this way reveals the mediated and contingent nature of the genre, highlighting the intersection between everyday writing and changing hegemonic ideals of selfhood, nation-state, and history. Read empirically through the lens of "people's history," diaries of Mao-era China can provide much valuable first-hand information and unorthodox insights about the individual and social life at the grassroots. But to strip the diaries (and their authors) of politics and ideology is to forego the opportunity to theorize the conditions for the production of autobiographical texts and subjects. A discursive analytical approach can remedy this oversight: when read as a method for understanding processes of subject-formation, diaries can bring much needed insights into the complex dialogical nexus of power, writing, and creative human agency. At a time when personal diaries are emerging as an important source for historical scholarship on Stalinist Russia and World War II in East Asia,²¹ this essay argues for the importance of Mao-era diaries for equivalent research in the Chinese context.

¹ I thank Antonia Finnane for her helpful suggestions and editorial insights on this article.

² See, for example, Liu Zhongli 刘中黎, *Zhongguo 20 shiji rizha xiezuojiaoyu yanjiu* 中国 20 世纪日记写作教育研究 [Diary education in twentieth-century China] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2013); Sang Ye, "Keeping a Diary in China: Memories for the Future," *The China Story* (blog), June 4, 2015, accessed January 8, 2020, <https://www.thechinastory.org/2015/06/keeping-a-diary-in-china-memories-for-the-future/>; and Wang Youqin, "Xuezheng Wang Youqin: wenge cuhui le zhongguoren de riji" 学者王友琴: 文革摧毁了中国人的日记 [Academic Wang Youqin: the Cultural Revolution destroyed the diary of Chinese people]. Podcast. *Radio France Internationale* 法国国际广播电台, accessed December 22, 2018, <http://cn.rfi.fr/中国/20180109-学者王友琴文革摧毁了中国人的日记>.

³ See Anna Krylova, "The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1, no. 1 (2000): 119–46.

⁴ Aaron William Moore, "The Chimera of Privacy: Reading Self-Discipline in Japanese Diaries from the Second World War (1937–1945)," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 68, no. 1 (2009): 165–98.

⁵ Desirée Henderson, *How to Read a Diary: Critical Contexts and Interpretive Strategies for 21st-Century Readers* (Routledge, 2019). 7.

⁶ For a more detailed discussion on the history of diary-keeping in modern China, see Shan Windscrip, "How to Write a Diary in Mao's New China: Guidebooks in the Crafting of Socialist Subjectivities," *Modern China* 47, no. 4 (2021): 412–40.

⁷ While many writers did idealize the diary for its supposed "privateness" (i.e., written for oneself with no immediate audience in mind), they saw "privateness" more as a favorable

condition for candid self-expression rather than as a signification of "hidden truth." Indeed, the May Fourth era saw the proliferation of published diaries, and the rise of a type of literature known as diary fiction (fiction written in the diary format), precisely due to the widespread view that the diary was a genre of self-writing for oneself, a genre that could lead the reader to the writer's innermost world. "Privacy" was thus more an imagined ideal than reality when it came to writing a personal diary. For more critical discussion on issues concerning "privacy" and the diary, see Penny Summerfield, "Historians and the Diary," in *Histories of the Self: Personal Narratives and Historical Practice* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2019), 50–77; and Aaron William Moore, "The Chimera of Privacy: Reading Self-Discipline in Japanese Diaries from the Second World War (1937–1945)."

⁸ This was very much in line with the Marxian ethics that "The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims" – a concept popularized in China by Liu Shaoqi in his 1939 speech, *How to be a Good Communist*. In Maoist China, especially during the Cultural Revolution, the "private self" was considered neither a locus of authenticity nor a positive source of identification.

⁹ For a genealogy of "people's history," see Andrew I. Port, "History from Below, the History of Everyday Life, and Microhistory," *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2015, 108–13.

¹⁰ Qingqing Sha and Jeremy Brown, "Adrift in Tianjin, 1976: A Diary of Natural Disaster, Everyday Urban Life, and Exile to the Countryside," in *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism*, ed. Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), 179–98.

¹¹ See Guobin Yang, "Ordinary Life," in *The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 93–118.

¹² Some of the recent examples include Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, eds., *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015); Felix Wemheuer, *A Social History of Maoist China: Conflict and Change, 1949-1976* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019); and J. M. Chris Chang, "Paper Affairs: Discipline by the Dossier in a Mao-Era Work Unit," *Administrory* 4, no. 1 (2019): 125–40.

¹³ For an eloquent critique of the category of "experience," see Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 773–97; for a historiographical review of debates concerning histories "from above" and "from below," see Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Territory of the Historian," in *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 63–85. Gail Hershatler has also cautioned against the notion of idealizing the "authentic person with an interior persona" when it comes to researching 1950s China. See Gail Hershatler, "Model," in *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2011), 210–35. 235.

¹⁴ See Dan Healey, "The Diary as Source in Russian and Soviet History," in *Reading Russian Sources: A Student's Guide to Text and Visual Sources from Russian History*, ed. Gilbert George (London: Routledge, 2020), 196–211.

¹⁵ Jochen Hellbeck, "Liberation from Autonomy: Mapping Self-Understandings in Stalin's Time," in *Popular Opinion in Totalitarian Regimes: Fascism, Nazism, Communism*, ed. Paul Corner (New York, United States: Oxford University Press, 2009), 49–63, 56.

¹⁶ See Sigrid Schmalzer, *Red Revolution, Green Revolution: Scientific Farming in Socialist China* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), Chapters six and seven, 155–205.

¹⁷ Liu Ping, May 22, 1970. Diary. From Dartmouth Digital Library Program. <https://n2t.net/ark:/83024/d4hm3f> (accessed May 6, 2020).

¹⁸ Yu Zhang, *Going to the Countryside: The Rural in the Modern Chinese Cultural Imagination, 1915-1965*. 159.

¹⁹ Liu Ping, *Ibid.*

²⁰ For discussion on these binary conceptions in the context of Soviet Studies, see Anna. Krylova, "The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies."

²¹ Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006); Aaron W. Moore, *Writing War: Soldiers Record the Japanese Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013).