

Too Much Paper to Erase

XDA ·  *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History* (2006) ×  Tania Branigan, *Red Memory* (2023) · two CCP texts, 605 pages indexed

The one idea

The Cultural Revolution is one of the best-documented episodes of mass violence in the twentieth century and one of the least publicly known. The abundance is not in tension with the erasure — it is what makes the erasure sustainable.

When there is no single missing archive, there is nothing to point at.

The scholarly side · an unusually rich record

This is the finding that surprises people. "In terms of the written documentation generated at the time by participants both inside and out of party and government, and in terms of the collection, compilation, and publication of documentary materials by official agencies in the ensuing decades, **the Cultural Revolution is unusually well documented for such a period of upheaval.**"

And the reason is the movement's own character: "One would be hard-pressed to name political movements or instances of rebellion in which **the participants were so obsessively oriented to the written word**, each group producing reams of wall posters, handbills, newspapers, pamphlets, and even their own histories."

Official compilations then add quantities. The provincial volumes of the *Dangdai Zhongguo* series "can provide surprising detail on certain events of the period — the numbers of cadres who lost their posts or who were accused of political crimes, or **the numbers of deaths due to political persecution.**"

Which is how the county-level figures in Lesson 18 exist at all: Guangxi 43 of 65 sampled counties with mass killings, Guangdong 28 of 57, Hubei 4 of 65. Those numbers come out of a state's own paperwork about its own violence.

The memory side · the record exists in three incompatible copies

Branigan's book is about what happened to that paper afterwards. "**The Party and those it rules have conspired in amnesia. A decade has disappeared.**" And it is maintained as infrastructure: "**Amnesia was the bedrock, and maintaining it took exertion, thoroughness and discipline.** If tens of millions had starved in a famine, you shuttered the archives for decades."

So survivors built their own archives, in furniture. Wang Jingyao "saved everything. **His wife's bloody clothes were folded in a suitcase, hidden beneath the bed. Her futile plea for help from officials was cached in a cavity behind the bricks.** He hoped that one day she would be vindicated, that these things might be displayed."

Copy	Who holds it	Status
Official compilations, provincial series, internal counts	The state	Exists; selectively accessible; cited by scholars
Wall posters, handbills, group self-histories	Scattered, partly collected abroad	Exists; fragmentary
Clothes, letters, objects	Individual families	Exists; hidden; undisplayable

The erasure does not destroy the record. It separates the three copies so that none of them can convene.

The epistemic finding · documents are not the same as being able to say it

Branigan's hardest passage is about a man who had the documents and still could not produce the sentence. "He had so many facts for me, so many documents, so many tears. But however many times I asked, this was really all he had to say about the decision that defined his life: **'It was not my mother. It was a demon with a terrifying face.'** He had such a tight grasp on his dreams and memories. They permitted no confusion."

Her own conclusion from it: **"Facts are — or should be — sacred, to journalists and historians at least, but facts are not the whole truth; which we select and how we understand and weave them together..."**

This is the gap the pair measures.

The scholarly volume shows a near-complete evidentiary base. *Red Memory* shows that a complete evidentiary base held by the person who lived it can still fail to produce an utterable account. Documentation is a necessary condition for public memory and nowhere near a sufficient one.

Where it connects

To "What a Regime Deletes": that analysis found the Party deleting the violence and preserving the succession. This pair explains how that is possible without burning anything. **A surplus of paper means every individual gap looks like ordinary archival friction** — a closed reading room, a restricted series, a provincial volume out of print. The deletion is distributed, so it is deniable.

To Lesson 18: the county death tolls and the amnesia are not two separate facts about the Cultural Revolution. They are the same fact seen from the archive and from the street.

The honest limits

"Well documented" is a claim about the existence of documents, not about open access.

The scholarly volume is describing what researchers have been able to assemble, much of it through official compilations whose selection criteria the state controls. An abundant record curated by the interested party is not the same as an open one, and the authors are explicit that provincial series provide detail "on certain events".

The two books are also doing different jobs. One is a methodological survey by historians about what can be known; the other is reported narrative built from interviews. Setting Branigan's single man against the *Dangdai Zhongguo* series is comparing a case to a corpus, and the comparison illustrates a mechanism rather than measuring its prevalence.

And the mechanism claim is not unique to China. Every state archive is curated; every family keeps things in suitcases. **What this pair establishes is that documentation volume is a poor proxy for public knowledge — not that China is the only place where that holds.**