

New Additions to the Search Party

Using THE SEARCH FOR MODERN CHINA

A Documentary Collection

By James H. Carter



First published more than ten years ago, Jonathan Spence's *The Search for Modern China* has become a popular text for many courses in Chinese history since 1600. Promised in the acknowledgments to the first edition was "a companion volume of primary sources," being compiled by Cheng Pei-kai and Michael Lestz. This companion, *The Search for Modern China: A Documentary Collection* appeared in January 1999, along with the second edition of Spence's textbook. The *Documentary Collection* presents teachers with a tremendous new resource for teaching about modern China, either as a companion to *Search*, as a companion to another text, or by itself. As with many documents collections, it is an extremely malleable source that can be adapted to a large variety of classroom settings. Time spent planning and preparing how to use the sources will be well rewarded in the classroom.

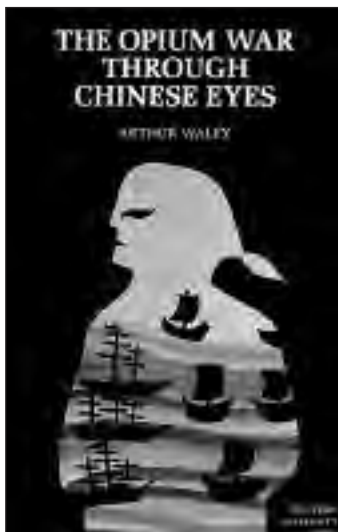
The *Documentary Collection* presents 521 pages of documents and brief contextual introductions. The earliest document, an account of riots in Suzhou, describes events of 1601, while the latest, Jiang Zemin's New Year's Greeting to the people of Taiwan, was delivered in 1995. Cheng and Lestz trace the intervening four centuries with 153 documents drawn from virtually all aspects of human society. Political platforms and polemics, journalism, poetry and fiction, treaties, formal declarations, speeches, court depositions, and letters all combine to form a primary source history of China's last 400 years.

The selections are sound and broad. All document collections must compromise the desire to represent all the important trends in history while limiting the number of excerpts to a manageable size. This has been done well. The essential standards are here, like Qianlong's rejection of Macartney; Kangxi's "Sacred Edict"; the Twenty-one Demands; "How to be a Good Communist," by Liu Shaoqi; Mao's "Bombard the Headquarters"; the Shanghai communiqué; Joint Declaration on Hong Kong; and the "Oppose Turmoil" editorial of May, 1989. Others, less well known and some translated for the first time, serve well to illuminate important trends. Among these are Qing court cases, accounts of Qing popular religion on the eve of the Taiping Rebellion, Jiang Zemin's New Year's Greeting, and a generous helping of poetry and fiction. One especially productive selection was the pairing of two Qing biographies of chaste women with Lu Xun's 1918 essay on chastity.

Two surprising and significant omissions from the collection are Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, who are nowhere present. Although writings from these two essential figures are easily available elsewhere, one of the attractions of using a reader is the ability to dispense with selecting and photocopying documents on one's own. An excerpt from Kang's "Confucius as Reformer" seemed especially glaring by its absence, and other instructors will feel similarly puzzled by other omissions. Yet, selection inevitably creates such controversies, and Cheng and Lestz have done a fine job balancing inclusion with brevity.

The discussion that follows is based on my experience using the *Documentary Collection* to accompany *Search for Modern China* as a core textbook. The parallel structure of the two books makes this a strong pairing. I believe, though, that it could be well used in coordination with another text, or without a "textbook" at all. This is primarily because Cheng and Lestz eschewed long, detailed explanations of the documents, which might have tied the documents more closely to the narrative of *Search*. Instead, the minimal introductions, which contextualize the documents without interpreting them for students, make the *Documentary Collection* much more flexible, and the book can stand on its own, not merely as an appendage to *Search*.





My Experience with History 321

I was able to use *Documentary Collection* in the spring of 1999 at the State University of New York College at New Paltz, for a course on China since 1800. New Paltz is a state institution about seventy-five miles north of New York City. The undergraduate population—just over 5,000 full-time—comes from a variety of ethnic, class, and occupational backgrounds, including many “nontraditional” students. In comparison with other classes I have taught at other schools, using essentially the same material, grades were somewhat lower, but not drastically so. The lower overall course average at New Paltz was, I believe, due more to an increase in the proportion of C and D grades, rather than a decrease in the percentage of A’s. For some students, college was not a high priority, and their grades and efforts in class reflected this lack of initiative. At the same time, the best students at New Paltz compared favorably with top students at either of the Ivy League schools at which I have taught.

The class enrolled about forty-five students, some of whom were filling a “non-Western” curriculum requirement. Many of the students, however, were motivated by a genuine interest in Chinese and Asian history; perhaps ten students were taking Chinese language courses, and many were also involved in New Paltz’s East Asian Studies program, which includes courses in language, history, geography, and anthropology. Few, however, had any real background in Chinese history. Aside from three who were born in China or Hong Kong, only one had ever been to Asia. Given this lack of familiarity with the subject, it took several weeks to develop a common vocabulary and frame of reference for discussion and debate.

Although this was a new course for me, I drew on similar courses I had taught to construct a syllabus. I used the second edition of *Search for Modern China*, which appeared at the same time as the *Documentary Collection*. Publisher W. W. Norton has altered *Search*’s familiar red cover for the second edition, and thinner paper has slimmed its considerable girth, perhaps making its nickname, “The Big Red Book,” less appropriate. Supplementing *Search* and *Documentary Collection*, I chose four other books: Lu Xun’s *True Story of Ah Q*; Arthur Waley’s *The Opium War Through Chinese Eyes*; Zha Jianying’s *China Pop*; and Zhai Zhenhua’s *Red Flower of China*.

I had integrated primary sources into my previous classes regularly, but on an ad hoc basis, asking students to read and react to short documents in class. This was my first time using a single sourcebook, and I felt that to make the reader work, I had to integrate it tightly and thoroughly into the syllabus.

I decided to assign each student a document (or, in some cases, two or three closely related documents) to present to the class. Each student prepared a ten- to fifteen-minute presentation and a two- or three-page analysis of the document, which usually paralleled, or sometimes served as the script for, the presentation. I stressed that their assignment was to *teach* their selection to the class. After their presentation, I questioned the presenter to make sure that all key aspects of the documents were covered, and also moderated questions from the rest of the class. This method obtained mixed results: some students went into great depth researching and then explaining the key figures, events, and ideas contained in their selection. Others did a very cursory job, limiting themselves only to what was printed in the *Documentary Collection*. In what follows, I will reflect on what I and the students felt worked and what did not, and suggest ways that this valuable tool might best be used in different settings.

The first challenge of this approach was assigning documents. I decided to give the class a free rein in making selections: I didn’t guide or restrict their selections in any way. My rationale was that students would tend to do a better job with documents they chose themselves, presumably because they would be more interested. Several pitfalls manifested themselves. Certain chapters attract students to the documents in them; others don’t. I had to turn students away who wanted to present one of the five documents surrounding the events of spring 1989. Few students, on the other hand, wanted to tackle the doctrinal development of communism or the diplomatic wrangling that accompanied Japan’s expansion into China. Another factor in the students’ selections was procrastination, or phrased more positively, lack of familiarity with the material. Very few documents were presented in the first month of the class, while the last few weeks featured two or more every day. More problematic

than this unequal distribution was the fact that several students' choices seemed to have been based solely on putting off the presentation as long as possible, without regard to their interest in the selection. This made for dull presentations, and also meant that some important documents from the start of the term were neglected. (Lin Zexu's letter to Queen Victoria was one of these, though I was able to convince a student to do this after a conflict arose over her original choice.)

Once documents were distributed, the problem of uneven quality became paramount. This derived from two issues. First, some students simply did a better job than others. This is of course inevitable, and since I gave significant weight to the document presentation in calculating final grades (fifteen percent), most students took the assignment quite seriously. Nevertheless, there were times when the fifteen-minute presentation detracted from instruction, requiring me to spend more time re-explaining the key issues of the document that supposedly had been presented. This was particularly problematic if I relied on a student to explicate a vital document and found the presentation lacking. That was the case with Documents 12.5-12.7, which describe the lives of three warlords. These were colorful narratives, and I had hoped to let these passages answer the question, "What is a warlord?" Yet the presentation did not make the needed connections with earlier lectures and political trends, leaving the class more confused than before. Conversely, some sources that I believed were less essential to the narrative I was trying to construct for the class took on lives of their own, such as document 13.7, "Henry C. Fenn: 'Notes on Field Work in the Distribution of Grain Tickets in Shunde Fu.'" In this case, a well-prepared and eloquent student talked about famine and famine relief with such power that we wound up devoting much of a class period to it. As long as an instructor is able and willing to be flexible in anticipation of circumstances like this, the flashes of enthusiasm easily outweigh the occasional failures.

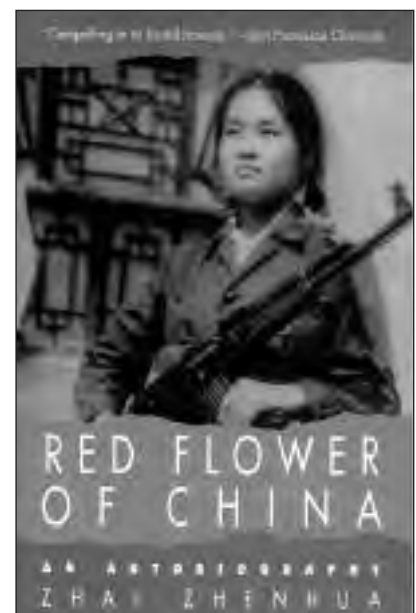
Overall, the class seemed to enjoy the documents contained in the reader. Students I asked to evaluate the book were consistent in their praise for its "personal perspective" on the past. Several commented that they could picture the events discussed through the authors' descriptions. Another common praise was that these documents freed the students from "the interpretations of a scholar" and enabled them to interpret for themselves "which parts [of Chinese history] are more and less significant." Students also enjoyed being able to focus on one aspect of Chinese history in which they were particularly interested.

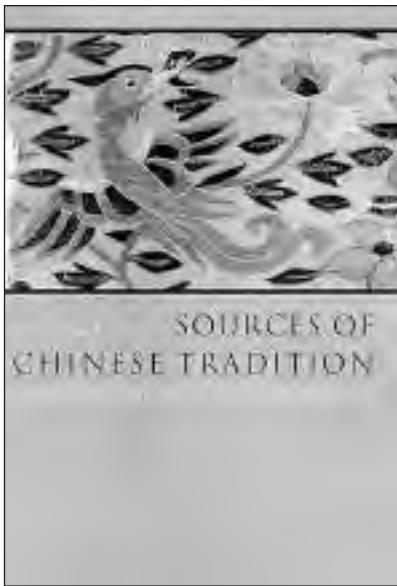
There were few complaints about the book, though this may be in part because I was soliciting opinions before grades were due. I suspect that few students read most of the documents in the book, and discussion was sometimes lacking because students were unfamiliar with the document being presented to them. Additionally, since the class was large, soft-spoken students had difficulty holding the attention of the class.

Roads Not Taken

There are of course numerous other options for how to use *Documentary Collection*, many of which are contingent on class size. Rather than specific documents, students in a smaller class (less than thirty students) could be assigned an entire chapter of documents (there are usually five to ten documents per chapter) to analyze and synthesize. Their findings could then be reported either as an essay or a classroom presentation. This could also work well in a large lecture class with additional discussion/recitation sections (the format of Spence's survey class at Yale, out of which *Search* grew). In this type of class, the sections might be dedicated to discussion of the primary sources and how they relate to the themes elucidated in the main lectures. This approach would force students to draw out the themes that link the documents, and would probably be more effective than the single-document method I used at New Paltz, where some students neglected the context and focused too myopically on their single document.

The chapter focus could also be employed to have students write essays rather than do presentations. Many of the chapters provide competing viewpoints on events (for instance, chapter 14 provides both Guomindang and communist reaction to the purges of spring 1927), and students could reasonably be expected to analyze these sources and arrive at their own assessment of events, using the textbook as a source for further analysis and description of the happenings described in the primary sources.





Alternatives and Conclusions

The *Documentary Collection* is a strong contender for inclusion in any course on modern China. The parallel structure makes it especially compelling for teachers who currently use *Search for Modern China*. For others, alternative options need serious consideration. Those who desire a primary-source reader have three main choices: a self-made “packet” of photocopied articles; Patricia Ebrey’s *Chinese Civilization and Society: A Sourcebook*, and Wm. Theodore de Bary’s *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, volume II, newly revised with Richard Lufrano. All of these have their own advantage and drawbacks. The copy packet has the advantage of being customized for each individual course, but requires considerable time and energy to prepare, and furthermore is in chronic conflict with the ebb and flow of copyright law and enforcement. Ebrey’s collection is similar in content and scope to Cheng and Lestz, including fiction and many selections dealing with social and legal history. It is thorough and well chosen, but it focuses on the entire breadth of China’s recorded history. For this reason, it may be a better choice for a survey of all of Chinese history rather than the narrower time period covered by Spence.

Sources of Chinese Tradition, updated in 1999, presents many of the same documents contained in *Documentary Collection*. Earlier editions lacked the methodological scope of Cheng and Lestz, focusing almost exclusively on intellectual and political currents, but Lufrano and de Bary have largely corrected this for the new edition. Cheng and Lestz—while focusing on politics—still include a broader range of sources that permit some attention to groups other than the political or intellectual elites. Lufrano and de Bary have also updated the periodization of *Sources*, vol. II. Whereas the first edition began with the Opium War, the new edition begins with the Qing dynasty, covering the same 400-year sweep as Spence’s text.

The second edition of *Sources* has also been greatly expanded; the current incarnation runs to almost 700 pages, making it a bit unwieldy for most undergraduate courses. It is also currently available only in cloth (though a paperback version is presumably forthcoming), and its list price is more than double that of the *Documentary Collection*. *Sources of Chinese Tradition* is certainly more comprehensive, because of its much greater size, but the selectivity of Cheng and Lestz is also of value when, realistically, instructors will not be able to use every document in any book.

The Search for Modern China: A Documentary Collection is a welcome new resource for teaching about modern Chinese history. It requires some forethought and preparation on the part of the instructor to be used most effectively, and probably will need one or more trial runs to determine how it might best be incorporated into different courses and styles of instruction. For instructors seeking to integrate primary sources into their courses, this new reader is a powerful tool that will reward effort by both teachers and students. ■

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JAMES H. CARTER is Assistant Professor of History at St. Joseph’s University in Philadelphia, where he teaches courses on East and Southeast Asian history. He earned his Ph.D. in the History of Modern China from Yale University in 1998.