Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS


At a time when the Cultural Revolution seems to be fast fading in the collective consciousness of the Chinese people, Yongyi Song, a China Studies scholar and East Asian librarian at Dickinson College, has made yet another accomplishment—his recent publication of A New Collection of Red Guard Publications, Part II: A Special Compilation of Newspapers in Beijing Area. This new addition to the general collection of Cultural Revolution literature consists of forty volumes and includes over 500 Beijing Area Red Guard tabloids. Its significance is manifold.

This new publication addresses a major problem in the study of the Cultural Revolution, namely, the lack of sufficient original historical documentation. The history of the Cultural Revolution remains far from fully explored in large part due to the Chinese government’s reluctance to make historical materials available to the general public. For anyone wishing to research the history of the Red Guard movement in Beijing through original materials, Song’s new publication is required reading.

Some written records concerning the Red Guards have been collected and published outside China in recent years through the concerted efforts of a group of Cultural Revolution scholars. Most notable is the 20-volume A New Collection of Red Guard Publications, Part I: Newspapers, which was published in 1999 by the Center for Chinese Research Publications and edited by Yuan Zhou. Song’s sequel to this publication is distinguished by its exclusive devotion to the Red Guards tabloids in the Beijing area. In addition to being the center of the Cultural Revolution, Beijing was also its birthplace and a hotbed for the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. Because the activities of the Red Guards in Beijing had significant impact on the rest of China, whatever written information there is concerning them provides an invaluable resource for the study of the Red Guard movement.

This new publication has made it possible to draw a more accurate picture of the Red Guards. While a significant portion of the existing literature has centered on the violence and damage caused by the Red Guards, precious little has been conveyed about other important aspects of the movement. In the absence of a public and reliable written record, many people remain ignorant about many important facts such as who supported and motivated the Red Guards, who instigated factional fighting, and how senior government officials, including Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, used the Red Guards for their own political gains. This new publication has made it possible for people to weigh the facts as presented and draw their own conclusions about the events of that era. It has provided a needed source to enable a more comprehensive and balanced study of the Red Guard movement during the early years of the Cultural Revolution.

The fact that this new publication is universally accessible lends it even greater significance. Current or future Cultural Revolution scholars as well as members of the general public interested in this subject can access this resource without any restrictions. This and other important aspects of this new publication were not missed by Professor Andrew Walder of Stanford University who aptly noted in his foreword for this publication, “This 40-volume collection of Beijing Red Guard tabloids marks a turning point for international scholarship on the Chinese revolution. Without special
access to archives within China, it is now possible to begin serious historical research on the course of the Cultural Revolution in its important locality.”

This publication is an important resource for scholars, researchers and libraries concerned with contemporary Chinese history in general, and the history of the Cultural Revolution and the Red Guard movement in particular.

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北美汉学家辞典 (Dictionary of Sinologists in North America) aims to provide research information on scholars of Chinese studies in North America. In addition to this book, there are two other previously published sources of similar format. The first is “A List of Chinese Studies Scholars in the United States” included in Mei guo Zhong guo xue shou ce 美国中国学手册 (Handbook of Chinese Studies in the United States) (Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1993). The second can be found under the heading for the United States in Shi jie Zhong guo xue jia ming lu 世界中国学家名录 (Sinologists of the World) (Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 1994). Following are some of my comments and observations made in review of the Dictionary of Sinologists in North America.

Criticisms

1. Problematic coverage

The problematic nature lies in two questions. Question one is in regard to the subject coverage. When readers browse the scholars and researchers covered by the book, it is evident that their subject fields cover not only the classical Chinese humanities that traditional sinology has defined, but social sciences and regional studies as well. In fact, from the 20th century, and especially the mid-20th century, the field of Sinology was no longer limited to studies of the Chinese classics, which were traditionally centered in Europe and lasted almost three hundred years, from the 16th century to the first half of the 20th century. The second half of the 20th century has witnessed the rapid growth of Sinology in North America with much broader research focuses. “Classics studies” has been extended into “Regional studies” and has become a distinguishing feature of sinology in North America. Therefore, it would have been more appropriate to name the book a dictionary of “scholars of Chinese studies” rather than “sinologists” in North America.

Question two is in regard to the personnel coverage. Both the preface and the editorial note declare that “five hundred present sinologists with research focus on ancient, modern and contemporary Chinese history, as well as humanities, are included.” This statement is very ambiguous. Users may well ask: Who are the present sinologists? Does this mean those scholars and researchers currently active in the field, or those still on the job? If so, it would be helpful to specify this distinction because any reference material has its specially designated coverage. It should be stated clearly in the preface or in an editorial note for efficient use. Actually, the number of sinologists who are active in North America not covered by this book is so extensive that even an addendum would not help. It
is also worthy to mention that many retired sinologists in North America have still been very active and continue to make significant contributions in their fields.

2. Crude editorial style

Compared to the Handbook and Sinologists one can easily tell that the Dictionary was hastily compiled. First of all, it would have been more appropriate to call it a “directory” rather than a “dictionary.” According to the definition, an item or an entry in a dictionary should provide interpretative contexts. What is provided in the Dictionary however, is simply information that the compilers collected.

Second, the Dictionary has very limited access methods to its contents. For instance, all entries are arranged alphabetically by the scholars’ last names only. No method is provided to identify scholars by their research fields.

Third, the information about a number of scholars is far from specific and complete. A comparison of Handbook and Dictionary here would make this point clear. In the Handbook, the “Research Interests and Fields” of Morris Rossabi are Chinese History, History of Central Asia, Kublai Khan, Chinese ethnic nationalities, Islam history, etc. In the Dictionary, only “History/Politics” is listed. In addition, the Handbook listed 12 academic works by Morris Rossabi, while the Dictionary only listed 5.

Positive words

Having made the above criticisms, I should like to state that the Dictionary certainly has some merits of its own. First, it serves as a nice follow-up to the Handbook and Sinologists. Nearly all 1,870 scholars covered by the Handbook were born before 1945, while more than half of the 500 scholars covered by the Dictionary were born after 1945. Therefore, the Dictionary can be used as the first reference tool to identify scholars of Chinese studies in North America born after WWII. What is more, the Dictionary provides information on the “ongoing research projects” of certain scholars. It also provides scholars’ email addresses, which are very helpful in today’s information age.

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