

CHINESE HISTORICAL SOURCES

The four categories of Chinese bibliography:

Historians are not particular. They will use any source they think will shed light on the historical phenomenon that they are studying. One characteristic of innovative historical scholarship is unexpected source use: either the exploitation of new sources or the imaginative use of well-known ones. It is therefore not really possible to identify “historical sources.” We can, however, talk about the usual sources that Chinese historians use.

We should begin with a word about how Chinese traditionally categorize books. Although it developed gradually over time, one of the most important classification schemes in Chinese bibliography was the “Four Categories” system (*sibu* 四部). The four were Classics (*jing* 經), History (*shi* 史), Philosophy (*zi* 子), and Literary Collections or *belles lettres* (*ji* 集).

The Classics section contains the texts concerning the thirteen Confucian Classics. It includes not only the original texts themselves, but also commentaries and technical treatises on various Classical topics.

The History section not surprisingly is the repository for any works written about history. I will say more about this below, but it contains a wide variety of texts, including general narrative histories, biographical texts, books on technical historical subjects, and many others.

Philosophy is also a very broad category that includes any book by or about a thinker in Chinese history. Here you will find works on the classical philosophies of Legalism, Taoism, Mohism, etc. Later thinkers are also included.

The Collection section is a very important one because Chinese political and social elites spent a great deal of time writing. This section contains the literary collections (*wenji* 文集) of many historical figures. One subsection is devoted to individual collections (e.g., the poetry collection of the great Tang poet Du Fu 杜甫); another contains multi-author collections.

Histories

Broadly speaking, there are three types of historical texts of which historians make routine use. They are largely the foundation upon which our knowledge of Chinese history rests.

The Dynastic Histories:

The importance of the dynastic histories cannot be exaggerated. Because traditional Chinese believed that history could act as a guide for present behavior, the successive dynastic governments compiled official histories of preceding dynasties. The first, Sima Qian's 司馬遷 *Shiji* 史記, was completed in the first century B.C. and covers everything prior to his own day. Although it was a private endeavor, it became the model for all subsequent official dynastic histories. A draft of one last dynastic history was completed

in the twentieth century after the fall of the Qing dynasty. We therefore have a series of detailed histories that cover all of history up to 1911.

You will run into four different sections in dynastic histories. All the dynastic histories contain the first and the third. Many also contain the second and fourth:

1. Basic Annals (*benji* 本紀): A chronological account of the important events during the reign of each Emperor in the dynasty.
2. Treatises (*zhi* 志): These contain discussions of important topics during the dynasty in question. Some examples include treatises on ritual, geography, finance, military affairs, government organization, etc.
3. Biographies (*liezhuan* 列傳): Noteworthy individuals during the period covered were given individual biographies. These tend to emphasize their public careers, but also contain illuminating details about other aspects of their lives.
4. Tables (*biao* 表): These present useful information in tabular form (e.g., the genealogies of Prime Ministers).

You can find a complete list of the dynastic histories and a chart describing the contents of each in Wilkinson's *Chinese History: A Manual*, pp.501-15.

One interesting aspect of the quadripartite structure of the dynastic histories is that they often present the same event from different perspectives. Thus, historians will certainly read the biographies of the individuals involved in an event after they have read the material in the Basic Annals.

The dynastic histories were generally compiled by including lengthy quotations from the primary source documents to which the editors had access. This makes them sort of a hybrid between primary and secondary sources. Since many of the original sources have since been lost, the quotations are all that is left.

The last point that is worth bearing in mind is that these were generally committee productions. Officials were assigned to compile the sources from the previous dynasty and distill from that the dynasty's history. The histories therefore are guided by a very specific worldview: educated court officials. One underlying assumption was that the dynasty in question had lost the "mandate of heaven" to rule and the new dynasty had received it. The result is a story that emphasizes the moral degeneration of the dynasty. This quality gives the series a kind of cyclical sensibility as dynasties rise with vigor, go into decline, and end in pathetic depravity. Nevertheless, the compilers were usually serious historians with a fair amount of integrity. Only occasionally do they do an obvious hatchet job.

The University at Albany Library has the dynastic histories at various places in its collections.

Private Histories

China produced more than its share of intellectuals interested in history. There were therefore many who wrote private histories. These usually took a form different from the “annals and biographies” (*jizhuan* 紀傳) format of the Dynastic Histories. The most popular was the so-called “annalistic” (*biannian* 編年). These were basically chronological histories covering various periods.

By far the most important one was Sima Guang’s 司馬光 (1019-1086) *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (“Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government”). Sima’s purpose is clear from his title. He intended his history, which covers the period 481 B.C. to A.D. 959, to illuminate the principles of history and thereby help the ruler to govern the empire. Among the remarkable characteristics of this work, one stands out. Sima composed a companion volume that discussed what sources he used, the disagreements between them, and why he chose the versions of events that he did. Many of his sources have since been lost and so we have a priceless historiographical record that allows us to see beyond Sima’s own version of events.

Specialized Historical Works

Besides the annalistic histories, Chinese historians also produced narrower works on specific historical topics, including histories of institutions, compilations of historical sources, and analyses of earlier events.

Literary Collections

Literary collections are an incredible source of information. They include government documents such as memorials (see above). Famous Chinese authors also wrote funerary texts (e.g., posthumous biographies and epitaphs) for others. These are a goldmine of biographical information. We can often reconstruct their philosophies from essays in the collections, while their poetry gives us an insight into the personalities and emotions of the authors.

Collectanea

There has long been an instinct to collect and preserve important texts in China. We can see this in efforts to collect government documents, poetry, or other great literary compositions into classified anthologies. This tendency reached its logical extreme in several efforts to collect *every important* text into a single collection. Some of the monuments of these efforts are described below.

Siku quanshu 四庫全書: “The Complete Writings in the Four Treasuries”

This collection is a milestone in the effort to gather every important text together. The size of the undertaking alone is stunning. It was compiled during the 1770s under orders from the Qing Emperor Qianlong 乾隆. After reviewing over 10,000 works, almost 4000 were selected for inclusion. A modern photographic reprint (in reduced size) runs to 1500 volumes, each about the size of an *Encyclopaedia Britannica* volume. It required the hand transcription of 2.3 million pages! At the same time, the compilers produced an annotated bibliography that discussed the authors, editions, and history of the texts included. Note, however, that the Qing government took the opportunity provided by the

massive collection effort to destroy many works that it deemed to be anti-Manchu. The collection is organized according to the “Four Categories” described above. There is a fascinating book about the compilation of this work by R. Kent Guy entitled *The Emperor’s Four Treasuries: Scholars and the State in the Late Ch’ien-lung Era* (UA library AC 149 S73 G89 1987). This is now available on-line in a fully searchable database. Our library actually has a subscription.

Sibu congkan 四部叢刊: “The Collected Publications from the Four Categories”

This was published by the Commercial Press (*Shangwu* 商務) in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s. It photographically reproduces early editions. As a result it did not introduce any new copyist errors, but it did preserve earlier errors uncorrected. It contains a little over 500 titles. The University at Albany Library has this work. The call number is AC 149 S82x 1979. There is an index to works included (Z 7059 L75).

Sibu beiyao 四部備要: “The Complete Essentials of the Four Categories”

This was published in the 1920s and 1930s by the publisher Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 in order to compete with the *Sibu congkan*. It includes over 330 titles, many of which are in the *Sibu congkan*. The publisher, however, made a different decision. Instead of reproducing earlier editions, it typeset all of the texts in a uniform type. This allowed it to correct many errors in older editions; unfortunately it also allowed many new typographical errors to creep in. Although many were corrected in a later edition, it is still necessary to check earlier editions when using this work. It just goes to show that seemingly simple publishing decisions have many trade-offs. The University at Albany Library also owns this work. The call number is AC 149 S8 1965. There is an index shelved with it.

Congshu jicheng chubian 叢書集成初編: “The Completed Collection of Collectanea: First Series”

This was another massive collection (almost 4000 titles) put out by the Commercial Press. It includes many works not included in the *Sibu beiyao* and *Sibu congkan*. It was published originally in the 1930s and has been reprinted and expanded since. This work was also typeset with the added benefit that it was punctuated (for more on that see below). The University at Albany Library owns this. The call number is AC 149 T88x 1985. There is an index volume.

The Buddhist Canon

You will be dealing with religion in East Asia in another session, but it is important for historians to be familiar with religious sources as well. By and large, because the Buddhist establishment (monasteries, monks, and lay disciples) had its own tradition of collecting important texts, the collections described above did not include Buddhist texts. These were periodically assembled in collections of “stored scriptures” (*zang jing* 藏經). The material in these texts is not only relevant to scholars of religion. In addition to Buddhist sutras, the canon includes commentaries on the sutras, monastic regulations, biographies of eminent monks, ritual instructions, philosophical treatises, and many other kinds of texts. Taken together the canon provides an incredibly rich source for intellectual history, popular culture, social history, etc.

The most widely used edition of the canon was compiled in Japan during the Taishō period (1912-1926). It has the title *Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經. Although it was published in Japan, it contains all of the most important Buddhist texts written in Chinese. The University at Albany Library owns the volumes containing texts composed or translated in China (55 volumes). The call number is BQ 1210 T35x 1987.

The Taoist Canon

Adherents of Taoism were inspired to compile their own collection. The Taoist Canon (*Daozang* 道藏) includes a startlingly broad array of sources in 30 volumes under the title *Zhengtong daozaang* 正統道藏. Zhengtong is the name of the fifteenth century reign period during which it was compiled. It includes the texts of ancient Taoist philosophy such as the *Daodejing* 道德經 as well as a myriad of alchemical texts, moral treatises, ritual manuals, collections of spells, revealed scriptures as well as many others. The University at Albany Library owns the work. The call number is BL 1900 A1 T26x 1986.

Archives and Document Collections

Although we do have many materials for early Chinese history thanks to the efforts at compilation and collection, even more has been lost. From the Song 宋 dynasty (960-1279) on, source survival improves because of the spread of printing and therefore the increasing number of texts produced (prior to then almost all texts were hand copied). The variety of texts surviving also increases as we approach the modern period.

Government Archives:

Much of the government archives of the Ming 明 (1368-1644) and Qing dynasties have actually survived. They are mostly in Beijing with some important collections in Taipei (brought to Taiwan in 1949 by the fleeing Nationalists). The documents stored in the archives number in the millions.

Sources for the Modern Era:

Research on the twentieth century (bridging the modern, *jindai* 近代, and contemporary, *xiandai* 現代 periods), is both easier and more complicated. It is easier because so many more types of sources are available. However, because it is politically charged, it is not always possible to get access to sources. In fact, government archives in the mainland are particularly sensitive. Many materials are designated as “internal circulation” (*neibu* 內部), meaning that only authorized officials have access. Furthermore, excessive creativity in acquiring sources can get one into trouble. There have been cases where scholars have been accused of espionage when researching sensitive subjects (even when they seem to have used materials that were common knowledge). Obviously a certain amount of tact and delicacy is necessary if this is the kind of research one is doing.

The good news for undergraduate research is that there has been a great deal of modern material translated into English. Collections of translated government documents, media broadcasts, literary works, newspapers, and many others are available.

The Discovery of Early Sources:

Sometimes historians of early China get jealous of the abundance of material from later periods. Although there will never be the same number of sources, new ones for early Chinese history are discovered all the time. Archaeologists periodically find texts in tombs that they are excavating. Not only do they discover philosophical and religious texts, but law codes have even been found. The late nineteenth century witnessed some of the most dramatic discoveries. The stories of these finds could almost make movies.

The Dunhuang Archives: Dunhuang 敦煌 is an isolated oasis in northwestern Gansu 甘肅 province. During the Tang 唐 dynasty (618-907), it was an important stop on the fabled Silk Road. As the region fell to a conquering army in the eleventh century, occupants of the local Buddhist monastery sealed up a large cache of documents in one of the many caves in the monastery complex. The hoard was discovered in 1900. Word reached several adventurous, non-Chinese scholars who paid next to nothing to the guardians of the caves for what are priceless materials. The two biggest portions were bought by Aurel Stein for the British Museum (10,000 manuscripts) and Paul Pelliot for the Bibliothèque Nationale (6000 manuscripts). Russian, Japanese, and German scholars followed suit. Most of what was left ended up in Beijing. The manuscripts include many Buddhist and Confucian texts as well as administrative records, almanacs, and many other types of documents. Nor are they limited to Chinese. They include works in Sanskrit, Sogdian, Tangut, Tibetan, Turkic, and Uighur. Needless to say, Chinese have ever since been outraged by the “theft” of the manuscripts. The British Museum is currently engaged in a project to digitize its manuscripts and provide web access. You can look at the results so far at the following URL: <http://idp.bl.uk/>

The Oracle Bones: The other great “discovery” was the so-called “oracle bone” texts (*jiaguwen* 甲骨文). The value of these bones is inestimable. They corroborated much of the legendary history of the Shang 商 dynasty in the second millennium B.C. They were apparently accidentally discovered by farmers who came upon bones with strange writing on them. They decided that they had to be dragon bones. Their real origin as divination tools used in far antiquity was realized after a Chinese scholar got word of pharmacists grinding the bones for medicine. Unlike the Dunhuang manuscripts, most of the oracle bones remain in China. The script on them is the clear ancestor of the writing system used in China (and, in a way, Japan) to this day.

The lesson of these stories is that there are many sources available for research and the number continue to expand.

MISCELLANEOUS POINTS ABOUT CHINESE HISTORICAL SOURCES

Below are some things you should know about sources for Chinese history but do not fit naturally into the categories listed above.

1. Most of the primary sources used for researching Chinese history before the twentieth century were written in Classical Chinese (*wenyanwen* 文言文), also known as Literary Chinese. This is clearly the ancestor of modern spoken Chinese, but it is a very different language. Both its grammar and vocabulary are different and therefore requires separate study. There are many educated Chinese today who cannot read Classical Chinese. The difference between modern Chinese (*baihua* 白話) and Classical Chinese is greater than the difference between modern English and Shakespeare. Anglo-Saxon and modern English might be a closer analogy. One language complication is the presence of what are referred to as Vernacular texts. This means that they were written in a style closer to what was actually spoken. Vernacular writing from centuries ago is also called *baihua*. Although it is different from what is spoken today, early Vernacular writing is much closer to modern Chinese.
2. Since publishers issue texts on different principles, it is worth taking note of format variations. Before the twentieth century, Chinese books were formatted with the text running vertically from the top to the bottom of the page proceeding from right to left. In the last century, that tradition has begun to share the stage with the Western European convention of horizontal text running from left to right. In general, publishers on Taiwan are more likely to follow the traditional format, but even in the People's Republic of China publishers often use the traditional format for pre-twentieth century texts (especially if they are aimed at a scholarly audience).
3. Punctuation is an important issue. Traditional Chinese texts had NO PUNCTUATION! It is a difficult skill to read texts without punctuation. It is sometimes difficult (even with years of experience) to be sure where to break a sentence (or even where one word stops and the next begins). Modern editions of these texts often do include punctuation. This can range from simply differentiating the phrases with dots (as in the *Congshu jicheng* above) to full-fledged Western-style punctuation.
4. The primary sources for Chinese history are not limited to texts in Chinese. There are many sources from other countries in other languages that are useful for research on China. For example, some Japanese Buddhist pilgrims kept diaries of their travels (often in Classical Chinese, as it turns out). Similarly, there are Manchu language sources for the Qing 清 dynasty (1644-1911). Tibetan language sources are also available as are Mongolian sources. Sources in European languages often record important information as well.