

EAST ASIAN HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Doing research on East Asian history requires an understanding of the kind of sources available and how to use them. This handout is designed to introduce the main types of sources that are available. It also suggests the path of development that you will follow if you pursue the study of East Asian history beyond the undergraduate level. With this background, you will have a general idea of the kind of sources available for research.

Before we get to the sources, we need to understand some basic characteristics of the discipline of History as it is applied to East Asia.

Do you know the lingo?

History as an academic discipline is a little unusual in that it encompasses a great deal of variety. The only thing that all its practitioners agree on is that history is the analytical study of the human past. Historians therefore happily adopt whatever tools are available to help them make sense of the past. Economic historians use the tools of economic analysis; intellectual historians (who study ideas and values) use the tools of philosophy; and social historians often draw on anthropology and sociology. As you research a topic in East Asian history, you should pay attention to the jargon that authors use. If they seem to be using unfamiliar terminology, USE RELEVANT DICTIONARIES to learn the terms. Not only will this make the work more comprehensible, you may actually find yourself enjoying the intellectual puzzle (yes, I know, but allow a professor to dream a little!).

Besides the technical jargon of the various historical subdisciplines, there are terms frequently encountered in reading Chinese, Japanese, or Korean history that you will need to become familiar with. For example, when historians of China use the word “memorial,” they usually mean a report by an official to the Emperor. A cloistered emperor in medieval Japanese history has a particular meaning, as does *yangban* in Korean history.

Go East Young Person

Well, we usually fly west to end up in East Asia, but you get the idea. Here I want to make some observations concerning where you go from here (undergraduate history writing). American students tend to be spoiled by the fact that English has become a global language and that most Americans live a significant distance from non-English speaking countries. As a result, Americans are almost willfully monolingual. By the fact that you are in this course, we know that you do not fit that category, but there is still a temptation to rely excessively on English. This will have to change if you pursue East Asian history in graduate school.

The first place that English will fall away is in your use of primary sources. At the moment, you are largely restricted to using English language translations of primary sources. This is a perfectly acceptable entry way if you are using quality translations. You

will, however, eventually have to convert to using primary sources in the original languages. I will indicate some of the most important primary sources for Chinese historical research below.

However, primary sources are not the only place that East Asian languages come into play. Believe it or not, native Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans have been studying their own history for millennia. Scholars from these cultures produce a large amount of secondary scholarship in their own languages on their own history. As your language skills improve, you will have to begin consulting this scholarship as well. That means if you want to study Japanese history, you must be able to read modern Japanese well enough to know what is going on in Japanese language scholarship. It will also help your career immensely if you can speak the language well enough to converse with scholars (though that will come later).

It turns out also that not just American scholars are interested in the history of other countries. When you really progress in your studies, you will want to be able to consult scholarship from other countries. For example, you should not even think about doing premodern Chinese history without at least a reading knowledge of Japanese. Japanese scholars do amazingly high quality research in many fields. I think Irish historians should learn Japanese!

A QUICK PRE-GAME PEP TALK!

I know that the nascent historians are now close to tears because of all the language requirements, but they need not despair! The burden is only a burden if you look at it as one. There is really nothing like the excitement of learning and using a new language. Sure there's tedium and terror, but imagine being in a dead-end job for fifty years! Each new language you learn opens a window on a new world. Those of you who hang around the Department office enough will know what a kick we get out of this stuff. All that fun can be yours too!

METHODS IN HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Choosing the sources

Having decided on a historical problem to research, you will first have to decide on the proper sources. If you are able to use primary sources in Chinese, you can search widely for relevant sources. If you cannot yet (and I emphasize YET) use Chinese, you still must think about what sources are relevant. For example, if you are examining the philosophy of a famous intellectual, you will want to look for translations of that individual's writing.

At the same time that you are looking for such primary sources, you will also have to look for relevant secondary sources. You should see the section on the annotated bibliography for some guidelines on this.

Evaluating the sources

Having selected your sources, you must approach them in a critical fashion. You should always think about the particular viewpoints of the authors. As mentioned above, the dynastic histories were composed by court officials under imperial command. Their interpretations must be evaluated in that light.

If you are relying heavily on secondary sources, you should figure out what sources the author used. Then think about the implications of his or her source choices. Do they suggest holes in the analysis? How do the sources used relate to your own project? The ability to evaluate the source base of a piece of scholarship is one reason why scholarly monographs are very useful in doing research.

Synthesizing your material

Having formulated your research problem, selected your sources, and evaluated their strengths and weaknesses, you are ready to synthesize your material to create your argument. Primary sources provide basic raw material while secondary sources can offer data as well as interpretations on either your question or ones that are related. Often you will find that sources disagree. It is your responsibility to consider the problem, evaluate the arguments, and arrive at some conclusion.

“Chasing Rabbits”

My wise aunt uses this phrase to let me know when I am off on a tangent. Anyone who regularly walks through the woods will understand what she means. You are walking along minding your own business, when a rabbit scurries across the path. Tell me you don't want to run after it. I won't believe you. As it turns out, you should do a certain amount of chasing rabbits to produce a good piece of historical writing.

As you read about your topic, you will run across names of historical figures, government offices, famous monasteries, and many other interesting details. These are your rabbits. You will need to chase some of them. It may help your argument to know the family background of a historical figure. Are his or her birth and death dates significant? You won't know if you don't chase the rabbit to find out. Of course, in historical research, as in life, the trick is to know which rabbits to chase and which to ignore. Yet, if you ignore them all, both your papers and your life are likely to be fairly dull.

There are many kinds of reference works that will allow you to begin your rabbit chase. I have listed some below. Of course, rascally rabbits are sometimes hard to catch so the list is by no means exhaustive. You will occasionally have to be creative to get the information you need.

EAST ASIAN HISTORICAL REFERENCE WORKS

There are many reference works available to assist you in your efforts at East Asian historical research. Below I have made a list of the main types of reference works that historians use all the time (I have given some examples but the list is, by no means, exhaustive). Note also that reference works are being digitized all the time, so some of the printed versions may become less important in the future.

1. Encyclopedias:

These should never be the central source for historical writing, but they can be incredibly useful in tracking down some of the details concerning the topic you are researching. Those in Western languages are generally organized alphabetically. Take the time to familiarize yourself with the principles behind the work. That will make finding information easier. Remember when using them that sometimes a little creativity will make a big difference. If you do not find the precise term for which you are looking, try looking for related concepts or subject matter. Very good encyclopedias will also provide some bibliographical references for more in depth research.

It is worth noting that the compilation of encyclopedias has a long history in China. Traditional encyclopedias generally employ a topical arrangement (as opposed to the usual Western alphabetical organization) that takes some getting used to, but they provide enormous amounts of information once you get used to the system. They also often quote extensively from primary sources. Thus, some portions of works that otherwise are now lost have been preserved.

The University at Albany library has the following:

The Encyclopedia of Asian History

The Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan

2. Specialized (topical) dictionaries:

This kind of dictionary is useful for finding a brief identification of some important person, event, or concept. The title of the work will generally indicate the coverage of the dictionary. East Asian publishers are particularly fond of this kind of reference work. If you are willing to use your language skills, you can draw on some marvelous reference works.

Here are some examples:

Zhongguo lishi da cidian 中国历史大辞典 (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe).

This work (in 13 period and topical volumes) is incredibly useful. In addition to people, concepts, and events, it includes places, institutions, and important texts. Unfortunately, the University Library only has the volume concerning the Song 宋 dynasty (960-1279).

Hunter, Janet E. *Concise Dictionary of Modern Japanese History*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1984.

There are a couple of dictionaries of Buddhist terms:

Bukkyō dai jiten 仏教大辞典. Taipei: The Horizon Publishing Co., 1977.

Soothill, William. *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms with Sanskrit and English equivalents and a Sanskrit-Pali index*. Rpt. Taipei: Ch'eng-wen, 1972.

3. Atlases and Geographical Dictionaries:

It is often important to know where things are physically located. For this, atlases are essential. Good ones have place name indices and break regions into reasonably scaled maps.

Although our library does not have it, the standard atlas for Chinese history is the following:

Tan Qixiang 譚其驤, ed. *Zhongguo lishi dituji* 中国历史地图集 (Shanghai: Ditu chubanshe).

There are many Chinese geographical dictionaries. See, for example, the following:

Zhongguo gujin diming cidian 中國古今地名辭典. 3rd ed. Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu yinshuguan, 1972.

For Japanese historical place names, see *Nihon rekishi chimei taikai* 日本歴史地名体系 (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1983). DS 805 N5367

4. Chronologies:

This type of reference work is very popular in East Asian. The chronology (*nianbiao* 年表, J. *nenpyō* 年表) is a venerable form. Chronologies can be focused on a period or even the life of an historical figure. They can help you establish clear timelines and verify the sequence of important events.

Zhongguo lishi dashi nianbiao 中国历史大事年表. Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 1983+. DS 733 S48 1983

The following is a supplement to a Japanese historical dictionary *Nihon rekishi daijiten* 日本歴史大辞典:

Nihon rekishi nenpyō 日本歴史年表. Tokyo: Kawade shobo, DS 833 N513 1979.
SUP 1.

5. **Biographical Indices** (Ch. *renming suoyin* 人名索引; J. *jinmei sakuin* 人名索引)

Once you begin to do primary source research, you will need to track down sources on the lives of historical individuals. Scholars have produced many works that index biographical sources. In these, you can find references to primary sources relating to individuals arranged by the name.

There is another type of biographical index. That is the index of people who appear in a given work. For example, the Zhonghua shuju 中华书局 has produced indices for the names of individuals in all of the dynastic histories.

More will be said about biographical resources later in this course.

6. **Textual Concordances** (Ch. *yinde* 引得 among other terms; J. *sakuin* among other terms)

A concordance is a list of every word in a text. Many of the most important books in the Chinese cultural tradition have had concordances compiled for them. These works allow you to look up every occurrence of a specific character in the text. They are invaluable for close textual analysis.

7. **Specialized bibliographies**

One of the key stages in carrying out a research project is the compilation of an initial bibliography. This is made easier by the existence of specialized bibliographies. You can use this to identify previous work in a field and thereby know what you should read. The downside to these works is that they are out-of-date as soon as they are published because new research is constantly being produced. Nevertheless, they are good places to start.