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1994

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):

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Researching the Cultural Revolution: Impressions from a summer in the Beijing University Library

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Under an academic exchange agreement between Stockholm University and Beijing University ("Beida") and as the recipient of an NIAS Asia grant, I recently spent two months at the Beida Department of International Politics doing research on the topic of public discourse on culture in revolutionary China. In the course of my research, I was able to read many Red Guard publications from the Cultural Revolution - something that in the past, to the best of my knowledge, has been very difficult if not impossible for Western scholars. As a small service to those colleagues who share my interest in the years of great turmoil and who might be interested in the steps taken to gain access to Beida's excellent but well-hidden holdings of Red Guard tabloids, I decided to write down the following brief impressions and practical hints.

The Beida Library has a very sizeable collection of Red Guard tabloids, far exceeding in scope and completeness anything known to exist anywhere in the West. It includes complete or almost complete runs of the "big five": Xin Beida, Qinghua University Jinggangshan, Beijing Geology Institute Dongfangdong Bao, Beijing Aeronautical Institute Hongqi, and Beijing Teachers' University Jinggangshan. In addition, there are many issues of lesser tabloids like the China People's University Renda Sanhong and Xin Renda, etc. Tabloids put out by Red Guard factions opposing Nie Yuanzi (i.e. Beida Jinggangshan) are, however, conspicuously absent.

Tabloid holdings are not listed in the main library catalogue and merely having a library card or reading room card does not give access to them. Somewhat inexplicably, they are stored together with pre-1949 periodicals in the so-called "old library" (jiuguan) next to the old administrative office. When I first went there and asked to see them, I was told by a surly but friendly member of staff that "I am not entitled to give you access to them. You need a letter of introduction from the University Party Committee."

I was a student in China in 1975-76 and in those days I would simply have been told a lie, e.g. "We don't have the things you are asking for!" Certainly things had improved a lot, and I showed the staff who I was and why in his opinion it was OK for me to be given access to the tabloids. Having been told what the formal procedure was, I wrote a letter to the Beida Foreign Affairs Office listing roughly the tabloids I wanted to read. In my letter I requested that they "submit a report" (da baogao) to the University Party Committee, explaining my situation and that I "ask the leadership for instructions" (qing lingdao pishi). The next day, the man at the Foreign Affairs Office promptly wrote such a letter, addressed to the Party Committee, and handed it to me. I then sent the letter to the Director of the Department of International Politics. He now wrote a third letter, addressed to a certain secretary on the Party Committee, explaining in greater detail who I was and why in his opinion it was OK for me to be given access to the tabloids in question as part of our academic exchange agreement. My original letter, the letter from the Foreign Affairs Office, and my academic host's letter were then all passed on to the University Party Secretary who was kind enough to promptly write (with his brush, not a fountain pen!) his comments/instruction (pishi) at the top of the Foreign Affairs Office letter: "Will Comrade so-and-so (the Director of the Library) please see to it that Mr. Schoenhals gains access to the materials he has asked for."