

Feature Article 【專題論文】

## Who Owns History? 誰擁有歷史？

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**關鍵詞：**記憶、審查、檔案、隱私、歷史書寫的社會學

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## Abstract

This paper consists more of questions about comparative historiography than of answers. They fall under four headings: Who defines what counts as history? Who lets histories get published and sold? Who controls the documents which are the raw material of history? What can historians do if ownership in one or more of these areas is obstructing their work?

Comparative historians of historiography face a dilemma: should works from some cultures, or by some members of our culture, which they would have regarded as histories but which don't meet the criteria of modern academic historiography, be included?

Outright or more subtle political censorship, repressiveness of the academic institutions which prepare professional historians, and market forces vary widely; comparative historians must take these into account rather than relying simply on reading historical literature.

Historians can seldom get access to all the evidence they need because of the interests of governments and private citizens in concealing some of their actions. Various forms of legal action, such as freedom of information laws, can be used to gain such access but these have been passed in only a minority of countries.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the difficulties in taking these factors into account in comparative historiography and of the logic of comparison, concluding that taking some point of view is essential if intended comparisons can rise above the level of juxtapositions.

## 摘要

本文提出較多與歷史書寫比較研究相關的問題，而較少提出答案。它們屬於以下四大主題：誰定義什麼才算歷史？誰讓歷史出版並銷售？誰掌握文件，亦即歷史的原始資料？如果上述一或二項領域中的所有權擁有着阻礙歷史學者的工作，歷史學者能做什麼？

從事歷史書寫研究的比較歷史學者經常面臨一個困境：那些出自某些文化，或由我們文化中的某些成員所完成的著作常被視為歷史，但並不符合現代學術性歷史書寫研究的標準，它們是否應當被納入研究之中？

公開的或較為敏感的政治審查，來自訓練專業歷史學者的學術機構的抑制，以及市場力量間存在千差萬別，比較歷史學者必須將這些因素均列入考慮，而不僅只是仰賴閱讀歷史文獻。

歷史學者很少能夠取得他們所需要的所有證據，因為政府和私人平民基於利益往往隱瞞他們的某些行為。各種形式的法律行動，例如：資訊法的自由，可用來獲取這些管道，但是只有少數國家已通過這些法律。

本文結尾論及在進行歷史書寫比較研究時，將這些因素列入考慮的困難，以及比較的邏輯。本文提出的結論是：即使歷史學家擬進行的比較研究能夠超越並列的層次之上，仍有必要採取某些特定觀點進行研究。

At first glance this looks like what the French call a *question mal posée* — that is, one that is constructed on a shaky premise. We might be able to clarify the question if we take advantage of the variety of verbs that English affords us: owns, has, possesses. "Possesses" suggests a settled ownership, perhaps one of something that cannot be given away or sold (implied in the adjective "possessive"). I have never seen "possesses history" in ordinary language, but as we shall see a possessive attitude towards history is not uncommon. On the other hand "has history" is very commonly used, as in such sentences as "China has a history that goes back several millennia" or "she has a history with him." Such sentences seem to mingle two ways in which the word "history" can be used: to refer to events that occurred in the past, or to what has been written about them.

Everyone who isn't suffering from complete amnesia has her own history, which is based on what she can and wants to remember (though there are private documents such as diaries or letters which could be consulted by her or by a biographer). Normally other people offer little interference with "having history" in this sense, though a course of psychoanalytic sessions (to take an extreme example) is a kind of historical investigation aimed at helping the patient to bring more of her history to consciousness and thus reach a deeper understanding of it though understanding its unconscious determinants.

When nations or ethnic groups "have history," they have a sort of memory of it, which has been the subject of much attention from theorists of history in the past couple of decades. There have been two nodes of the discussion: one how they remember — or perhaps remember all too well — significant events in their national past, through memorializations of various kinds; and the other, how their memory can be so obstructed through suffering such traumatic events in their pasts that they cannot work through them and so they repress memory altogether<sup>1</sup> or else have only a distorted recollection of them.<sup>2</sup>

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1 This might seem to be impossible, but apparently Romany people today have no memory of the

I think there are considerable problems with the assumption that terms derived from Freudian therapy for individuals can be transferred intact to historical cultures. These analogies are doubtless suggestive and seductive, but they have the usual problem of analogies — they can't prove anything.<sup>3</sup> I do not propose in this short paper to enter the extensive discussion of historical memory, beyond suggesting (still in the realm of analogy) that one way in which nations and ethnic groups express their ownership of history is in their creation of what might be called induced or artificial collective memories. The relationship between the origins of "scientific" historiography and nationalist sentiment in nineteenth-century Europe is well known; but national regimes — and not just authoritarian ones — are increasingly using textbooks, national curricula, and teacher training to inculcate the version of the nations' past that suits their present political aims. In one month in the summer of 2007 I collected from a few websites and print media recent examples from the United States, Great Britain, Russia, Turkey, Japan, and India. Most of this serves to reassert or restate the importance of the national heroes and to whitewash or ignore such episodes as participation in slavery and the slave trade, Armenian massacres, and the like. The example of the nationalist government of India in the early years of the present century is particularly interesting; they reached deep into India's past, not only contriving archaizing names for cities like Mumbai, but also demanding the suppression of such historians' findings as that the original Aryan population ate

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Romany being targets, like Jews and homosexuals, of the Holocaust.

- 2 The best introductions are, for the first, Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire* (3 vols.; Paris: Gallimard, 1984), translated into English by Mary Trouille as *Rethinking France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) and by Arthur Goldhammer as *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). For the second, see Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) which, like almost everything written on historical traumas, focuses on the Holocaust.
- 3 There is the further problem that Freud's work on group psychology (*Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey [New York: Norton, 1959]) focuses primarily on small groups, and his conception of trauma sees it as arising from a single event rather than something protracted over several years.

beef.<sup>4</sup> When schoolchildren in Serbia are taught about what happened at the Battle of the Field of Blackbirds in 1389, and how it makes Kosovo an essential part of Serbia, they will probably have to memorize the historical information, and (or so the Serbian government hopes) attach to it the interpretation of its significance which it desires to promulgate. In one sense, the Battle of the Field of Blackbirds has become part of these children's memories, but not like their memories of their first day of school.

Plain old market forces both conspire with and expand the scope of political will to express ownership of history in order to shape the historical consciousness of the general population. "Giving the public what it wants" easily slides in late capitalism into molding the public's taste, and this is seldom done to enhance its discrimination and sophistication. It has also become common for nations and ethnic groups, and other people who feel that they have been systematically excluded from historical scholarship, to lay claim to another form of ownership — that they have a privileged access to the history of their group because they are members of it. Women are presumed to have particularly valuable insights into women's history, Asian-Americans are peculiarly prepared to understand Asian-American history, and so on. This claim has some plausibility because family memories can be passed down for a long time, and they almost always seem more authentic than academic historiography. For example, in an Oakland, California school whose students were mostly African-Americans, parents and children protested against an assigned textbook because

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4 This involved contradicting the picture of ancient Indian history established by such distinguished historians as Romila Thapar. See for example her *Early India from the Origins to A.D. 1300* (London: Allen Lane, 2005) and in *The Aryan Debate*, ed. by Thomas R. Trautmann (New Delhi: OUP, 2005). Among examples from the summer of 2007: the furor stirred up by Gordon Brown's effort to eliminate mandatory instruction about the careers of Winston Churchill (and other prominent figures of the twentieth century) in the UK's national history curriculum (*Daily Express*, July 13, 2007); the Greek government's removal of a sixth-grade history textbook for inadequate dramatization of Greek sufferings under the Ottomans and Turks (*International Herald Tribune*, September 26, 2007); and Vladimir Putin's approval of a new manual for Russian history teachers praising the accomplishments of Tsarist Russia as well as the USSR (*Wall Street Journal*, July 6, 2007).

its depiction of African-American life was so unlike their families' own memories of it. The textbook was eventually dropped.<sup>5</sup>

One of the standard arguments for the value of historical studies lends some further plausibility to this position. It is the humanistic claim that knowledge of the past is essential, or at least useful, for self-knowledge. Some of this is achieved through acquaintance with the pastness of the past, but identification with figures of the past, especially ones with whom some kinship can be established, is even more powerful. This helps explain why so many amateur historians throng public record offices and visit websites investigating their own family histories.

Thus there is a sense in which people "have history" through their memories of it, including those which are induced. Historians however generally doubt that historical knowledge can be achieved through memories. Trained professionals, when they turn to their own memories, are no better than anyone else in reconstructing even a bare chronology of their lives without consulting their old diaries and other items in their personal archives.<sup>6</sup> So lying beyond the sense of ownership of history conveyed in individual memories is the world of historical inferences; or, putting it another way, the world in which histories are produced. These inferences largely depend, of course, on interpreting the documents and artifacts which survive from the past. And, despite the assertion that "information wants to be free," these are the property of some person or institution; therefore the sociology of history production raises a further cluster of issues raised by the question of who owns history. I shall consider four aspects of them: "Who defines history?" "Who lets histories get published and sold?" "Who controls the

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5 Shelly Weintraub, "What's This New Crap? What's Wrong with the Old Crap?" in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. by Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 179-182.

6 See Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review*, 37 (1932), pp. 221-236.

materials on which history writing must be based?" and "What can historians do to bring to light what owners and controllers want to keep secret?"

One of the ways that ownership of history can be expressed is through claiming the right to decide what is and what isn't a work of history. The obvious justification for this is that academic historians can always tell the difference between history and fiction. But what, if anything, authorizes or requires us to believe that historians have the right and responsibility to judge what is a work of history? Historians would probably answer — at least they often say this — that they are craftsmen, forming a sort of guild which can determine what can appropriately count as a work of history. Even if we grant this, what about the assumption many historians make, based on their professional role, that they are society's designated proprietors of the past? Such an assumption makes, tacitly or explicitly, the more problematic claim that only historiography can create and convey knowledge (or truth) about the human past. This is probably a reaction formation against the view advanced by some philosophers that the past cannot be an object of knowledge at all; but it is not necessary to make this point by rejecting, for example, all historical novels (and novelistic histories), plays which use only words spoken by the historical personages who are characters, or docudramas. Furthermore, if we define as proper historiography only the sort of thing that we would accept today for a history PhD thesis, we would have to exclude almost everything written before the nineteenth century, or in parts of the world outside Europe and North America. George Iggers and Q. Edward Wang have shown that early works in the Muslim and Indian traditions demonstrate a real historical sense, albeit expressed in poetry rather than prose. Bonnie Smith has done a similar service for the many prose works about the past written by women prior to the nineteenth century by demolishing the belief that there were no female historians in England or France before, say, Catherine Macaulay in the late eighteenth century or the first products of Girton College Cambridge.<sup>7</sup>

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7 Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge,



We tend to think about institutional constraints on historiography which allow or prevent the creation and/or publication of historical works, whether primarily economic or primarily political, as operating on completed works of history (including those that can't get published). They do, of course, but the process of creation begins with the system established to train historians. It would seem harsh to describe the teachers who admit students to the guild of historians as censors of their work, but they certainly have a powerful influence in imposing professional standards (and their definition of what is unacceptable as a work of history).

Relatively few governments nowadays attempt outright censorship of historical works. They seldom are of widespread interest or contain dangerous messages. Efforts at political control of historians, however, seems to have become more common, as the excellent work of Antoon de Baets and the Network of Concerned Historians on imprisoned or threatened historians makes clear.

A direct way to assert ownership and control of historiography is ownership of the documents and artifacts from which histories must be constructed. The great bulk of documentary evidence to which historians can seldom or never get access is that created by corporations. The veil of commercial secrecy has been slightly lifted in the recent turmoil in the banking and financial services industries, but it is unclear whether even the now largely publicly owned banks will be required to disclose evidence of their practices. It's not surprising that businesses do not wish to disclose trade secrets to their competitors, but there is no justification for holding the records of a firm perpetually inaccessible.

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Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998); Georg G. Iggers and Q. Edward Wang, with the assistance of Supriya Mukherjee, *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (Harlow, England and New York: Pearson Longman, 2008).

In principle, all public records should be available for historians to inspect; in practice, not always. After the end of World War II Winston Churchill said about one of his decisions, "History will judge that I was right; and I know this because I shall write the history" — whereupon he retired to his country house with the foreign office and war office documents, as well as those he had created and received, and proceeded to write his history of World War II. Only when he had finished with them were these handed over to the Public Record Office so that others might see them. In the United States presidents own all their papers and take them with them when they leave office. They then eventually deposit these in "presidential libraries" which also serve as monuments to their administrations. In Germany the major parties have set up research institutes which house many of their documents; not all historians can presume to be admitted to these.

So even when documents are lodged in public or quasi-public institutions, there are often onerous restrictions on their use. Sometimes they can be seen, but not quoted; more often, because of excessive use of secrecy, too many documents remain sealed far too long. Thirty or even fifty years must elapse before essential primary sources for the diplomatic history of the twentieth century become available. Some documents from the World War II period in the British Public Record Office can't be seen until the middle of the twenty-first century, apparently because they reflect unfavorably on some activities of members of the British Royal Family.

If this sort of thing can happen with public records, the fact that what historians might want as sources are sometimes somebody's private property can have even more awkward consequences. Historians usually take a particular interest in documents which were never intended to be published, but these are exactly the ones for which claims to privacy are most likely to arise. Privacy is one of the most contested concepts in contemporary legal and moral thinking, some asserting a right to privacy (to have abortions, for example) and others

asserting the merits of transparency or an overriding state interest in circumscribing privacy claims. The internet is making it increasingly difficult to preserve personal details. Private owners are not necessarily versed in custodianship of documents, and may perfectly legally sell, neglect, or destroy them. They are also especially prone to letting only friendly or "safe" historians see their records. This is a familiar practice in authorized biographies, which can be commissioned for businesses as well for businesses as well as for writers or celebrities.

The flow to museums and especially to American universities of privately-held documents relating to novelists and playwrights is well-known and shows no signs of abating, though many today never put pen to paper and one wonders whether there will ever be a market for their hard disks. There seems to be no persuasive reason to restrict the sale of documents of potential historical interest, and once sold to a museum or university they are safe, if remote from their original creators. The most spectacular transfers of documents in the twentieth century occurred when underpaid or unpaid archivists in the dissolving Soviet Union were reduced to selling items in the files of the Communist party and the Soviet state. Many of these were acquired by the Hoover Institution Library in Stanford, California, whose particular interest in twentieth-century Russian history had led to the acquisition of the Kerensky papers after he fled Russia after the Bolsheviks took power. The dissolution of states (Communist Russia, Nazi Germany) can be the historian's best friend as governments lose control of their archives.<sup>8</sup>

Documents are — for now, at least — in a completely different category than books when it comes to questions of conservation and access. It is not yet clear how the Google project of digitalizing every book ever written will turn out as various lawsuits make their tedious way through the American courts; but the

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<sup>8</sup> Many sources for the history of the Nazi régime were captured by the American army in the final campaign of the war in Europe and are still preserved in the Library of Congress.

contest concerns books still in copyright, but out of print. Only refusal by libraries to lend older volumes to them will limit the Google project. The main difficulty in digitalizing books no longer in copyright is the physical state of the volumes, and it already seems clear that perfect reproduction is not guaranteed and some careless treatment of them can be expected.

If indeed there are absolutely no limits to what the internet, or the "cloud," can contain, we could imagine massive digitalizing of manuscripts as well, which in fact has already begun. It is conceivable, though probably unlikely, that the entire contents of every archive could be made available on-line. But should they be? Considering that almost any document might be of interest to some future if not present-day historian, should everything be put on the internet? If we decide that not everything should be, who should appraise documents and decide what gets digitalized? Even if universal and infinite preservation seems appropriate or necessary, should there be any trusteeship or ownership of documents such that access to them on the internet could be regulated? Underlying such questions is a concern — valid, I think — that historians become so overwhelmed by data that synthetic judgments will become much more difficult.

Artifacts cannot be digitalized. Though of course they can be photographed, historians will want to see the object itself. Some of these, however, were preserved exactly for reasons why historians have difficulty in gaining full access to them. Rather than having the same status as documents, their character (for example, being objects of religious obligation or veneration) may entitle them to special treatment. There is an ongoing court case in the United States concerning the status of a skeleton discovered in the Pacific Northwest which comes from one of the first humans who settled the continent. It was immediately examined by physical anthropologists, who detected surprising evidence indicating that the person's ancestors came from the Caucasian areas of Russia rather than from East Asia, as Native Americans had believed. Before a more thorough examination of the skeleton could be made, Native Americans objected that their tribal law

would be violated if it were not buried forthwith in Indian territory rather than subjected to any further investigation. This, if they win the suit, will prevent a definitive finding whether Native Americans were originally Europeans.

What means have historians to gain access to materials which are being kept reserved or secret? Governments which don't want to release these regularly plead national security concerns, even if the documents are old or are being withheld to conceal crimes and blunders they have made. (There seems to be little hope of getting hold of documents revealing the crimes and blunders of corporations.) To some extent historians will have to depend on — or, if newspapers are killed by the internet, become — investigative reporters. Freedom of information laws, where they exist, can be invaluable. Where they don't exist, organizations of historians should take up the cause of introducing them. Finally, sometimes you can sue. The American Historical Association filed a lawsuit against the Archivist of the United States to force him to make public the email internal communications within the administration of George H. W. Bush, which he naïvely thought had been definitively deleted. The suit eventually succeeded, only to be reversed by an executive directive of his son, which in turn was overturned by President Obama. The process called "discovery" in connection with lawsuits can prise open secret archives and sometimes result in increased knowledge unrelated to the matter at issue, but it is very expensive.

I shall present some considerations about what directions research into the question of the ownership of history might take. Difficulties in doing this are easy to see, and it is not surprising that it has not been extensively studied. Just to investigate the four areas I have indicated would require skill in philosophy and literary criticism to establish the criteria for defining the central subject — what is and what isn't historiography in a number of intellectual traditions. The political and economic factors involved in the production and sale of histories would call on the expertise of political, economic, and social historians, since censorship, the economics of the publishing industry, and the reader responses of

the history-reading public all have to be taken into account, not to mention the structure of universities and research institutes. There are however good recent accounts of the material conditions of the production and distribution of history books. I think particularly of some of the work that Masayuki Sato has done on the book trade in early modern Japan and I was intrigued by the statement made by Iggers and Wang that there was also a lively trade in history books in eighteenth-century China and that the people there probably had at least as good knowledge of their past as those of France or England had of theirs. The evidence for things like the scale of publication, publishers' profits and authors' receipts or royalties (if any) ought to be available cross-culturally, especially in the more recent periods, and would be a good place to start such a study.

Adding to the challenge to any single historian to write authoritatively on one or more than one of the four questions I have raised is the desirability that her scope extend, at a minimum, to East Asian, South Asian, and Muslim historiographical traditions, as well as European and North American ones. It would of course be good if she also knew about Latin American and African historiography. (As is obvious, this article is written from a Euro-American perspective.) Failing the appearance of such a prodigy, the approach taken by Daniel Woolf in assembling a large team of historians looks more likely to make some progress.

I have cast this article in the form of a catalogue of difficulties for historians which are preliminary to those which arise when the historian is adequately prepared and all the materials for the historical work are in hand. One might call these the "pre-epistemological" problems. Lest they prove too daunting, historians can take some hope from contemplating them. They are in no danger of running out of things to think and write about; and ownership would not be so

frequently and variously contested if history were not so widely considered to be worth something. ♦

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♦ Responsible editor: Hsiu-wen Huang (黃秀文).

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