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Remembering the Mao Era

Editorial

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Editorial

JUDITH PERNIN AND SEBASTIAN VEG

While discussions continue about the details of the periodisation of post-1949 history in China, there is a general consensus to accept a divide between roughly two periods of 30 years: one spanning the events from the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to Mao's death and subsequent arrest of the "Gang of Four," and the second running from the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in December 1978, during which Deng Xiaoping consolidated his power, until the present day. While the second period is commonly referred to as the time of "Reform and Opening," the first may be designated as the "Mao era," given the central role of the PRC's first leader and the personality cult surrounding him from 1949 until his death and even beyond.

Closing off the "Mao era" as a distinct historical period and coming to a consensus on an official judgment was one of Deng Xiaoping's first tasks on assuming power. In this area, as in many others, Chinese society, although just emerging from totalitarian atomisation, was well ahead of its political leaders. The citizens of Beijing had already voiced their silent opposition to the Cultural Revolution during the April 5th protest at Tiananmen Square in 1976. In spring 1978, a 24-year-old first-year student at Fudan University in Shanghai, Lu Xinhua, wrote a short story entitled "The Scar" (*Shanghen*). Although it went unnoticed at first, it attracted great attention when it was posted on a "wall newspaper" inside the university, and on 11 August 1978, it was published on a full page of *Wenhui*bao, which reportedly printed an additional 1.5 million copies that day. It gave rise to an outpouring of "scar literature," highlighting the important role of literary expression as a space for critical voices that could not be heard in politics. Other forms of popular critique of the Mao era flourished in the late 1970s, in particular during the Democracy Wall movement in Beijing.

The Party's 1981 "Resolution on certain questions in the history of our Party" was therefore as much designed to contain popular expression as to officially break with the political organisation of the Mao era.⁽¹⁾ This resolution set out the boundaries that still guide scholarly inquiry, literary and artistic creation, and critical reflection about the Mao era up to the present. It reflects the basic consensus that marked the 1980s and the sympathy that existed during this decade between critical intellectuals and reformers inside the system (despite continued resistance from "Leftists" that broke out in sporadic political campaigns). This consensus was based on a common embrace of "Enlightenment" and "modernisation," which entailed a framing of the Mao era in terms of "backwardness" (*luohou*) and "benightedness" (*yumei*), and accused the forces of "peasant tradition" or "feudalism" of having gained the upper hand and given rise to economic irrationality, political repression, and cult of personality.⁽²⁾ Within this framework, Maoism could not be envisaged as a distinctly modern form of totalitarian politics. Under the leadership of a Party that remained the highest historical authority, victims of various movements received "rehabilitation" (*pingfan*), "redress" (*gaizheng*), and sometimes financial compensation. This consensus singled out the Cultural Revolution as the most legitimate target for critique but largely spared the "17 years" (1949-1966) of "construction of socialism." Historical and ideological blind spots therefore remained embedded in the very framework in which the first partial wave of "de-Maoisation" took

place. In particular, the link between the nature and institutions of the PRC polity and the mass violence that took place under Mao was never officially probed.

After the repression of the 1989 student movement, popular memory became an even more important topic. In a seminal article published in 1990, Fang Lizhi coined the concept of *duandai* or "generational break," according to which each generation of democracy activists in China is deprived of the memory of contributions by former generations because of the Communist Party's "techniques of amnesia."⁽³⁾ In the 1990s, a number of factors came together to bring the "memory" of the Mao era back to the foreground. In response to the CCP's control over history (which the 1989 massacre had once again highlighted), many intellectuals and ordinary citizens began to collect and discuss personal memories. Three factors may have played a particularly important role in this evolution. Firstly, the age of the historical actors of the Mao era: as the participants in mass movements or victims of the Mao era reached old age, many of them wrote and sometimes published memoirs, talked to younger family members, built informal networks, and generally brought the events of the 1950s and 1960s back into the limelight. The economic liberalisation and technological changes of the 1990s (in particular the Internet) also provided new fora to bring such discussions into the public sphere. Finally, the trivial commercialisation of the Mao era ("Mao nostalgia") studied by Geremie Barmé,⁽⁴⁾ despite its obvious shortcomings in terms of critical thinking, also contributed to renewed discussion of the "17 years" and the Cultural Revolution.

Since the 1990s, a series of forms expressing the popular memory of the Mao era has thus appeared in China against a background of amnesia and explicit restrictions in the official media, academia, and public commemoration. They provide spaces for unearthing or revisiting historical documents, producing unofficial testimonies or investigative studies. Important former participants have published memoirs, either within China or more often in Hong Kong (Zhao Ziyang on Tiananmen, Wu Faxian on the Lin Biao incident). Memory groups have appeared, structured around a chronological event, and usually composed of former "participants" or "veterans." Some are made up of former "educated youth" who were sent down to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution,⁽⁵⁾ while others (whose participants are even older) go back to the political movements of the 1950s, such as the

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1. See "Guanyu jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi," <http://cpc.people.com.cn/BIG5/64162/71380/71387/71588/4854598.html>. A full English translation is available as: "Resolution on certain questions in the history of our party since the founding of the People's Republic of China," www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/history/01.htm (all links accessed on 28 October 2014).
2. See Arif Dirlik, "Mao Zedong in Contemporary Chinese Official Discourse and History," *China Perspectives*, No. 2012/2, 2012, pp. 17-28.
3. Fang Lizhi, "The Chinese Amnesia," *New York Review of Books*, 27 September 1990, www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1990/sep/27/the-chinese-amnesia/ (accessed on 3 November 2014).
4. Geremie Barmé, *In the Red*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1999.
5. See Michel Bonnin, "The Threatened History and Collective Memory of the Cultural Revolution's Lost Generation," *China Perspectives*, No. 2007/4, 2007, pp. 52-64.

Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Great Leap Forward. These social groups may meet regularly or irregularly, conduct collective activities, or facilitate publications. Unofficial journals like *Jiyi* (Memory, edited by Wu Di) or *Hei wulei* (The Five black categories, edited by Jiao Guobiao) are disseminated via the Internet. *Yanhuang Chunqiu* (Annals of the Yellow Emperor) and *Lao Zhaopian* (Old Photographs, edited by Ding Dong) continue to publish a paper version, while *Kan Lishi* (Looking at History, edited by Yang Xiaodong) closed down in 2013.⁽⁶⁾ This movement seems to have accelerated since the early 2000s with the publication of works of family history such as Zhang Yihe's *The Last Aristocrats* (*Zuihou de guizu*, 2004) on the Anti-Rightist Campaign and works of "citizen journalism" such as *Tombstone* (*Mubei*) by Yang Jisheng in 2008. Although published in Hong Kong, the latter represented the first full-fledged analysis and indictment of the Great Famine of 1959-1961 to circulate widely inside China, and continues to spark violent controversies within and beyond academia.⁽⁷⁾ The last 15 years have also seen an outpouring of independent documentary films recording family histories and personal memories. The latest development, since 2013, has been a wave of spontaneous, individual "apologies" by former participants in political violence during the Cultural Revolution, calling for analysis and interpretation.⁽⁸⁾ These apologies came just as Xi Jinping was launching a re-evaluation of the Mao era via his theory of the "two irrefutables," according to which the 30 years of Mao's rule and the 30 years of Reform and Opening have equal value.⁽⁹⁾

The vast majority of previous scholarship on the Mao era has focused on elite politics. In the area of historiography, Michel Bonnin's study of the educated youth movement and Frank Dikötter's study of the Great Famine are among the first works to turn towards the lives of ordinary people under Mao,⁽¹⁰⁾ applying to China some of the methodological questions that over the last decades have determined the understanding of daily life under Nazism or in the Soviet Union.⁽¹¹⁾ Nonetheless, history is only beginning to integrate the memories of ordinary people into its narratives. Manifestations of popular memory have been covered by journalists (usually focusing on nostalgic commodification) and began to receive some scholarly attention in the early 2000s,⁽¹²⁾ but it is only recently that an edited volume has been published bringing together multidisciplinary approaches to studying the history and memory of the Mao era, viewed through a diversity of lenses: trauma entailed by mass violence as well as revolutionary nostalgia.⁽¹³⁾ This recent shift of attention in academia suggests that popular memory may also eventually inflect historiography.

Although distinct from one another, most of these popular memory initiatives pertain to the "space of the people" (the *minjian* or unofficial realm of Chinese society) and therefore share a number of common points. They are often autonomous endeavours carried out by individuals or groups who choose to focus on the everyday and "ordinary people" instead of grand narratives. To a large extent, their exploration of history is based on memory, personal accounts, most recently apologies, and subjectivity, something that calls for a historiographical appraisal as much as for an examination of their means of expression. Drawing on testimonies and archival materials, these works and initiatives may take the form of literary texts, interviews, memoirs, performances, films, or visual art works. How do they question established views of history, and can they translate into a broader new historical narrative? How are they perceived by the public and society at large?

The following papers seek to answer these questions by focusing on the modes of expression and organisation that these initiatives rely on, as much as on the historical discourses they produce, in order to examine the ways

they challenge the official narrative on the history of the Mao era. The wide range of media under scrutiny here – painting, literature, the Internet, and film – reveals the diversity and extent of these investigations on the subjective memories of the Mao era. If an autobiographical framework is prevalent in many projects, some are presented as works of fiction (literary fiction or film),⁽¹⁴⁾ while others constitute an appropriation of former generations' experiences, expressed through a personal and artistic perspective.⁽¹⁵⁾

If subjective memories are by definition intimate and thus pertain to the private sphere, they acquire a form of publicity whenever they are discussed or mediated in arts and literature. Circulating these personal accounts in the "space of the people" amounts not only to crossing the line between the private and the public sphere, but also to breaking down the border between the official and the unofficial. If the majority of the early alternative accounts of the Mao era originated on the margins or outside of the system (*tizhiwai*), the situation has become more complex. Nowadays, unofficial memories manage to enter the mainstream through online discussions, publications, films, and piracy practices. This aspect of the circulation of memories from the private to the public – and therefore their reception and transmission – lies at the heart of this special issue.

Four Books, a novel by Yan Lianke taking place during the Great famine, is discussed in the first article by Sebastian Veg. Departing from the documentary style often used in comparable works, Yan Lianke uses fiction to question the complicity of intellectuals and depict Maoism as an irrational cult. Although published only in Hong Kong and Taiwan, *Four Books* circulates among the mainland readership as well, fostering discussions on the period within the Chinese-speaking public sphere.

- Following this, a new online version of this journal, *Our History* (*Women de lishi*), is available on this blog: <http://ourhistory.blog.21ccom.net/> (accessed on 3 November 2014).
- See Anthony Garnaut, "The Mass Line on a Massive Famine," *The China Story*, 8 October 2014, www.thechinastory.org/2014/10/the-mass-line-on-a-massive-famine/ (accessed on 3 November 2014).
- See for example: Zhao Jie, "Too Little, Too Late?," *News China*, November 2013, www.newschina-mag.com/magazine/too-little-too-late; Xiao Han, "Confessions of the Cultural Revolution," *The International New York Times*, 26 January 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/01/27/opinion/confessions-of-the-cultural-revolution.html (all links accessed on 3 November 2014).
- See: Central Bureau of Party History, "Zhengque kandai gaige kaifang qianhou liangge lishi shiqi" (Correctly view the two historical periods before and after Reform and Opening), *People's Daily*, 8 November 2013, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/1108/c1001-23471419.html> (accessed on 3 November 2014).
- Michel Bonnin, *The Lost Generation*, Hong Kong, CUHK Press, 2013; Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine*, London, Bloomsbury, 2010. See also the following edited volume: Joseph Esherick, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Andrew G. Walder, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2006.
- See: Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary life in extraordinary times. Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.
- See: Yang Guobin, "China's Zhiqing Generation: Nostalgia, Identity and Cultural Resistance in the 1990s," *Modern China*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2003, pp. 267-296; Yang Guobin and Ming-Bao Yue (eds), "Gilded-Age Memories of the Cultural Revolution," *The China Review*, special issue, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2005.
- Ching Kwan Lee and Guobin Yang, *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: The politics and poetics of collective memories in reform China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007. See also this special issue of *China Perspectives*, "China and its Past. Return, Reinvention, Forgetting," *China Perspectives*, No. 2007/4, 2007.
- See for instance the works partly derived from the former Rightist He Fengming's memoirs: Yang Xianhui's *Jiabiangu jishi* (*Woman From Shanghai*, Pantheon, 2009); Wang Bing's documentary *He Fengming*, 2007, 186 min., and his fiction film *The Ditch* (*Jiabiangu*), 2011, 112 min. For further reading, see: Sebastian Veg, "Testimony, History and Ethics: From the Memory of Jiabiangu Prison Camp to a Reappraisal of the Anti-Rightist Movement in Present-Day China," *China Quarterly*, No. 218, 2014, pp. 514-539 and "The limits of representation: Wang Bing's labor camp films," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2012, pp. 173-187.
- See, for instance, the role of records, documents, and subjective memories in the Living Dance Studio's performance pieces *Report on Body* (*Shenti Baogao*, 2002) and *Remembering 1* (*Huiyi yi*, 2008). See also: Zhuang Jiayun, "Remembering and Reenacting Hunger: Caochangdi Workstation's Minjian Memory Project," *The Drama Review*, Vol. 58, No. 1, February 2014, pp. 118-140.

The next article by Judith Pernin looks at an independent and multidisciplinary memory project combining oral history, documentary filmmaking, and performances. A participative initiative launched in 2010 at Caochangdi Workstation in Beijing, the Folk Memory Project encourages filmmakers to return to their home villages to record the historical memories of older inhabitants. Their documentary films consist not only of interviews with the witnesses of history but are also laced with performative elements conveying the filmmakers' subjective experience during the field trip, and acting as educational and transmission devices.

The subjective memories of witnesses of the Cultural Revolution are directly addressed in the last article of this issue on *Wuming*—one of the first

Chinese unofficial painting groups, to which the article's author belonged. Wang Aihe offers a close reading of her peers' and her own works. Acting as the visual diaries of repressed artists, these landscapes, still-lives, and scenes of the everyday display a subjective record of their feelings, and constitute, for those who can decipher them, a poignant collection of documents on the resistance of subjectivity during the Cultural Revolution.

Finally, a translation of an article by independent documentary filmmaker Wu Wenguang on the aforementioned Folk Memory Project is included as an additional document. Both an introduction to the project and an assessment of its first four years, it provides an account of the work method and goals of a specific unofficial memory project, written by its founder.