SEEKING TRUTH FROM RECOLLECTIONS:
CONDUCTING ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH IN THE PRC

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In 1985, an interview was held with Professor Li Xin, the Director of the Modern History Institute at the Chinese Academy of Social Science. This took place at Qinghua University in Beijing, where the author was affiliated with the Social Sciences Division, researching the development of a Chinese Communist Party and Youth Corps in Europe during the early 1920's.\footnote{In fact, Professor Li was not a specialist in this particular area, but he has a large knowledge base on modern biography, personally knew many of these people, and shared some intriguing insights on growing up in Sichuan. At that time, the interview was significant, first, because of the fact that it took place. It emerged that this was the first time that Li Xin had made a public appearance at Qinghua University since the Cultural Revolution. Secondly, the interview was memorable because there were some lively exchanges about American history and the issue of revolution. Five years later, in 1990, the author returned to the PRC to research a biography of Zhao Shiyan (1901-1927), who was the first secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in Europe. Notes from previous interviews were reviewed, and it was noticed that in the Li Xin discussion there was an inquiry about remaining family members. Professor Li remarked, "Yes, there does exist a younger sister, and his nephew, a fellow named Li Peng." He imputed that Li Peng, a government bureaucrat, knew very little. This is not surprising since Zhao died before Li Peng was born. At that time there were no political repercussions in discussing Li Peng's position or knowledge base. However, this answer gains in significance five years later for, as one might expect, with the ascension to power of Li Peng, the general Chinese population has been treated to some exaggeration of family background, connections with significant revolutionaries, and so forth. Because of the Chinese reverence for moral, self-sacrificing leaders, the fact that Zhao Shiyan is Li Peng's uncle has been used as a legitimating device. One suspects that this innocuous question in 1985 might have been}
answered in a very different fashion in 1990.

The relevance of the above example is to highlight the fact that an interview may contain information on several different levels. There is the direct information obtained, implicit assumptions, or a subtext, which one must try to separate from the more factual data, and there is the important area of mistakes of memory, whether deliberate or unintentional. In a highly political climate, such as exists in the PRC, answers are often shaped by current political necessities, and limitations of memory and perspective. The main argument presented here is that while recognizing these limitations of oral history, we must integrate the rich historical potential of the interview with the more traditional written evidence. This paper will examine some of the historiographical uses and distortions of this kind of interview. There will be a focus on two individuals who were interviewed in both 1985 and 1990: Sheng Cheng, (b.1899) who was one of three Asian founders of the French Communist Party (December 1920), and who was an underground Communist for over forty years; and Zheng Chaolin (b.1900), an editor of The Bolshevik [Buweiersike] after the April 1927 coup, who was imprisoned for over 34 years by both the Guomindang and the Communists, who has been writing prolifically in the last decade. Each personality will be discussed by first giving a brief personal background, examples from the interview process, and an extrapolation of lessons learned from that process. The conclusion will discuss the implications of oral history research conducted in the PRC.

I. Sheng Cheng and the Tension Between Ideology and Personality

Born 6 February 1899, in Yichang, Jiangsu, Sheng Cheng, according to his own account was one of the youngest participants in the 1911 Revolution. Raised in a poor family with a scholarly tradition, Sheng was still able to go to a progressive school in Nanjing, and attended Zhendan University in Shanghai, thus receiving Western knowledge and a taste of the French language.
For a short time Sheng was a worker and labour organizer for the Beijing-Hankou railroad, when he made the decision to participate in the May Fourth Movement. After some preparatory school, and a gift of money by Huang Xing's widow, Sheng left in the fall of 1919, arriving in France in January 1920.

Sheng spent his first six months in France at the Lycée Vendôme, where he quickly acquired facility with the French language and began to take some science courses. In the last few months of 1920, Sheng was in Paris, earning money at the cabinetmakers, Duchiron. Thus, Sheng Cheng tasted firsthand the labour experience. At one point, like 200 other Chinese youth, Sheng lived in a tent on the lawn in front of the Chinese Federation. According to Sheng, he attended the Congress of Tours in 1920, where he became one of three Asian founders of the French Communist Party. For the greater part of his adult life he was an underground Communist, living in effect, a double life.

Sheng moved south and became the first Chinese student at the College de Montpellier, where in less than one year, he was well on his way to earning a degree in sericulture, and had earned the respect of the faculty, with F. Lambert, the Director of the Station sericulture in Montpellier writing of Sheng that he was "well content with him," that Sheng was an interesting and hard worker. Through scholarships from the Association Amicale et de Patronage Franco-Chinoise, and his own efforts to earn funds, Sheng obtained his certificat d'études supérieures de botanique (1923), a diplôme de licence (1926), and by 1927 he was taking coursework in Paris, in preparation for his dissertation. Sheng studied comparative sericulture throughout France and spent some time in Italy. Although not a member of a youth group like the Young China Study Association or the New Citizen’s Study Society, Sheng Cheng was a prominent activist in the Chinese community in France. He participated in meetings of all types, and was secretary of the Association Générale des Travailleurs Chinois en France.
Sheng thoroughly enjoyed France on a visceral level, he loved the art, the politics, and the people. He felt enervated by the cultural atmosphere in Paris and often went to the cafés, where "... many writers, painters, and sculptors would congregate together, ... There was nothing anyone would not say, the sphere of discussions was wide, the arguments heated, it is so hard to imagine. During the discussions there would be times when I did not even know why some words left my mouth, this was the influence of a special, creative environment. Comparing it with our present day, totally pestilent world, it is like two different types of circumstances." 12

In 1927, Sheng Cheng was invited to participate in a conference organized by the Ligue Internationale des Femmes pour la Paix et la Liberté, held from 16-30 August, in Geneva. The conference was an anti-colonialism forum, and was attended by Romain Rolland, J. Nehru (and his daughter, the late Indira Gandhi, who was ten at the time), A. Schweitzer, S. Stefany, J. C. Bose, Mohammed Hatta, Roger Baldwin and several others. 13 Sheng had completed a part of his autobiography and read it to other participants at the conference, who applauded and encouraged him to publish it, which he did with the help of Romain Rolland, who was very enthusiastic. Through Rolland's connections, Sheng was also able to get an introduction to Paul Valéry, meeting at the author's home. Valéry, (whose mother was Italian), and Sheng conversed in French and Italian, progressing in their discussion, "from Sicily, Rome, France to speaking of China." As Valéry escorted Sheng to the door he offered to write a foreword for Sheng's book, which he later extended into a preface. 14 With Valéry's fame as a poet, as well as his twenty years of silence before he resumed publishing, Sheng was receiving a tremendous honor. Sheng earned 4,000 francs for his book which received an enthusiastic response, and was translated into several languages. In fact, in 1985 the French wrote to him that they were reissuing his book and in the early eighties, the Mitterand government awarded Sheng the Légion d'honneur, which he has proudly hung in his study.
Sheng’s book is about his mother, her wisdom which was anchored in suffering, growing up in a time of transition as expressed through his own childhood. He wrote of the values and moral fables he was told, his education, a brief retreat into Buddhism, and his preparation to depart for France. Sheng used his own family members to reflect the national situation. His father’s mother is portrayed as tyrannical, clinging to her power and to tradition with devastating harshness.

"There are two grandmothers," Sheng wrote, "both superstitious, one is at the head of the nation [Dowager Empress Cixi]; the other is at the heart of the nation, in the family."\(^{15}\) The predominant themes were the value of hard work, community solidarity, sincerity, suffering as learning, the need for sacrifice, and the necessity to face death as part of life. "Night. After suffering is over, I see the dawn in the heart of death. In the heart of the pale dawn: a statue! The four of us, [children] standing at its feet, cry: Mother!"

Yet Sheng was not too heavyhanded in his lyricism, and often laughed at his own escapades, or at the inconsistencies of life, "If the Chinese are awakened today, it is because the foreigner accused them of being a race of barbarians."\(^{16}\) In order to learn from the West, Sheng advised that the Chinese must also retain their own traditions, and must go slowly in inculcating new values. Sheng, tried to show that the gulf between the Orient and the Occident was not so wide. Sheng suggested a credo of humanity, "Man should be human in the fullest sense of the word. He should realize that he himself is a god, a living god. He is all-powerful. He can annihilate the impossible. . . . Finally, he can both idealize the real and bring the ideal into realization, materialize the spirit and spiritualize matter. . . . I believe in the religion of Humanity."\(^{17}\)

For most of his life, Sheng Cheng worked secretly as an underground Communist. After 1949, it was not until he spent almost twenty years as a political science professor at Taiwan University that he came out into the open, leaving for Paris, the United States, and finally, the
Beijing Foreign Languages Institute, where he has been conducting linguistic research during the 1980's.

When first meeting Sheng Cheng, he appears frail. However, this is deceptive. Sheng Cheng, even currently ill and wasting, still resonates with vivid liveliness. One can easily imagine the gadfly personality he had to have to pursue his political, cultural and educational goals while in France during the 1920's. After several interviews, it was obvious that Sheng had a wide array of acquaintances and an unusual breadth of activities. With his participation in Chinese labor organization, his matriculation at Montpellier, helping to found the French Communist Party, the ability to enter the French cultural milieu, not to mention his role as an underground Communist, make Sheng Cheng's life an intriguing study in its own right. An article on Sheng Cheng in a 1988 edition of *Le Monde*, claimed that one could not help admiring "the spirit of contradiction and non-conformity, which is rare in China."\(^{18}\)

After the interviews of 1985, the author was able to conduct research in France, and surveyed several archival collections. Sheng Cheng was an ubiquitous part of this search, as his name, documents about his activities, appeared regularly in many different collections. Therefore, one could assess the validity of certain historical recollections. It quickly appeared that there was concrete evidence to support many of his assertions in the main, but that some of the more glamorous aspects were a little suspect. For example, Sheng Cheng asserted that when he went to Geneva for the Conference in 1927, that Ho Chi Minh, escaping from China, was also at the Conference and then stayed in Paris.\(^{19}\) This sounded like a plausible explanation for an episode of mystery in the life of Ho Chi Minh. The Vietnamese name that Sheng Cheng gave to me was "Duong Van Giao." Duong Van Giao was listed among those who attended the same meeting against colonialism, that was attended by Sheng Cheng.\(^{20}\) At the colonial section of the French national archives, however, it became apparent that Duong Van Giao was clearly not Ho Chi Minh,
but a well-known lawyer, who did not argue for revolution but constitutionalism for Viet Nam. According to the police records, in 1927, after his return from Geneva, Sheng Cheng had engaged Duong Van Giao in a whole series of public debates about the future of Viet Nam.21 Therefore, one could conclude that in this case, at least, Sheng Cheng’s recollection was highly unlikely. Duong Van Giao was definitely not a pseudonym for Ho Chi Minh, and verification for Ho’s whereabouts in late 1927 is still lacking. However, by seeking documentary evidence in conjunction with the oral history, other historical episodes were enhanced. Thus, we know that Sheng Cheng did attend the important meeting, in Geneva, with important international personages, and did impress some of them to the point of sponsoring publication of his autobiography. We know that he debated on the side of radicalism against reformism for colonial Viet Nam. We know that he was one of the few Chinese on the subscriber’s list to La Paria. It is very likely that he did know Ho Chi Minh at the Congress of Tours.

One of the most valuable lessons contained in the oral interview is that the human richness of emotions and relationships can be preserved in some form. It is startling to realize that these relationships are in reality, full of ambivalence. For example, Sheng Cheng had mentioned that he named his first daughter after American Secretary of State Lansing’s niece, Bessie Hugues Le Roux. Bessie Hugues Le Roux was the wife of Senator Hugues Le Roux, who were both concerned and helpful to the Chinese community in France. One would assume that Sheng’s relationship with Bessie Hugues Le Roux might have declined after his personal commitment to Communism at the Congress of Tours. Thus, it was somewhat surprising to find a letter in the Archives Nationales written from Sheng Cheng, months after the Congress of Tours, to Bessie Hugues Le Roux,22 with the salutation "Chère grande soeur," thanking her for five hundred francs, and devising strategies to obtain more money, and including a questionnaire on his background and plans. The content of this letter appeared contradictory at first. How could Sheng Cheng have committed himself to
the revolutionary cause and claim that he was going to pursue agricultural science in China after five years? How could he have pledged himself at the Congress of Tours and then accept benefaction from this rather conservative Senator? Was it part of a cynical strategy or greed? Was Sheng Cheng in some way an elasticized ideologue? The issue was clarified by an enlightening discussion with a French colleague who simply, but insightfully, remarked, "Communists are humans too, you know." Actually, in history books the lines of ideology are drawn with thick, impermeable strokes. In reality, people are capable of relationships beyond ideologies and politics. There were congruencies between Sheng Cheng and the Le Roux couple, as for example, both worked hard for the promotion of intercultural understanding. In the tension between ideology and personality, the oral history of Sheng Cheng provides society with an expanded vision of the dimensions of human behavior, that people are not black and white in their behavior, but flesh and blood, full of a range of emotions and passions and even contradictions. Thus, a more textured reality emerges when one combines historical methods, such as oral history and archival research. It would seem that the relationship between belief and behavior, between thought and action are understood in their broader context, and in all their ambiguities.

II. Zheng Chaolin and the Tension Between Historical Revisionism and Historical Recovery

In interviewing Sheng Cheng, there is a certain emphasis on his participation in certain environments and historical turning points. To be sure, his life has been rich with adventure and accomplishment. The case of Zheng Chaolin is notable for his preoccupation with his own role as an observer, rather than as an actor in events. Indeed for over half of his adult life, he was precluded from activity, as Zheng Chaolin was a political prisoner for thirty-four years. Released in 1979, Zheng has been carefully watched, as he lives quietly in a one-room apartment in Shanghai.

Born in 1900 in Fujian, Zheng Chaolin was a sickly child, who read extensively and lived
mostly an internal life. Studious, he was able to obtain some scholarship money to travel to France, which he reached in the winter of 1919, with his fellow students from Fujian. According to Zheng, not only was he unawakened during the New Culture Movement, but he did not care for the ideas of Chen Duxiu that he did know about. In addition to the non-participation in the activities of the May Fourth era, Zheng was also oblivious to the problems of the Chinese student-workers in France during the various demonstrations in 1921. In many biographical accounts of this New Culture generation, there is usually some attempt to justify positions held during these demonstrations and struggles, as well as some retrospective leadership role or adventure. Zheng remembers the different cliques, and for reasons of his personal connections tended to favor one faction over another, but he himself never claims participation. After his conversion to Marxism-Leninism and during his participation in the European Branch of the Chinese Communist Youth Corps, this neutrality later plagued Zheng, both in his thought process and in how others perceived him. For example, Zheng recounted, in a memoir on Yin Kuan, another famous Trotskyite, that he received a severe chastising during a meeting of his Communist cell which included Li Weihan, Wang Zekai, Qin Shilun, Wang Ruofei and Yin Kuan. They were discussing the idea of political struggle, and when Zheng mentioned that three attitudes existed toward struggle:

Thereupon, everyone... attacked my view. At the meeting dispersed outside it was pouring rain, they wanted to return to the city, I escorted them a bit of the way, but they did not want my escort... [They wanted to discuss his mistake in private] At the next small organizational meeting they sternly criticized me, remarking that even the masses knew that there was no neutral attitude [toward struggle],... I had previously read Romain Rolland, especially his work that opposed the eruption of the First World War, Au-Dessus de Mêlée, ... I had used this neutral attitude during the factional struggles during 1921 in the Work-Study Movement... [However], after I entered the factory, my thoughts had already
progressed, I had really wanted to take that opportunity to criticize my own previous thoughts.  

This sense of being apart, of independent analysis did not bode well for Zheng Chaolin's position within the Party during the late 1920's when the standard of conformity was increasingly high. In March 1923, Zheng Chaolin left France for the Soviet Union with the first group from the European Branch of the Chinese Communist Youth Corps. While in Moscow, Zheng wanted to learn Russian, which was not encouraged, "While in Moscow," he recalled in an interview, "the CCP group in Moscow was told not to study Russian, for there were interpreters and time was too pressing. But I studied Russian all the same, for which I was criticized." 

The decade of the 1920's was eventful for Zheng Chaolin, who worked in the propaganda section of the party. His particular contribution was helping to edit the post-1927 Party organ, The Bolshevik. Although most of Zheng's memoir publications deal with the role of others, such as Chen Duxiu and Qu Qiubai, his published autobiography discusses other important early leaders. In one case, he relates how the important CCP head of Guangdong/Guangxi, and son of Chen Duxiu, Chen Yannian, had asked for help in writing his articles. In the most recent interview, Zheng was able to flesh out his own participation. In researching the leadership role of Zhao Shiyan at the time of the April 12th Coup, it seemed significant that Zhao was the very first CCP martyr to be remembered on the pages of Buweiersike, with a memorial, that secondly included Chen Yannian. This memorial was printed on the first page of the first issue: 

Interviewer: Who wrote the article [unsigned] in memory of Zhao Shiyan on the first page of the journal The Bolshevik?

Zheng Chaolin: I did. Many died, the most important ones of whom were Zhao Shiyan and Chen Yannian. Nominally, Qu Qiubai was in charge of the journal. But as a matter of fact, it is I who was in charge. All those articles without the writers' names were written by
The fact that Zheng was so involved in the publication of *The Bolshevik*, is significant because Zheng Chaolin was soon to become an avowed Trotskyite, following Chen Duxiu, and his good friend Yin Kuan, into a different conception of the revolutionary future. By knowing that Zheng was a key editor of *The Bolshevik*, one can better understand the subtle interplays, not only in the journal itself, but also in the larger debates within CCP circles. In fact, because of these theoretical disagreements on revolutionary strategy, Zheng Chaolin was expelled from the CCP alongside Chen Duxiu and many others in 1929.

From 1929 onwards, Zheng Chaolin has been a firm believer in Trotskyism, and throughout his various captures and imprisonments, releases and political activities, he has never lost his identity as a Trotskyite. Wang Fanxi, who was of a different Trotskyite faction, but who was imprisoned with Zheng, testified to his indomitable spirit, comparing Zheng’s firmness and spirit to an "Old Buddha." Wang’s memoir analyzes the different Trotskyite factions and the prison experience.30 Put in prison by both the Guomindang, and after 1952 by the CCP, Zheng Chaolin had ample time to reflect on the process and nature of revolution in China during the 1920’s. After his release from prison in 1979, he has been prolific in his writings on this period. For example, in 1985 alone, he published over a dozen articles in the Hong Kong journal, *Zhongbao*. Between 1985-1990, Zheng published an autobiography, (written originally in 1945), and a book of poetry that he had also written during imprisonment.31 Moreover, Zheng Chaolin himself, became an object of controversy when he disputed the memoirs of Peng Shuzhi.32 Currently, Zheng’s autobiography is being translated into English by Gregor Benton. This tremendous burst of memoirs, some of which are still laying unpublished in his study, have become the main objective of Zheng Chaolin’s remaining years.

At the first interview with Zheng Chaolin, in 1985, due to the fact that he was still
monitored, there was a government political observer, and the questions were of necessity limited in their scope. The importance of speaking with Zheng Chaolin is that he is the only living founder of the European Branch of the Chinese Communist Youth Corps and Party who had attended the meeting in the Bois de Boulogne in 1922. Thus, Zheng is in a unique position to help in the explication and clarification of certain historical facts and events. For example, one of the concerns historians have had about this historical event has been the role of the Communist International. While the Chinese Communists in China were heavily controlled in their political strategy and activities by Communist International representatives, it appeared that their compatriots in Europe had no such supervision. This was important for the theoretical development of the European Branch, and for their attitude toward the Comintern and the Soviet Union, contrasted with their more closely supervised comrades back in China. According to Zheng, except for some linkages of Zhang Bojian (in Germany), there were no strong, direct linkages. Later research by several researchers in the French archives, including the archives of the French Communist Party, the notes of the Communist colonial committee, and other materials have not uncovered Comintern linkages. Moreover, evidence at the time indicates that the visas of the Chinese Communists who traveled to the Soviet Union were issued through the Youth branch back in China.

In general, while relating the circumstances of his own role in affairs, Zheng Chaolin does not inflate his historical contribution, and is occasionally self-deprecating. One is inclined to trust the recollections of Zheng Chaolin because he is hesitant and forthright when he does not remember something, and will mention if there is some doubt, or probability. When he wants to indicate the tentative nature of a memory, he will preface, "I do not remember exactly, but, kongpa [perhaps] it was thus...."

During the 1990 interview with Zheng Chaolin, the author was not accompanied by a political observer. His mind lucid and sharp, Zheng looked thinner, and moved more slowly.
However, his demeanor was somehow stronger and happier than in 1985. He was living in the same one room apartment. A saucepan, sticky with cooked milk lay on his desk, which was covered by books and works in progress. A magnifying glass stood on a stack of papers. Above the walls of the bed, which faces his desk, were pictures from the past: the second meeting of the European Branch of the Chinese Communist Youth Corps in 1923, a picture of his son, who died of starvation as a young child, during the War of Resistance against the Japanese. His wife was pictured both on the wall and on his night table. Blind in her old age, she was attacked by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, and died in the early 1980's. Except for a nightly check by a grandniece, who visits each evening to make sure he is alright, Zheng Chaolin is alone in his apartment. Solitary and persistent, Zheng diligently continues to write about the past, reconstructing history as he saw it, preserving the broader contours of political figures like Chen Duxiu, Qu Qiubai, and many others less famous. Finally, and perhaps most overwhelming, in his demeanor, there is no sense of self-pity, no bitterness that corrodes his portrayal of the past, so much of which was spent behind prison bars, his life seemingly wasting away.

One of the keys to this amazing tranquility was discovered after the 1990 interview, when lunch was eaten together at a nearby restaurant. The author was especially surprised at the sense of humility and humor that seemed to permeate Zheng Chaolin’s persona. When she asked, "How did you survive thirty-four years of prison?" Zheng replied, as if he was waiting for this question a long time, "Well Louis Blanqui survived thirty-three years!" Perhaps the key to Zheng’s serenity comes from his deep commitment to his political philosophy, and the fact that he has never betrayed his values. He has learned how to endure years of inaction, but that did mean that he did not actively believe in his vision of society.

Zheng Chaolin was particularly important to interview in 1990, because of the potentially increasing focus on Zhao Shiyan, as the Uncle of Li Peng. Zheng knew Zhao in France, he had
been with Zhao in Moscow, and Zheng confirmed that he had written the latter's obituary in *The Bolshevik*. Probably the most informative factual information, was the answer to the question, that was asked on Zhao Shiyan's relationship with Vladimir Lenin. Zhao Shiyan's exceptional abilities to organize and write for labor, his linguistic skills, and his articles which appeared after 1924 on Leninist strategy, led to the author's speculation that perhaps Zhao had met with the favor of Lenin. Moreover, this speculation is very appealing to those who are attempting to build up a certain hagiographic vision of Zhao Shiyan. Zheng Chaolin who saw Zhao Shiyan daily, replied to this question decisively not:

Zhao arrived in Moscow in the same group as I on April 4, 1923. Meanwhile, Lenin was seriously ill and lived in a small village outside Moscow where Gorky lived. We did not see Lenin until he died and his corpse was carried to Moscow. That is we saw the dead Lenin.\(^{35}\)

A follow up question by the interviewer inquired that in perhaps their ability to lead, one could conceive of Zhao Shiyan as a "Chinese Lenin." The answer that Zheng gave was significant for the conceptual insight and objectivity of the response. Zheng explained, "He was far from being called the Chinese Lenin. Zhao was no match with Lenin in that the latter was a great theoretician (while the former was not)." Zheng recognized that Zhao Shiyan might have developed more theoretical depth had he lived longer, but he had a frank assessment of Zhao's leadership abilities, as they stood at the time. It was probably this sense of potential lost, as well as the loss of a charismatic labor agitator that has remained so vivid in the minds of Zheng Chaolin and others who knew Zhao Shiyan.

Strengthened by his belief in Trotskyism, Zheng Chaolin has attempted both the recovery of history and its revision. If Sheng Cheng has been excited about recovering his own role in a life where he had to hide his convictions, Zheng Chaolin has been excited about recovering the
historical role of events that surrounded him in a suspended life, where his convictions were his only reason to live. Both have contributed to our knowledge of revolutionary Chinese history and society by sharing their past.

III. Conclusion: On Reality and Truth

One of the most exciting aspects of Chinese historical research is the fact that the Chinese themselves have a reverence for the richness of historical meaning. Throughout the dynasties, periods of disunity, and the modern era, history has served, alongside writing, as a key cultural anchor for the Chinese. While access can be a difficulty in conducting research in the People’s Republic of China, historians who are interested in the Republican period must realize that a rich source of material is disappearing as the unique May Fourth generation, those born around the turn of the century, are increasingly passing on. Both the Chinese and a few Westerners have realized this important point. Since 1979, there have appeared numerous compendia and memoir collections in China. Scholars such as Vera Schwarcz and Mary G. Mazur, among others, have endeavored to capture the recollections of these older historical actors.36

Thus far this paper has examined two case studies that have illustrated two different emphases, the interviewee as actor and the interviewee as observer. Overall, it has been contended that the oral interview, used cautiously and in conjunction with written sources is an important historical tool. The conclusion will explore some of the contributions, limitations and implications of conducting oral history research in the People’s Republic of China.

There is a distinct challenge in using oral history in modern Chinese studies. It seems clear that oftentimes the interviewer and the interviewee have competing agendas. First there is the perspective of the interviewer. For the historian the oral interview can serve to confirm the generally accepted historical record. This "setting the record straight," can contribute to both
confirmation and clarification. For example, the fact that Sheng Cheng was an underground Communist means that much of his personal recollections, especially regarding his radical activities were purposely misleading. In fact, Sheng Cheng’s memoir, particularly relating to the Work-Study Movement, was used by historians for many years as a foundation work. Thus, although this does not mean that greater veracity is necessarily associated with the current retelling of history, there is the self-conscious task of clarification, getting the final edition of these events, now free from the necessity of subterfuge.

Secondly, while oral interviews can serve as tools of history in understanding what happened, they can also point to new directions of thought and interpretation in understanding why history happened a certain way. For the biography of Zhao Shiyuan, the ideas that Zheng Chaolin presented on Zhao’s strengths and weaknesses as a leader provided important pathways for future interpretation. The researcher, based on the unique aspect of Zhao’s leadership in Europe, had extrapolated from that experience in viewing his subsequent activities. Upon reflection, it seemed nearer to reality that as Zheng indicated Zhao Shiyuan was somewhat impetuous in promoting political agitation, just as was his close friend from France, Li Lisan. This impatience helped to lead to premature labor uprisings, both in Beijing in 1925 and Shanghai in 1926, although the final uprising in Shanghai was successful in March 1927. Perhaps, in considering revolutionary leadership, the idea of impatience also can be a necessary attribute, as well as dangerous tendency. Thus, oral interviews can also be dialogues that have salience in their ability to collect the meaning as well as the reality of the past.

Thirdly, in addition to the purely factual information and intellectual stimulation that an interview with a participant or observer can provide, an interview with a person from a certain time era, will hopefully sensitize the interviewer to the mentalité of a certain historical generation. Since the May Fourth generation are the last generation who had childhoods in a dynastic period, this
has been a critical task for historians throughout the last decade.

If the task of the historian conducting oral history research in the PRC is to preserve the reality and truth of the past, the agenda of the interviewee is often to live with the present and protect himself/herself from future problems. This is reflected in a variety of interviewee perspectives toward the interview process. For example, the interviewee response can be a straightforward desire to recapture the past. Depending on the political issues involved, a response can help to establish, seemingly trivial but important understanding of past events. An example of this was an interview with the distinguished Dr. Yang Kun, who was one of the hundred students escorted by Wu Zhihui in the fall of 1921 to matriculate at the Sino-French Institute at Lyon University. In discussing the voyage, Dr. Yang remarked that Wu Zhihui had traveled fourth class with the students aboard the ship. This is a small piece of the picture. But it means that Wu Zhihui was not as unsympathetic to Chinese youth, as is he is often portrayed during the post-1921 period. This small insight gains in salience as one realizes that the struggle over Lyon comprised an important historical turning point for the radicalization of key Chinese leaders such as Li Lisan, Cai Hesen, Chen Yi, (CCP) Wang Jingqi (GMD), and others who were to be expelled from Lyon, sent back in humiliation to China, shortly after Wu’s arrival with the hundred new students to Lyon.38

In addition to recapturing the past, the interviewee response is often influenced by the need to recapture or rework one’s own role in past events. In part, this is a natural desire to have a part in history, as well as a need to justify past actions or inaction. For example, in his memoir on Zhao Shiyian, which was originally a response to Zhao’s older sister, Zhao Shilan, who collected materials on her brother in the early 1960’s, Li Lisan claimed that even though at one point he supported Zhao Shiyian’s faction against Cai Hesen’s faction because of friendship, in reality he believed in Marxism at this point. In fact, Li Lisan’s articles at this time clearly show that his ideology was not
Marxist but anarchist, and that he was committed ideologically to the anarchist doctrine of mutual aid. In addition to the impulse of self-justification, another rationale that may have motivated Li Lisan to misremember his early political positions, may have been the current need in the early 1960's to protect himself from current political consequences of admitting a non-Marxist background. Given the fact that Li Lisan was driven to commit suicide for his previous political actions, his possible consideration of the then political present was not unreasonable.

How does the researcher contend with the sometimes competing agendas of the interviewer and interviewee? First, in writing about the actions of the human community, historians must not be totally detached from the moral consequences of their research. Therefore, if recollection becomes politically "sensitive" material, the interviewer has the moral responsibility to make this explicit with the interviewee, and gain their conscious permission to use that material. Even at this point, other routes to give the same information should be explored to protect the interview subject. So in the first place, the researcher and interview subject must have the same sense of what the political consequences are in using the material.

Secondly, one must always be cognizant in conducting oral history research in the PRC, that there may be an implicit political meaning, or a subtext (an implied meaning) in the information being relayed. By understanding the historical context of the questions being asked, as well as the political ramifications that would currently arise, seemingly small facts can gain in significance and enrich the historical study. An important dimension to recognizing or utilizing a subtext, is to hold judgement until the project goes through further forms of study, whether they be more interviews, archival research, and so forth.

Finally, the historian, in conducting oral history research might reflect on the nature of reality and truth. Our task is to attempt to fit together a web of facts, a series of actions, and an interpretation of the moral, social and political consequences. The question to ponder when
hearing anyone relate their past actions and observations is "which reality," and "whose truth?"
Ideally, historians attempt to capture the pure truth, but it should be recognized that for the
participants there may be other realities, other truths that have precedence. The dangers of living
a double-life or being imprisoned for decade after decade were not realities for the majority of
people in China, but it did mold the shape of truth for both Sheng Cheng and Zheng Chaolin. For
them, the predominance of ideological commitment has been a central truth in their life. Perhaps,
the sense of their truth will help historians understand the revolutionary zeal and commitment of
this pivotal generation. While not the total view, their truth should not be discounted in exchange
for a linear narrative of history.

In conclusion, while there are obvious limitations to conducting oral history research in the
People's Republic of China, there is also abundant potential. Historians can gain greatly from this
contact: a sensibility toward past historical epochs, factual information and leads to further
information, as well as illuminating dialogue. However, one must also be alert to the objectives of
the interview subject, to recapture or justify past actions, and often to protect oneself in a constantly
changing political environment. By using interviews judiciously alongside the written record, oral
history can add a rich dimension to the historical record.
Notes

1. This European Branch of the Chinese Communist Party and Youth Corps, both formed in 1922, served as a crucible for some very significant leaders such as Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, Zhu De, Nie Rongzhen, Li Fuchun, Xiao San, Chen Yannian, and Zhao Shiyan.


4. The archives throughout Paris abound in the traces of Sheng Cheng [often spelled, Cheng Tcheng]. Whether it is the Archives Diplomatiques, Archives Nationales, or the Archives Nationales Section d'Outre Mer, Sheng can be found as the prime target of a Sûreté investigation or one of many people on a list, or in a monthly political report. Sheng's name occurs in even the most unexpected place, for example, he was noted as a correspondent of a Vietnamese radical, La Bacang, along with Marcel Cachin, Charles Belian, Camille Drevet, and others, Agent Guillaume, "Liste d'Indochinoise avec leurs adresses trouvée dans la chambre de Le Bacang." 30 Mai 1930, Archives Nationales Section d'Outre-Mer, [ANSOM], Service de Liaison avec des Originaires des Territoires de la France Outre-Mer, [SLOTFOM] Carton III, Dossier 12.

5. Sheng Cheng Interview, 12 October 1985 (Beijing).

6. Ibid.


9. Note on Sheng Cheng (1928), [for renewal of carte d'identité request], Archives Diplomatiques, Série E Chine 492.

10. Sheng contributed two articles on agriculture and China to the popular journal, *Lü Ou zhoukan* [Travel to France journal] 4 June 1921 and 9 July 1921.

11. For example, in 1925, Sheng asked the government on behalf of the Chinese labour corps of the First World War, for compensation, monuments and amnesty, which were all denied. See pp. 34-38, Archives Diplomatiques, Série E Chine, 491.


13. See the report "Section Francaise de la ligue internationale des femmes pour la paix et la liberté" ANSOM, SLOTFOM, Carton III, Dossier 92. Sheng Cheng's name is confused with Sia Ting, a common phenomenon, especially during 1927, when both Sheng and Sia Ting (the latter
headed the radical section of the reorganization of the Guomindang), attended foreign conferences. For other confirmation of Sheng's participation in the meeting see Notes of Agent Désiré, 1927, ANSOM, SLOTFOM Carton VIII, Dossier 6; "Notes Sur la Propagande révolutionnaire intéressant les pays d'outre mer, 1927," ANSOM, SLOTFOM Carton III, Dossier 67; and "Le Prefet de Police à M. le Ministre de l'Intérieur" (19 November, 1927), AN F713438.

14. Sheng Cheng, "Ganku tan," p. 9. This article is basically about how Sheng came to write A Son of China.


16. Ibid., p. 207.

17. Ibid., pp.122-25.


19. Interviews with Sheng Cheng, 12 October, 18 October 1985, (Beijing).

20. See the report "Section Français de la ligue internationale des femmes pour la paix et la liberté" ANSOM, SLOTFOM, Carton III, Dossier 92.

21. See the note by agent Désiré, 15 September 1927, which claims that "CHENG TCHENG" (Sheng Cheng) had attended the meeting in Geneva, and was reporting on the meeting at a gathering on 10 September 1927, in the Foyer Indochinois, where after reporting on the Conference, Sheng then "criticized the attitude of DUONG-VAN-GIAO who advocated the reopening of the monarchy in Indochina. . ." ANSOM, SLOTFOM Carton VIII, Dossier 6.


24. Interview with Zheng Chaolin 18 June 1990, (Shanghai). This is also in various articles and his autobiography, Zheng Chaolin huiyilu [The memoirs of Zheng Chaolin] (Beijing: Xianlai shiliao biankanshe, 1986), chapter 1.


28. "Dao Zhao Shiyan, Chen Yannian ji qita si yu guomindang guizishou de tongzhi!" [Mourning Zhao Shiyan, Chen Yannian and other comrades who have died under the guomindang slaughter!] Buweiersike 1 (24 October 1927): 1.

29. Interview with Zheng Chaolin, 18 June 1990 (Shanghai).


33. Interview with Zheng Chaolin, 29 October 1985 (Shanghai).

34. See the request for visas in Zhao Shiyan letter to Luo Jue [Luo Yinong] and Peng Shuzhi (14 February 1923) in Qinghua University Faculty Research Unit on History of the Communist Party, comps. Fu Fa qingong jianxue yundong shiliu [Documents on the travel to France work-study movement] 3 vols. (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe), 2:841.

35. Interview with Zheng Chaolin, 18 June 1990, (Shanghai).

36. Vera Schwarcz's work with oral history has resulted in several works. Her exhaustive interviews with a prominent intellectual, Zhang Shenfu, will be highlighted in her forthcoming book. Schwarcz consciously discusses the historiographical implications in her article, "Out of Historical Amnesia: An Eclectic and Nearly Forgotten Chinese Communist in Europe," Modern China 13:2 (April 1987): 177-225. Mary Mazur's meticulous work on the enigmatic historian, Wu Han, includes dozens of interviews that she has conducted. Mazur's work exemplifies brilliant integration between the interview process and fitting together the facts in her article, "Studying Wu Han: The Political Academic," Republican China XV:2 (April 1990): 17-39.


38. Interview with Dr. Yang Kun, 14 October 1985 (Beijing).

40. As an example, when writing articles after interviewing Zheng Chaolin in 1985, if dealing with a sensitive issue, I always used the written source that was not for internal publication, whenever possible, instead of the oral interview material. When we met in 1990, we had an explicit discussion about using the oral and written materials. Zheng was very eager for me to use all the materials I had available. However, in other interviews and personal correspondence, with other interview subjects, there have been times when I have not used all the materials, and have awaited explicit recognition and permission to do so.
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III. Interviews

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Dr. Yang Kun 14 October 1985; 26 May 1990 (Beijing)*

Zhang Shenfu 25 October 1985 (Beijing)*

Zheng Chaolin 29 October 1985; 18 June 1990 (Shanghai)*

* European Branches of the Chinese Communist Organizations Participant