

The Contested Archive

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This first teaching plan was made with contributions from Dr. [Eric Schluessel](https://history.columbia.gwu.edu/eric-schluessel) (<https://history.columbia.gwu.edu/eric-schluessel>) at George Washington University.

In conjunction with shahit.biz, students will analyze primary sources to develop their own understanding of the situation based on the evidence at hand. This is a “history of the present” exercise in which students will spend a class period conducting simulated research in a “Xinjiang archive.” They will begin with a simple question—“What is happening in Xinjiang?”—and come to their own conclusions through a guided activity.

■ Suitable for

Intermediate-level history, political science, or international affairs classes.

■ Goals

Students will:

- 1. Develop their own understanding of recent and current events in Xinjiang.
- 2. Improve their critical reading skills by evaluating evidence
- 3. If they are not historians, encounter primary source research; and if they are, learn to apply their skills to a present-day issue.
- 4. Understand the role of their own biases in approaching the archive, as well as the archive’s power to shape their conclusions.

■ Preparation

Students will read a relevant textbook chapter (ex. [Bovingdon in Politics in China](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3181331?seq=1) (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3181331?seq=1>)), an eyewitness account such as [Sayragul Sauytbay](https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/06/she-fled-chinas-camps-but-shes-still-not-free/)’ (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/06/she-fled-chinas-camps-but-shes-still-not-free/>), and an official Chinese statement (http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/2019-03/19/content_74587148.htm), such as an editorial in the Global Times. More advanced classes can assign Roberts, “[The Biopolitics of China’s ‘War on Terror](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14672715.2018.1454111?src=recsys&journalCode=rcra20)” (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14672715.2018.1454111?src=recsys&journalCode=rcra20>).” The instructor should come with a significant volume of primary evidence printed out and arranged in folders, including

- 1. eyewitness accounts,
- 2. documents in translation,
- 3. official Chinese and foreign government statements. A separate computer station can be loaded with a “video archive.” This setup should be sufficient for a class of 35 students—duplicate material for larger classes. All materials should be listed in an archival “finding aid,” with enough copies for about one-third of the class. The “finding aid” headings should not be too detailed. For example:

“Folder E3: Witness Testimonies 3”; “Folder R: Extracts from Chinese White Papers”; “Folder 12: Qaraqash Database.” Each student should also receive a handout outlining the lesson plan.

■ Lesson Plan

(This plan assumes a 70-minute lecture period.)

■ 5' Get Settled, Introduce the Lesson

Inform students that today's class will be a visit to the archives of a research institute dedicated to the study of current events in Xinjiang. Their goal is to explore those archives to answer a question they have on their minds about what's happening in the region. In these first few minutes, ask them to think of a question, but this question should be a general one, for example “What's happening with children?” or “What's the role of technology?” They will have the chance to refine the question later. Everyone should find a partner and look together in the finding aid to figure out what to examine first. Students should also ask themselves, “What sorts of information am I expecting to find?”

■ 20' Phase 1

Students will work in pairs to explore their questions at their desks through one or two folders of sources. Their only job is to read, take notes, talk, and think. It's alright to skim. Students should ask questions about their sources: “What kind of document is this? Who wrote it? What kind of person are they? What is the audience for this text?” The instructor will circulate through the room, checking in with each pair. Ask for status updates and listen to what they find interesting or frustrating. Nudge students towards exploring other folders, especially those that you know will provide contradictory information. (“Oh, I think there's something on that in Folder B7...”)

■ 20' Phase 2

Student pairs need to switch folders. They can either refine the same question or follow a new thread they've discovered during Phase 1. Their job does not change—read, take notes, talk, and think. The instructor will circulate once again. Ask what students find confusing and note it down mentally.

■ 10' Collect Thoughts

Now it's time for everyone to look at their notes and summarize for themselves what they've found. Students should write down what they found interesting, or surprising, or a problem they had in the course of research. Was their question answered? How? In which sources?

■ 15' Discussion

Students may now share the thoughts they've collected with the class. The instructor should write them down on the board for everyone to see, and especially so that students can recognize shared issues. You can ask questions about the process, such as: “Why did you choose to research your topic?” “Did your research change your understanding of Xinjiang?” “Was there anything missing from the archive?” “Do you have any unresolved questions?”

Typically, what emerges is a discussion about the researcher's relationship to the archive. What do we bring to the archive in terms of assumptions and biases, and what does the archive bring to us? In daily life, this is a lesson in critical reading.

■ Follow-Up

This exercise can be good for prompting end-of-the-semester research papers, as it guides students to focus on a relatively concrete research question and exposes them to relevant primary sources.

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