

Studying and Constructing History: A Historian's Take

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As a historian, I consider myself very privileged to be working alongside history educators and history teachers. This is a privilege that not many academic historians can enjoy since there are very few university departments that offer a combination of courses in academic history and history pedagogy such as those offered by HSSE. From my colleagues, I not only gained new insights into history education and classroom teaching, but I have also come to appreciate that there is a clear distinction between what I do as a historian – the locating and reading of primary documents and the very tedious process of reading, corroborating, cross-referencing and finally writing – and what history teachers do in the classroom, that is to teach history as a school subject.

As much as one might consider history to be a subject that seems to be the same at different educational levels – after all, isn't history about dates and events and people long dead? – there exists a gap between the work that historians do and the histories they write (let's call it academic history) and the history that is taught in the classroom (let's call it school history). For one thing, school history appears to have a beginning and end, usually in tandem with the first and last pages of the textbook and the first and last lesson of the school year. It suggests a body of finite knowledge about certain countries, or wars, or historical epochs, that if one studies it thoroughly enough, one might be assured of a pass in the assessments that come with the subject.

In contrast, the historian does not live in such a neat and tidy world. To the historian, the body of knowledge is infinite and the research question one has in mind often has an uncanny knack of metamorphosing into many other questions and leads that always seem much more interesting than the work on hand. While school history tends to be presented in a largely linear fashion with students being taught to “read” sources for answers to assessment questions, the work of a historian is not as straightforward. The historian tends to work in circular fashion – reading documents, starting to write and then realizing more information or research is needed and then it's back to the archives or library he / she goes. This is, perhaps, the very first distinction between studying history in school and writing history.

Another significant distinction between school and academic history is that of presentation. Most of us would be familiar with the parable of the four blind men and an elephant, the origins and meanings of which are debated (yet again a problem that historians would be familiar with). It tells the story of how four blind men, who had not encountered an elephant before, came across one and had to form their own conceptions of what an elephant was by touching it. Each of them did so, but only on one specific part of the massive animal. Their resulting conception of the elephant was therefore limited by their subjective experience of the different body parts and, in one variation of this popular story, the

differing descriptions of the animal they proffered each other led to suspicions of dishonesty and conflict. So too the case with history. Many today understand different parts of the same story (or what we might call from different perspectives) and yet insist that their part (or what they understood) to be the truth of what happened in the past. At the same time, while some may suspect they do not know the whole story, the massiveness of the story deters them from finding out more, preferring to remain comfortably within the scope of what had been presented to them as history and, therefore, the past that happened.

Yet, is history the same as the past? The way history is presented in textbooks, with explicit training of skills and historical concepts, and often with an eye on assessment, tends to encourage in our students the idea that history is about past events and past lives, and therefore what they learn in history lessons is the truth of what happened in the past.ⁱ In short, the event in question had already happened and the outcomes a foregone conclusion, simply because we cannot turn back the clock and return to the past to change the way things happened. We cannot reverse time and change the outcomes of World War II, or the horrific terrors of the Holocaust or prevent the rise of the Cultural Revolution. Because we cannot change the past, it therefore gives rise to a very common perception of history that it is all about knowing what happened in the past and, in some uncommon cases, being able to explain what happened in the past.

Consider, however, what environmental historian William Cronon posits as the main difference between history and the past:

“history is a form of storytelling that has nothing to do with nature and

everything to do with human self-understanding. The past is an infinitude of undigested happenings; human history, on the other hand, consists of the stories we choose to record in remembering what we care most about in ourselves and in our world...”ⁱⁱ

The main ideas bear repeating. History is a story or a narrative that leads one to self-knowledge and this knowledge is derived from stories that are remembered because they mean something to the people recording them. Yet, how often do we forget that history is fundamentally derived from stories that are significant in themselves and not simply as case studies where skills such as source analysis or comparative reading can be applied? The Holocaust is remembered primarily because the people who survived the war felt it a necessity to record it for posterity to remember and learn lessons from. In short, history is not simply a catalogue of events from the past, as students tend to think, but it is about events and individuals, personal experiences and observations that people felt were significant enough to record at that point in time. A young girl recording her life in occupied Netherlands simply because she needed a source of comfort and support would not have imagined how her diary would become a classical work on life during the second world war came to be translated into 70 languages and read worldwide.ⁱⁱⁱ Likewise, a British official sitting in his government office in Singapore of the 1950s probably had to, in his reports to the Colonial Office, be selective and strategic in making certain facts known to his superiors in line with the general policy at that time, perhaps at the expense of ignoring other pieces of information, now perhaps lost to posterity simply because they were not recorded. These pieces of information, selectively and perhaps even randomly recorded by

people in the past, now serve as the historian's materials to understand the past, and because the creators of these records serve as a filter, we can never truly know the past in the way we can perhaps understand history.

As a social historian of Ming China, I tend not to start my forays into primary documents with a hypothesis (that usually came much later), but rather with a simple question: "What's the story here?" Whether the source was a letter, a piece of local history, a biography or even just a random jotting or what is known as *biji* in Chinese historiography, it would usually have a story that might interest me sufficiently to follow the clues. If the source recorded an event in the reign of a particular emperor, then I need to know what happened in that reign and about the emperor and his courtiers. If the source was a letter, then the letter writers, their backgrounds, their social circles and concerns become of interest. If it was a piece of local history, then the locality, its customs and traditions, its practices and place within the larger entity of China would become crucial information to know.

However, while these sources fall into the category of "undigested happenings", they also represent vignettes of events and daily life that the people living in Ming China cared sufficiently about to put brush to paper. These records or observations of national or regional or local events, of social etiquette, cultural norms, practices and other aspects of daily life thus open for me windows into the world of Ming China. Through their lived and observed experiences, I am able, as a social historian, to understand the past as it was lived by these observers and to make sense of the past through these "undigested happenings".

While the sources may be informative

in themselves, it is also crucial that one reads the sources with knowledge of the historiography. Every type of historical source comes with its own unique characteristics. Records of the Imperial Court records, based on daily audiences with the emperor, and official histories tended to be heavily censored and conforming to styles and standards of writing acceptable to the imperial court.^{iv} The "wild histories" or unofficial histories usually were written for particular reasons, whether it was to provide alternative narratives or just as a catalogue of "interesting and off-tangent" tidbits of information about significant personalities or events or epochs. While their authors often claimed eye-witness status, careful reading of the materials sometimes suggests otherwise. Local histories (or local gazetteers), usually compiled under sponsorship of local magistrates or families prominent in the locality, tend to tell the history of particular regions, provinces, counties, market towns or even significant monasteries or mountains through the lens of the local residents, though the narrative could be the result of negotiation among interested parties in the locality. Lineage genealogies are usually positioned as family histories and juxtaposed against national or state histories, though they often feature only the richest and most established branch that could afford to spearhead and underwrite the process of compilation.

Knowledge of the historiography of the sources I was reading would thus inform me of the purpose of the source and the kind of information therein, as well as the possible slant or positions they might take. Why were these sources written? Was it to justify one's actions? Was it to establish a claim to landholdings or social prominence within a locality? The audience for which the writing was intended is also crucial. Who were these sources written for? In my

research, I had to utilize lineage genealogies which are in themselves family archives. Often seen to be private collections of documents relating to wealthy local families including imperial edicts, household registration certificates, land transaction records, biographies, necrologies, burial grounds records and so forth, the genealogies are often presented as efforts to simply unite kinsmen and as acts of filial piety in ensuring the continuity of the lineage and clarity of descent lines. Yet, at the same time, it should be borne in mind that by the 16th century, when lineage genealogies were becoming the mark of social status, the existence of professional genealogists, the open acknowledgement of fudged ancestries, the insertion of laudatory prefaces by outsiders (suggesting therefore a certain external audience for the genealogies) and the fact that these genealogies often form the basis of information for compilers of local gazetteers suggest that the genealogy in itself played a more significant role in asserting group identity, social prestige and local power.

The multiple trajectories that began with a research question was what I experienced in my research on Japanese piracy in southeastern China in the 1540s and 1550s. When I first encountered the Japanese pirates or *wokou* in my undergraduate years, it seemed a simple and exciting story. Beginning in the 1540s, the *wokou* attacked towns and cities on the southeastern seaboard of China, venturing as far inland as the major metropolises of Hangzhou and Suzhou, and becoming a major security threat to the Ming court, then concurrently plagued by Mongolian incursions from the north. The security threat posed by the *wokou* to the financial health of the dynasty was in fact a recurrent theme in the court documents of the Jiajing reign (1522 – 1566) as the court

deliberations recorded centered on the *wokou* problem. But from being simply a security issue in the 1520s, by the 1540s and 1550s, the *wokou* debate in the court documents had changed into one entwining foreign trade, tribute missions, international relations and ancestral traditions into a complex issue. No longer were fingers pointed at the Japanese for menacing the coast but instead blame was shifted onto Chinese merchants who had ventured overseas illegally to trade and returned, disguised as Japanese *wokou* and leading bands of Japanese mercenaries, to terrorize the coastal region. The root cause? The prohibition on maritime trade imposed in 1378 by the founding emperor Zhu Yuanzhang (*r.* 1368 – 1398) that illegalized private trade and channeled all foreign trade into the tribute trade system, in line with his vision and image of China as the center of the known world.

This by itself was a very interesting story but if I had confined myself to the court documents, I would probably have been one of the proverbial blind (wo)men, touching the trunk of the elephant and thus forming a mental picture of the elephant. But the happy problem in late imperial Chinese history, especially from the Ming dynasty onwards, is the historian is almost never short of primary documents for research. When I turned to the local provincial records – the local histories or local gazetteers – I discovered therein different narratives about the *wokou*. The local histories tell of how coastal populations suffered because the maritime prohibition impinged upon their traditional livelihoods of fishing and trade. As a result, many turned to maritime activities despite the illegality simply because they had no other options. Even the local officials, representatives of the Emperor, colluded in these proscribed activities, simply because local government finances depended upon the lucrative but illegal maritime trade.

Hence, despite the injunction that all foreigners could only trade in China at appointed ports and predetermined times, the officials themselves willingly closed an eye to the arrival of the Portuguese in Canton and even reached an unofficial agreement that led eventually to the establishment of Portuguese Macau.^v The traditional Chinese saying “The mountains are high, and the emperor is far away” has never rang truer.

When these local narratives are further juxtaposed against grassroots records in the form of lineage genealogical records of the people living outside of the provincial cities, in the towns and villages, yet a third narrative emerged. While the local gazetteers, often compiled with official sponsorship, tell the story of the *wokou*, described as incursions against the state, and extolled the heroism of those who stood up to them as exemplars of loyalty to the Emperor, the people in the affected areas, supposedly under siege and attack from the *wokou*, were in fact going through a busy period of construction and consolidation. They were building lineage temples, buying land to create lineage corporate estates, setting up schools and charitable organizations and even feuding with one another, all supposedly in the period where their home region was under attack from the *wokou*. With three competing narratives, how was the historian to make sense of these “undigested happenings” that William Cronon alluded to?

It is this process of making sense of these competing (or sometimes complementary) narratives that exemplifies, for me, the difference between academic history and school history. Historians rarely have the good fortune of going to an archive and reading a set of documents to find the answer they seek staring at them. It takes first of all

serendipity to find in, say a genealogy spanning twenty odd volumes and numbering thousands of pages, the letter or essay or biography that tells you exactly what that particular lineage or family had done during the *wokou* raids in their hometown. Most of the time (at least 95% of the time actually), the opposite rings true. The historian sits in the archive trawling through volumes of documents and spending days before actually finding a document that might even be remotely useful. Diverse pieces of information had to be connected mentally before the outlines of the story could be arrived at, and even then, the outlines may be blurred and indistinct and a lot more work had to be put in before they are clarified.

In this process, two things stand out clearly. The first is the importance of context. One should not look upon a historical source as an answer to an exam or research question. An understanding of the context of the sources (and the information therein) in question is important – what was the purpose behind the source? Who was it written for? Who was the author and what was his / her background, ideological leaning, life circumstances etc. when the source was written? And has the source been tampered with? Is it a truncated excerpt from a document no longer extant? Is it part of an edited collection, thus suggesting perhaps editorial manipulation? These questions surrounding the source are important because they help the historian to decide on the reliability and veracity of the information therein.

Secondly, the connections of the source to the larger environment are also crucial. What was the political, social and economic milieu when the source was created? What was actually happening in the background that may have affected the author(s) of the source(s) that they found it

worthwhile to record what they had written down.

All this is rather different from school history where sources are curated and arranged neatly in the textbooks, supported by a narrative and leading to particular conclusions or desired learning outcomes. That's not to say this is inappropriate, though, for schoolchildren may not yet have the mental capacity nor maturity to deal with sources independently the way a historian might. But at the same time, this approach also creates a certain mindset in students that history can somehow be neatly categorized, and, because of the source reading components, one can most definitely find the answer in the sources provided. By fixating on getting students to read and analyze sources and to find the answers therein, without understanding the historiography, context and connections of the sources, it is often difficult to appreciate the essence of history. A study of colonial immigration to Singapore that is linked to the coolie system and the *kangani* system of recruitment, the need for labourers in Singapore and Malaya and how that was facilitated by the steam transportation, the Chinese secret societies and even by Singapore's position as a key British port in Southeast Asia would be so much more richer for the narrative than one focusing on push and pull factors.

The essence of history – that it is an

argument without ceasing – means that when historians write, they stand ready to be critiqued by their peers. History, as most historians view it, is not so much a recreation of the past as truth, but rather as the historian's subjective interpretation of what happened in the past, based on his / her research which is built upon whatever sources that are extant and accessible. Rather than be seen as a herald of truth or of what really happened in the past, historians are at best refractors of historical events and the stories they can tell are stories drawn from information that people in the past felt were sufficiently important to record. A historian's work is only as good as the sources he / she encounters.

So rather than to look upon history as the "truth" of the past, it may be a more nuanced approach to think of the historian's work as contributing towards a huge canvas of the past that no one has oversight of. I often think of my work as part of a giant, unseen jigsaw puzzle and I am but a jigsaw puzzle enthusiast who is trying to put the pieces of puzzle I hold together in the most meaningful way possible. Where my jigsaw pieces link up with the puzzle pieces of another historian, the picture becomes clearer. Where the links and joints are not congruent, then it is back to the drawing board to rethink the picture that was crafted. For that reason, a historian's work is never done.

ⁱ This was brought home starkly to me during a recent focus group discussion with groups of lower secondary students who, when asked why history is important, answered with phrases such as "history helps us understand our ancestors better", "history tells us about the past" and such like statements.

ⁱⁱ William Cronon, "Why the Past Matters", *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Autumn (2000): 7. Accessed from

https://www.williamcronon.net/writing/Cronon_Why_the_Past_Matters_WHS_poor_sc_an.pdf (29 November 2018).

ⁱⁱⁱ It should be noted though that while Anne Frank may have started out simply writing a diary, she rewrote and edited her diary in 1944 with the intention of publishing it as a book, in response to the call she heard over the radio by Minister Bolkestein of the Dutch government in exile to keep records of ordinary life during the occupation of the Netherlands. See Anne Frank House, "Anne Frank and her Diary". Accessed from <http://diary.annefrank.org/the-history-of-the-diary/> (29 November 2018).

^{iv} It should be noted that records of a particular emperor's reign in late imperial China were usually compiled after the emperor's demise and at the behest of his successor and heir. This thus raises the possibility of whitewashing the faults of the imperial predecessors. In the case of dynastic standard histories, the narrative was usually compiled after the fall of the previous dynasty and the history was usually written as a warning to the succeeding dynasty not to tread the same path.

^v The officials in Canton first resisted the overtures of the *folangji* or the Portuguese as they were known in Ming records, but later acquiesced and came to classify the Portuguese as Malaccan traders. Eventually, both sides reached an agreement where the Portuguese established themselves on Macao in return for an annual payment of "ground rent" to the Governor.