PRESENCE AND FUTURE OF THE PAST

CHINA BETWEEN REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING

Regina Edelbauer

Regina Edelbauer is a Project Assistant of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Beijing.

When the process of coming to terms with the past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in German) can be defined as "a nation addressing a problematic period in its recent history",[1] there are numerous cataclysmic phases in contemporary Chinese history that are in need of a critical reappraisal. "The Great Leap Forward" (1958-1961) and the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" (1966-1976) are just two examples of political campaigns that have left deep scars on the collective Chinese psyche.[2] In 1981, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) detailed the framework for a party-politically approved interpretation of the past, which is still cemented in history books today, with its "Resolution on certain questions in the history of our party since the founding of the People's Republic of China". Beijing is also striving for the monopoly on the accepted historiography in international exchanges, which is evident in the current conflicts in the Sino-Japanese discourse for instance. Paul Cohen exposed the official, state-enforced selection of which historic episodes should be remembered

1 | Definition according to the Duden (translated), http://duden.de/rechtschreibung/Vergangenheitsbewaeltigung (accessed 15 Jan 2013).

2 | In this report derived from Jan Assmann's concept of the "cultural memory": "The term 'cultural memory' relates to one of the external dimensions of human memory. […] But what this memory records in terms of content, how it organises various content, how long it can retain something, these things are to a very large extent determined not by internal capacity and control but by external, i.e. social and cultural determining factors." Translated from: Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, München, Verlag C. H. Beck, 6th edition, 2007, 19.

and which forgotten as a "myth of remembrance".[3] This selection is undergoing continuous adaptation in response to current circumstances in domestic and external politics.

There are no official channels in the People's Republic of China for a critical examination of its own past. There is a lack of distance that this would require, as the present-day party leadership elites are direct successors to the government representatives who were instrumental in determining the course of contemporary Chinese history. This is the reason why numerous questions in the historic debate not only remain unanswered, but are not even asked. Tabooed, repressed and forgotten, alternative interpretations are being lost over time due to the contemporary witnesses dying off. The public partly colludes in this decision. There is a social contract of silence running like a thread through modern Chinese historiography. What Margarete and Alexander Mitscherlich succeeded in doing in Germany in the 1960s in their joint work "The inability to mourn", namely to break open "a collective repressive resistance",[4] is not likely to happen anytime soon in China.

There is a social contract of silence running like a thread through modern Chinese historiography. To break open "a collective repressive resistance", is not likely to happen any time soon in China.

The British-Chinese Author Xue Xinran comments that China's "map of history" lacks generally accepted, explanatory symbols: "In the search for their roots and for their self-respect as a nation, Chinese people have lost their way. The result is a map of history which lacks an agreed system of explanatory symbols and is forever reprinted."[5] There is no question that the CCP lays claim to the monopoly on the accepted interpretations of the past, but party historiography is only one of many variable, compartmentalised and selective partial truths that are currently depicted in contemporary Chinese history. Unofficial actors within

3 | "It is a myth that memory has to do only with the past. It stands to reason, therefore, that as the political, social, intellectual, and international environments of China changed in the course of the twentieth century, the meanings of 'remembering' and 'forgetting' – as well as the nature of tension between the two – also underwent significant change." In: Paul A. Cohen, *Evolving perspectives on the Chinese past*, RoutledgeCurzon, London, 2003, 172.

4 | Horst-Eberhard Richter, *Moral in Zeiten der Krise*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin, 2010, 31.

5 | Xue Xinran, *China Witness. Voices from a silent generation*, Random House, London, 2008, 397.

society are posing a challenge to the state's interpretation of history. Consequently, work of remembrance represents an area of conflict in China. A few coordinates of the (unresolved) past periods in China's map of history illustrate the limits of Chinese efforts to come to terms with the past in politics and in society in the area of tension between remembering and forgetting.

OFFICIAL NARRATIVE OF THE PAST

The instrumentalisation of history to further political agendas started long before the Communist Party took power. This allowed the ruling imperial dynasty to paint itself in a better light compared to the previous ruler.

Interpreting the past is a highly political enterprise, particularly in an authoritarian system such as the People's Republic of China, or as Kent Erwing said: "In China all history is political."[6] The instrumentalisation of history to further political agendas in China started long before the Communist Party took power. This is illustrated by one of the most significant Chinese historic records penned by Sima Qian (145 to 86 BC). Francoise Hauser defines the purpose of historiography at that time as "imperial marketing", which enabled dynasties to set down their interpretation of events as the "official history" (*zhengshi*). This allowed the ruling imperial dynasty to establish a cultural link to the tradition of the preceding dynasty, to paint itself in a better light compared to the previous ruler and to legitimise its own sole claim to power. "Unofficial, ultimately even deviating depictions were denigrated as 'wild history' (*yeshi)*."[7]

Against this background, the myth of continuity of a 5,000-year-old cultural history of China has been retained until today to provide a common national identity although the foundations for a joint culture were not laid until around 2,200 years ago by the Qin dynasty according to Hauser; and not many people question the external cultural influences by foreign ruling powers (Mongol Yuan Dynasty, 1279-1368; Manchu rule during the Qing Dynasty, 1644-1911) as part of the national cultural history either.[8] Once the People's Republic of China had been proclaimed, the

6 | Kent Ewing, "In China all history is political", Asia Times Online, 26 Jan 2007, http://atimes.com/atimes/China/IA26Ad01.html (accessed 15 Jan 2013).
7 | Francoise Hauser, *Alles Mythos! 20 populäre Irrtümer über China*, Konrad Theiss Verlag, Stuttgart, 2011, 59.
8 | Ibid., 54-57.

political exploitation of historiography was continued by the Chairman of the CCP Mao Zedong (1949). "He [Mao] wanted to define the communist revolution as a logical stage of historical development in China and find it a proper place in history."[9] This seemed particularly important for the collective acceptance of the imported communist set of values, which did not sit particularly well with the traditions of Chinese society, traditions strongly influenced by Confucian principles. In 1953, the Chinese government gave the newly founded Central Committee of Historical Study, which was made up of historians that were either party members or pro-communist, authority to control all of China's history studies.[10]

In 1981, the Chinese Communist Party used the "Resolution on certain questions in the history of our party since the founding of the People's Republic of China" to set down the accepted assessment of a number of periods of contemporary history.

The "Resolution on certain questions in the history of our party since the founding of the People's Republic of China"[11] is a manifest of Beijing's official historiography. In 1981, the Chinese Communist Party used this document to establish the accepted assessment of a number of periods of contemporary history. Amongst other things, the authors dealt with the historic role of Mao Zedong and they closed with an appeal for everybody to contribute to building a modern socialist China under the leadership of the CCP. The obvious agenda of that Party resolution was to ensure the legitimisation of the continuing CCP authority after the tumultuous years of the

9 | Qiu Jin, "History and State: Searching the Past in the Light of the Present in the People's Republic of China", in: *Historiography East and West,* Vol. 2, No. 1, 2004, 15.

10 | Ibid., 19.

11 | The 38 items of the resolution deal with the following key topics: "1-5: Review of the History of the Twenty-Eight Years Before the Founding of the People's Republic 6-8: Basic Appraisal of the History of the Thirty-Two Years Since the Founding of the People's Republic, 9-15: The Seven Years of Basic Completion of the Socialist Transformation; 16-24: Ten Years of Initially Building Socialism in All Spheres 19-24: The Decade of the 'Cultural Revolution'; 25-26: Great Turning Point in History 27-31: Comrade Mao Zedong's Historical Role and Mao Zedong Thought; 32-38: Unite and Strive to Build a Powerful, Modern Socialist China." In: "Resolution on certain questions in the history of our party since the founding of the People's Republic of China. Adopted by the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on June 27, 1981", Chinese Communism Subject Archive, http://marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/history/01.htm (accessed 31 Jan 2013).

Cultural Revolution. The resolution provides the contextual framework for the official interpretation of history, to which politicians as well as historians, scientists and journalists in mainland China must adhere when they comment on modern Chinese history. This includes not only mandatory use of the terms approved by the Party, but also the time frames of the respective historic periods as defined by the Party. The Party resolution depicts 32 years of history on just 30 pages and in 23,000 words,[12] less than one page per year on average. This vanishingly small proportion of official pronouncements on such far-reaching coordinates of contemporary history reflects the focus of Chinese history books, which predominantly describe the events before the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949).[13]

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There has not been a new edition of the 30-year-old resolution to date. No doubt, one of the main reasons is the quashing of the protests on Tiananmen Square (4 June 1989).[14] Making an issue of the violent termination of the democracy movement in 1989 on Party orders is still taboo in present-day China. Public events of commemoration in Hong Kong, which have attracted increasing numbers of people from the mainland in recent years, demonstrate the need within society to engage in the work of remembrance.[15] The party knows that addressing and assessing this "incident", as it is referred to officially, might represent an endeavour that could pose a threat to the system. This is the reason why it purposely ignores this part of history.

12 | Ibid. The rounded figures correspond to the English translation.

13 | "[…] for the last few years I have bought all the new editions of Chinese history books, and I have discovered that pre-1949 history accounts for 80 per cent of the material, and only 20 per cent is devoted to the period after 1949. The ten years of the Cultural Revolution receive scarcely any space at all, and are covered in just a few vaguely worded lines." Xinran, n. 5, 266.

14 | An analysis of the events from the point of view of Zhao Ziyang, former General Secretary of the CCP, who was denounced subsequent to the "incident" and died in 2005 can be found in his posthumous publication: Zhao Ziyang, *Prisoner of the State. The secret Journal of Premier Zhao Ziyang*, Simon& Schuster, New York, 2009.

15 | Sophie Beach, "Tiananmen Square: 23 years later", China Digital Times, 4 Jun 2012, http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2012/06/tiananmen-square-23-years-later (accessed 11 Feb 2013).

Due to different interpretations of historic events, there are also conflicts arising regularly in the area of international relations, which are producing significant tensions.

The fragmentation of memory landscapes is not only visible with respect to the way the authorities deal with domestic turning points, which influential Chinese personalities have drawn public attention to over the last few months, sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally. Due to different interpretations of historic events, there are also conflicts arising regularly in the area of international relations, which are producing significant tensions. The culture of selective memory of the state historiography is reflected particularly strongly in the relationship between China and Japan. In 2012, the territorial dispute about the uninhabited Diaoyu Islands (Japanese: Senkaku Islands) evoked anti-Japanese resentment in Chinese society, and not for the first time; back in 2005, there were country-wide anti-Japanese protests.[16] The new edition of a history book for Japanese schools, which was accused of glossing over Japanese war crimes during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), created a great deal of anger at the time. In both cases, 2005 and 2012, disagreement about history was at the centre of the conflict. Beijing considers the dispute with Tokyo in the context of the historic narrative of "national humiliation", which is not limited to China's degradation by Japanese acts of war but includes earlier humiliations by Western aggressors.[17]

Besides the party-political "master narratives", there are unofficial histories (*yeshi*) in existence within Chinese society, which break out of the confines of the official Chinese historiography (*zhengshi*). This poses an increasing challenge to the historic "master narrative" of the Party

16 | Joseh Kahn, "China is pushing and scripting anti-japanese Protests", *The New York Times*, 15 Apr 2005, http://nytimes.com/2005/04/15/international/asia/15china.html (accessed 11 Feb 2013).

17 | "[…] so called 'century of national humiliation' that began with the First Opium War (1839-1842) and lasted through the end of the Sino-Japanese War in 1945. China's memory of this period as a time when it was attacked, bullied, and torn asunder by imperialists serves as the foundation for its modern identity and purpose." Zheng Wang, "Not rising, but Rejuvinating: The Chinese Dream", *The Diplomat*, 5 Feb 2013, http://thediplomat.com/2013/02/05/chinese-dream-draft (accessed 8 Feb 2013).

resolution.[18] The catastrophic historic turning points in the Chinese past, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, are – in spite of the silence decreed by the party – ever-present in China's everyday domestic political life.

MEMORIES OF THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD

In the 1950s, Mao Zedong pursued the political campaign of the Great Leap Forward to push ahead with the transformation of agricultural and industrial production with the objective of narrowing the gap between China and Western industrialised countries. The intention was to ensure a faster transition to communism and to drive forward speedy industrialisation. The revolutionary mass mobilisation involved the combining of all social life into collective units. The campaign resulted in one of the worst, possibly even the most severe famine in the world. At least 45 million people lost their lives between 1958 and 1962 due to malnourishment and physical abuse by party cadres.[19] In spite of this virtually incredible number of victims, the party-political historiography writes this suffering caused by human hand off as "three years of natural disasters". According to the Party resolution, the errors of the Great Leap Forward only constituted one of several reasons for economic difficulties that caused great losses for the people between 1959 and 1961.[20] This brief official assessment laid the foundation for the marginalisation of public

At least 45 million people lost their lives between 1958 and 1962 due to malnourishment and physical abuse by party cadres.

18 | "However, this claim to monopoly [on the part of the CCP] has been progressively eroded during the reform period of the last 30 years and is increasingly difficult to sustain in spite of the party state strategies to uphold historiographical simplification (translated)." Heike Holbig, "Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik in China", The Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, bpb), 5 Oct 2009, http://bpb.de/internationales/asien/china/44265 (accessed 7 Feb 2013).

19 | Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's most devastating catastrophe 1958-62*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2010, x.

20 | "It was mainly due to the errors of the Great Leap Forward and of the struggle against 'Right opportunism' together with a succession of natural calamities and the perfidious scrapping of contracts by the Soviet Government that our economy encountered serious difficulties between 1959 and 1961, which caused serious losses to our country and people." Chinese Communism Subject Archive, n. 11.

discourse about the suffering of that time, which could be observed in subsequent years.[21]

Yang's blunt record of the horrific consequences of the Great Leap Forward is the courageous attempt by a contemporary witness to rejuvenate a period of history that had been covered up.

In 2008, the Chinese journalist Yang Jisheng set a memorial to the famine victims, which included his father, with a 1,800-page publication, which is banned on the mainland. The abbreviated German edition came out in 2012.[22] Yang's blunt record of the horrific consequences of the Great Leap Forward is the courageous attempt by a contemporary witness to rejuvenate a period of history that had been covered up. Although the work could only be published in China in the special administrative zone of Hong Kong, it has had an impact on the debate on the mainland. In September 2012, the state-controlled *Global Times*, a mouthpiece of the CCP, not only picked up on Yang's publication, but also reported about a memorial set-up on the basis of a private initiative – the only one of its kind – for the famine victims of the town of Xinyang in Henan Province, which was particularly badly affected.[23]

The censorship makes it difficult for society to address its own past. A lack of public memorials has contributed to the collective amnesia. However, this is only one side of the coin. Quite apart from the state-decreed silence, many contemporary witnesses have no desire to think back to this period in their lives: "To romanticise what were often utterly desperate ways of surviving is to see the world in black and white, when in reality collectivisation forced everyone, at one point or another, to make grim moral compromises."[24] It was not only neighbours stealing from each other, even parents withheld food from their own

21 | Felix Wemheuer's research about the oral history within the Chinese rural population testifies to the fact that this influential period is rarely a subject of discussion in society. Cf. Felix Wemheuer, "Oral History auf Chinesischen Dörfern", *BIOS. Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History und Lebensverlaufsanalysen*, No. 1, 2007, http://ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/27048/ssoar-bioszeit-2007-1-wemheuer-oral_history_auf_chinesischen_dorfern.pdf (accessed 8 Jan 2013).

22 | Yang Jisheng, *Grabstein – Mùbei: Die große chinesische Hungerkatastrophe 1958-1962*, Fischer, Frankfurt am Main, 2012.

23 | Zhang Zhilong, "Starved of memories", *Global Times*, 6 Sep 2012, http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/731589.shtml (accessed 13 Feb 2013).

24 | Dikötter, n. 19, xv.

children in order to keep themselves alive.[25] Yang Jisheng also recorded cases of cannibalism in his publication. The moral depths that resulted from the survival strategies generate shame and cause a great deal of pain when people attempt to come to terms with them. Despite or perhaps precisely because of this, some Chinese artists are taking on the task of dealing with these dark years. The documentaries of the China Folk Memory Image Archives (CFMIA)[26] can be ordered online; the website is accessible to users on the mainland. Although these eyewitness accounts cannot be broadcast on public television, their screening in the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing (April 2012) facilitated a debate about "forgotten memories"[27] according to the Chinese initiator and documentary maker Wu Wenguang.

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The Internet offers new opportunities to air different interpretations of historic narratives, such as illustrated by the case of Lin Zhibo, editor of the People's Daily in Gansu Province. In May 2012, thousands of Chinese internet users voiced their anger at his doubts about the millions of deaths caused by the Great Leap Forward, which he had published on the twitter-style online platform Sina Weibo. They subsequently exchanged information on experiences endured by their own families during the famine.[28] Lin withdrew his comment soon afterwards and his statement – unintentionally – provided an impulse for a discussion of

25 | Lecture by Frank Dikötter, "Frank Dikotter – Mao's Great Famine: The History of Chinas most Devastating Catastrophe", YouTube, http://youtu.be/DqFBa9ePWpo (accessed 13 Feb 2013).

26 | Self-portrait of China Folk Memory Image Archives (CFMIA): "An ongoing, long term archive powered by the community. It collects, organizes and preserves images from China's folk history. It's goal is to create a collection that can be used for research and study purposes, while at the same time engaging the community to document and preserve it's own history and memories." CFMIA, http://cidfa.com/video/about_us (accessed 21 Jan 2013).

27 | "Folk Memory project records forgotten memory of Great Leap Forward", WantChinaTimes.com, 22 Apr 2012, http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclass-cnt.aspx?id=20120422000005&cid=1104 (accessed 21 Jan 2013).

28 | "Denial from People's Daily Branch Head Ignited Fury and Discussions of the Great Famine", Offbeat China, 3 May 2012, http://offbeatchina.com/denial-from-peoples-daily-branch-head-ignited-furious-discussion-of-the-great-famine (accessed 21 Jan 2013).

this otherwise repressed phase of Chinese history, which reached across wide swathes of the online community.

In his publication "China in ten words", which is banned in the People's Republic of China, Yu Hua draws a parallel with contemporary politics. Comparable to the time of the Great Leap Forward, when local politicians tried to impress Party headquarters with embellished figures about the production output of their provinces and thus made the famine in many parts of the country even worse, Yu Hua thinks that prestigious major local projects such as airports and motorways now represent a popular way by which local politicians seek to enhance the image they present to the central government.[29] Yu Hua's publication can therefore be read as an exhortation against history repeating itself. One hint as to why the history of the Great Leap Forward aroused a comparatively high level of public interest particularly last year is provided by an article in the Global Times: "Cao Siyuan, a constitutional and economic scholar and director of Siyuan Think Tank, told the Global Times that the major reason for many scholars to highlight this part of history is to stress the importance of political reform at the Party's upcoming 18th National Congress, as many of them see that poor governance contributed to the famine."[30] This is a first, hesitant, but very important step towards a potentially more differentiated public debate of the horrors of that time.

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STORIES ABOUT THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

Coming to terms with the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution", which plunged the country into ten years of chaos from 1966 to 1979 according to the official view, probably represents the most important example of a skewed, party-political, agenda-driven culture of remembrance, which is still hindering efforts to address and come to terms with the events people lived through as individuals as well as collectively. The aim of the Cultural Revolution was to rebuild Chinese society from scratch by turning away from

29 | Yu Hua, *China in Ten Words*, Duckworth Overlook, London, 2012, 118.

30 | Zhao Qian, "Counting the dead", *Global Times*, 4 May 2012, http://www.globaltimes.cn/NEWS/tabid/99/ID/707768/Counting-the-dead.aspx (accessed 15 Jan 2013).

the "Four Old Things" (Old Ideas, Old Cultures, Old Habits, Old Customs). Due to the partly contradictory political mass campaigns, which followed in close succession, persecutors could very quickly become victims themselves – and vice versa. All social interaction had to be viewed in the context of the current political line. Against this backdrop, the experiences people suffered during the Cultural Revolution were particularly traumatic as they "undermined the fundamental trust in the reliability of social relationships".[31]

Reminiscence about the cultural revolution: reprints of propaganda posters from the 1970s are a popular souvenir. Accounting for the events of this decades continues to be instrumentalised by party politics. | Source: racken (CC BY).

31 | Tomas Plänkers, "Das psychische Trauma im Spannungsfeld zwischen Individuum und Gesellschaft in China", in: ders. (ed.), *Chinesische Seelenlandschaften. Die Gegenwart der Kulturrevolution (1966-1976)*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 2010, 170.

The Party resolution of 1981 assigned Mao Zedong chief responsibility and the Party partial responsibility for the "the grave 'Left' error of the 'cultural revolution'".[32] The party document does not say anything that would amount to a more probing analysis to determine which social actors of the time carried blame. As regards complicity, the resolution granted society victim status in principle, but did not absolve it from its shared responsibility. Shortly after the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Party leadership succeeded in restoring social cohesion by means of a "unity of victims"[33] and by making the forgetting of the suffering on Party orders a prerequisite to the normalisation of social co-existence on the basis of the collusion of society as a whole. The 1981 Party resolution "tried to convince the public that not to remember sufferings of the past would help everybody to live in the present. The nation united by collective memory was to be turned into a nation united by collective amnesia."[34] The enormous contradictions in the assessments of the events between 1966 and 1976 in both official and unofficial narratives show that there are great obstacles hindering people from coming to terms with this part of their past. The greatest difficulty within society, namely finding a generally valid and accepted assessment of this decade, is currently reflected, amongst other things, in the controversy about a memoir published in 2013 by the entrepreneur Ping Fu, who now lives in the United States. The critical reactions from the Chinese online community regarding the authenticity

The 1981 Party resolution tried to convince the public that not to remember sufferings of the past would help everybody to live in the present.

32 | "Chief responsibility for the grave 'Left' error of the 'cultural revolution', an error comprehensive in magnitude and protracted in duration, does indeed lie with Comrade Mao Zedong. But after all it was the error of a great proletarian revolutionary. […] the Central Committee of the Party should be held partly responsible. […] Blaming this on only one person or on only a handful of people will not provide a deep lesson for the whole Party or enable it to find practical ways to change the situation." N. 11.

33 | Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "Coping with the cultural revolution: Contesting Interpretations", in: Annette Schuhmann and Alexandra Pfeiff (eds.), *Die Welt der Anderen – Zeithistorische Debatten in Asien*, Zeitgeschichte-online, Jun 2009, http://zeitgeschichte-online.de/thema/die-welt-der-anderen-zeithistorische-debatten-in-asien (accessed 9 Feb 2013).

34 | "The unity of a society the social fabric of which had been torn by the Cultural Revolution was re-established as the unity of victims, and thus a memory frame was established that people used and had to use." In: ibid.

of Ping's reminiscences about her negative childhood experiences during the Cultural Revolution demonstrate the high level of emotion that pervades the discussions of this issue away from the party line.[35] While the culture or non-culture of the Cultural Revolution is addressed through special exhibitions in other countries,[36] for instance, there are no official memorials or events in the People's Republic itself to commemorate this cataclysmic period; apart from some low-brow, romanticised "themed restaurants with sparse interiors and menus […], revivals of the 'revolutionary operas' created under Jiang Qing [and] reproductions of Maoist emblems",[37] which were not only popular with foreign tourists.

Occasionally, nostalgic memories of the Mao era re-emerge among the disadvantaged groups of the Chinese population. These people are obviously harking back to the seemingly fairer revolutionary times. One frequently repeated assessment is that in those days at least everybody was as poor as each other. However, there are also some voices being heard in Chinese society today demanding a critical appraisal. Exiled historians living in the United States are addressing the past of their country of origin and providing impulses to their colleagues in mainland China through their articles in the magazine Chinese Historical Review.[38] In addition, pluralist voices on the Internet are engendering liberalisation tendencies in public discourse. Bloggers are increasingly using Sina Weibo to initiate a debate about the historiography that has been shaped by party policy. In a single day, over 2,000 users commented

Bloggers are increasingly using Sina Weibo to initiate a debate about the historiography that has been shaped by party policy.

35 | Josh Rudolph, "Ping Fu defends Memoir after Chinese Netizens Attack", China Digital Times, 7 Feb 2013, http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/02/ping-fu-defends-memoir-after-chinese-netizens-attack (accessed 8 Feb 2013).

36 | Exhibition "The Culture of the Cultural Revolution. Personality Cult and Political Design in Mao's China", 18 Feb-21 Nov 2011, Museum of Ethnology, Vienna, http://ethnomuseum.ac.at/de/ausstellungen/rueckblick/2011/die-kultur-der-kulturrevolution (accessed 19 Mar 2013).

37 | Holbig, n. 18.

38 | The Chinese Historical Review, http://www.chss.iup.edu/chr (accessed 19 Mar 2013).

on a touched-up picture of Mao Zedong, in which a cadre who had been denounced in the Cultural Revolution had been removed.[39]

Peng Zhen was barred from the leadership ranks of the CCP in 1966. He lost all his positions, got arrested and was even re-touched out of pictures, as shown above. | Source: GlobalVoices (CC BY), n. 39.

In spite of new ways of sharing opinions about history in the digital space, there are some party-political boundaries applying to a differentiated culture of remembrance that are proving impossible to overcome. The Chinese author Ba Jin, who died in 2005, had demanded the construction of a Museum of the Cultural Revolution for decades, to no avail. The online Chinese language magazine Hua Xia Wen Zhai (HXWZ), which is run from the USA and published by the non-profit organisation China News Digest, set up a digital Cultural Revolution memorial in 1996.[40] Access to the website is blocked in China. This is where the efforts to confront the past within society continue to clash with the state-approved historic landscape of remembrance.

39 | Josh Rudolph, "Two Versions of Mao's China", China Digital Times, 31 Jan 2013, http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/01/two-versions-of-maos-china (accessed 9 Feb 2013); Oiwan Lam, "Two Versions of Mao's China: History Retouched as Propaganda", GlobalVoices, 30 Jan 2013, http://globalvoicesonline.org/2013/01/30/two-versions-of-maos-china-history-retouched-as-propaganda (accessed 20 Mar 2013).

40 | Virtual Museum of the "Cultural Revolution", http://museums.cnd.org/CR/english/firsthand.htm (accessed 13 Feb 2013).

Against this background, the warning words that former Premier Wen Jiabao uttered about the period of the Cultural Revolution as part of his highly symbolic closing speech at the National People's Congress in March 2012 were all the more surprising. Wen warned that without political reforms the possibility that the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution would be repeated could not be excluded.[41] He thereby made a point of attracting the attention of the Chinese audience to this dark decade. Many observers think that Wen's motivation for pointing out the negative example of the Cultural Revolution at that particular point in time came from the case involving Bo Xilai, who went on to reveal one of the greatest scandals in Party history over the subsequent few weeks.[42] This would once again be proof of the exploitation of history for a political agenda – in this case Wen's intention of preventing Bo's advancement. But this cannot detract from the fact that the 5th leadership generation (including President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang), who took all political key positions after the 18th Party Congress in November 2012, is the last one that has its own, personal experiences of this cataclysmic period.

The career paths of the new government representatives are linked closely to this phase: 15 members of the Politburo joined the CCP during the Cultural Revolution.[43] In spite of the comments Wen Jiabao made last year, it is unlikely that the new leadership will find the courage to embark on a new interpretation of the Cultural Revolution and other contentious issues of its own historiography any time soon. As the government is blocking any active

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41 | "Tragedies like the Cultural Revolution may happen to China again if the country failed to push political reform to uproot problems occuring in the society, Premier Wen Jiabao told a press conference here on Wednesday after the conclusion of the annual parliamentary session. Premier Wen warns of another Cultural Revolution to happen without pushing political reform." Lu Hui, "Premier Wen warns of another Cultural Revolution to happen without pushing political reform", *Xinhua*, 14 Mar 2012, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-03/14/c_131466558.htm (accessed 24 Jan 2013).

42 | Andrew Jones, "Bo Xilai, Wen Jiabao and the Cultural Revolution", *gbtimes*, 15 May 2012, http://gbtimes.com/focus/politics/bo-xilai-wen-jiabao-and-cultural-revolution (accessed 11 Feb 2013).

43 | Alice L.Miller, "The Party Politburo Leadership", in: *China Leadership Monitor*, 40, 2013, http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/CLM40AM.pdf (accessed 15 Jan 2013).

and critical work of remembrance, the accounts handed down by eyewitnesses are slowly fading away. The Cultural Revolution therefore remains one of the most long lived, unresolved phenomena of the People's Republic of China.[44]

WORK OF REMEMBRANCE THEN AND NOW

China's map of history is showing totally different boundaries in 2013 than it did in the 1980s. In one of the country's most liberal political magazines, *Yanhuang Chunqiu* ("China through the Ages"),[45] (retired) party cadres were and are expressing differentiated opinions about the party-political view of historic events. The magazine's website was briefly blocked at the beginning of 2013.[46] This demonstrates that the boundaries for critical work of remembrance are constantly changing. Alternative, unofficial interpretations of the past tend to develop a dynamic of their own in China particularly when unresolved power issues within the CCP encourage efforts to address sensitive issues relating to the past. Immediately after the end of the Cultural Revolution, people addressed the experiences from this decade in public without having to fear any rebukes by the Party. Chinese authors, such as Feng Jicai, dealt with their personal experiences from the time of the Cultural Revolution by working them into the so-called "scar literature" they produced.

44 | "The impact of the Cultural Revolution on the development of the Chinese nation is enduring. The subsequent reform policies of the eighties are unthinkable without the experiences from the Cultural Revolution. The rejection of democracy by the Communist Party is also frequently justified with the experiences from the Cultural Revolution." Liying Wang, "Die Große Proletarische Kulturrevolution (1966-1976) als Kontingenzerfahrung", in: Plänkers (ed.), n. 31, 64.

45 | The first part of the Chinese name of the magazine consists of the abbreviations of the names of two legendary rulers of ancient China (Yan Di and Huang Di). The second part describes an important epoch in Chinese history (Chunqiu denotes China's Spring and Autumn Period, 722-481 BC). In terms of content, the magazine title can also be translated as "China through the Ages".

46 | "Yanhuang Chunqiu which often carries articles by retired officials that contest party versions of contemporary history, has come under pressure to tone down its relatively liberal content." Chan Kai Yee, "China: Yanhuang Chunqiu website closed down for advocating constitutionalism", China Daily Mail, 7 Jan 2013, http://chinadailymail.com/2013/01/07/china-yanhuang-chunqiu-website-closed-down-for-advocating-constitutionalism (accessed 9 Jan 2013).

The politically relatively liberal Zeitgeist of the 1980s produced the six-part mini-series "River Elegy"[47] in China. It was actually broadcasted twice on state television (*China Central Television, CCTV*) and was very well received by the public. The film makers examined Chinese culture in a historical context. The producers provided a very critical analysis of the country's traditions, which in their eyes prevented China from competing with the modernisation taking place in the West. The series also dealt with Mao Zedong's role during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution as a historic tragedy, as one excerpt from the documentary illustrates: "From economic utopia to political crises, and finally to social chaos […] wasn't this great historical tragedy the inevitable conclusion to this agricultural civilisation?" went the commentary accompanying the River Elegy.[48] Such a critical and public way of addressing the country's past has not been possible on the mainland for quite some time. The "incident" on Tiananmen Square represents a turning point as a taboo key moment of contemporary Chinese history.

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However, briefly before the National Congress in March 2013, at which the new Chinese government was officially installed, a message about a court case triggered a heated debate. A man from Zhejiang was accused of having murdered a doctor in 1967 in the course of the Cultural Revolution and he was called to account in a court of law. "What about those big names who started the Cultural Revolution? […] How come they never took responsibility?"[49] commented a blogger. The remarkable thing here is that the message found its way into public discourse via a state-controlled news agency (Chinanews.com.cn).[50] On the same day, a critical appraisal by the political scientist Zhang Ming was published in the state-owned *China Youth*

47 | "River Elegy", 1988, accessible under http://youtu.be/39j4ViRxcS8 (accessed 21 Jan 2013).

48 | David Moser, "Thoughts on River Elegy, June 1988-June 2011", The China Beat, 14 Jul 2011, http://thechinabeat.org/?p=3607 (accessed 9 Feb 2013).

49 | Amy Li, "Trial over 1967 killing of doctor sparks netizen debate on Cultural Revolution", *South China Morning Post*, 21 Feb 2013, http://scmp.com/news/china/article/1154954/trial-over-1967-killing-doctor-sparks-netizen-debate-cultural-revolution (accessed 12 Mar 2013).

50 | The article was published on 20 Feb 2013 on http://chinanews.com.cn and removed again shortly afterwards.

Daily. The author argued that "China must reflect back openly on the Cultural Revolution if the Chinese hope to regain a sense of humanity and dignity."[51] While the generational and governmental changeover is taking place, some scope for a critical debate of historic events has recently opened up. However, the CCP continues to keep a strong hold on its monopoly on interpreting the past and this is having an impact on Beijing's international relations, including the Sino-Japanese discourse.

A re-post of a critical article by Zhang Ming on *Phoenix Online* (history.ifeng.co) was accessed by 300,000 visitors in four days. The teaser shows a victim of the cultural revolution. | Source: cmp (CC BY), n. 51, screenshot by the editors.

SELECTIVE MEMORIES IN THE AREA OF TENSION OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The recurring quarrels in Sino-Japanese relations also illustrate the complex influencing potential that the national historic narrative has on current politics. In September

51 | David Bandurski, "China, den of cannibals?", China Media Project (cmp), Journalism and Media Studies Centre, Universität Hongkong, 25 Feb 2013, http://cmp.hku.hk/2013/02/25/31460 (accessed 12 Mar 2013).

2012, the dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands sparked numerous anti-Japanese protests in China's large cities. The rich raw material deposits that are rumoured to be present in this area are, however, only one aspect fuelling the public anger, which is encouraged by the CCP and has been reported on extensively by the state media machine. The roots of the dispute go much deeper. One decisive moment in the problematic bilateral relations was the Nanjing Massacre (1937) during the Second Sino-Japanese War, which resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths on the Chinese side within a few weeks. Figures about the precise numbers of victims of the crimes perpetrated by Japanese soldiers vary. Chinese scientists assume that there were over 300,000 deaths. Tokyo presents different figures: "The Japanese capped their estimate at 200,000, while continuing to insist there are also other estimates that put the number killed at 20,000 or 40,000."[52] A research project about this difficult period of shared history[53] started in 2006 by the Chinese Academy for Social Sciences in Beijing and Tokyo University has not been able to change the different views, although it did represent a significant sign of the willingness to work together to produce a historiography that would be acceptable to both sides.

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A remarkable parallel to this can be seen in the approach towards the national trauma of the Great Leap Forward and towards the Cultural Revolution: the silence of the contemporary witnesses. Iris Chang had this to say about the collective amnesia of the victims: "The Rape of Nanking did not permeate the world consciousness in the same manner as the Holocaust or Hiroshima because the victims themselves had remained silent."[54] Efforts to come to terms with this national trauma took a long time to start. It was not until 1985 that the Memorial Hall was opened in

52 | Peter J. Brown, "China, Japan still fighting over history", *Asia Times Online*, 11 Feb 2010, http://atimes.com/atimes/China/LB11Ad01.html (accessed 31 Jan 2013).

53 | Foreign Ministry of Japan, "The first meeting of the Japan-China Joint History Research Committee (Summary)", Dec 2006, http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/meet0612.html (accessed 15 Jan 2013).

54 | Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking. The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, Penguin Group, London, 1998, 11.

Nanjing.[55] Consequently, the memories of this cataclysmic historic event faded for a while.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the suffering of the Chinese people during the Second Sino-Japanese War was made into a central aspect of the official work of remembrance. The focus was on the humiliation that China suffered at the hands of Japan. What was it about the early 1990s that made it the appropriate time for this new interpretation? William Callahan has the following explanation: "Actually, 'national humiliation' only became a key education and propaganda theme in the 1990s as a way to make rebellious students feel more patriotic after the June 4th massacre. Unfortunately, this tactical method of dealing with the communist party's legitimacy crisis has become China's most successful propaganda campaign."[56] The Chinese Communist Party picks up on selected historic events that tie in with current political reality to refresh the nation's cultural memory. The Nanjing Massacre is an excellent example of this. There is no doubt about the atrocities perpetrated against the Chinese population by the Japanese invaders in the winter weeks of 1937, which are to be condemned. The rage felt by the Chinese is fuelled by the fact that people in authority in Japan are sending out very unfortunate public history signals, for instance by recurring visits to the Yasukuni Shrine by Japanese government representatives and through the fact that no official apology for the war crimes has yet been forthcoming. The problematic thing here is that China's "national humiliation" is now being used as a tool of patriotic education; a highly explosive undertaking.

The Chinese Communist Party picks up on selected historic events that tie in with current political reality to refresh the nation's cultural memory.

Aggressive anti-Japanese rhetoric, which dominated numerous front pages in the Chinese press in September 2012, fuelled nationalist resentment. Some people worked off their fury by attacking Japanese restaurants and cars, disregarding the fact that the owners were actually Chinese. This material damage is only a small manifestation

55 | "The memorial hall of the victims in Nanjing massacre by Japanese invaders", NanJing 1937, http://nj1937.org/english/default.asp (accessed 19 Mar 2013).

56 | William Callahan, "China: The Pessoptimist Nation", The China Beat, 15 Aug 2008, http://thechinabeat.org/?p=210 (accessed 9 Jan 2013).

of a very deep-rooted anger about China's humiliation by Japan.[57] Such public expression of the anti-Japanese resentment, which is condoned and even encouraged, keeps confirming it and means that it is handed down to the younger generations without due reflection. After the anti-Japanese demonstrations of September 2012 ended on orders from the central government, the anger moved from the streets onto the Internet. It does not look like the country has put this part of its past behind it by any means, quite the contrary.

In party-political terms, the Sino-Japanese conflict is being exploited as a way for the angry and frustrated young generation (angry youth: *fenqing*) to vent its annoyance. Julia Lovell provided a historic perspective in 2009: "Twenty years ago, today's *fenqing* would have been protesting against rats in their dorms and lack of democracy [Tiananmen 1989]; go back another 20 years, and they would have been Red Guards [Cultural Revolution 1969]."[58] A nationalism fuelled by public history seems to occupy a far higher position than communism in the catalogue of identifying values in China these days. All the more reason why active and critical work of remembrance on all sides (in this case China and Japan) would be required to encourage a differentiated approach to each country's own history.

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THE FUTURE OF THE PAST

After considering the above-described examples, the obvious question is how the traumas of modern Chinese history can be come to terms with in Chinese society in view of the CCP's continued claim on the monopoly on the past. What is the future of China's past? In trying to answer this question it is helpful to start by understanding what attitude

57 | "If you listen to our generation talk about the Anti-Japanese War, all of us, not to mention the wretchedly poor, have personal experience of the horror of it. When I see the Japanese flag now, it still makes me feel bad; my head is full of blood-soaked images, and I simply can't forget them, because they are so deeply imprinted on my consciousness." Xinran, *n. 5*, 274.

58 | Julia Lovell, "It's just history: Patriotic Education in the PRC", China Digital Times, 23 Apr 2009, http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2009/04/its-just-history-patriotic-education-in-the-prc (accessed 12 Feb 2013).

parts of Chinese society have towards their difficult past. Tomas Plänkers offers an anthropological, fatalistic analysis, according to which there is a traditional tendency towards accepting fateful turns of events that cause suffering, which goes back to the traditions of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. "To suffer in silence, not get worked up about the suffering, make a fuss or actually rail against it, is considered a sign of psychic maturity in China. One accepts life's blows like natural disasters, which means that the Cultural Revolution can also be understood as 'fate' resembling a natural event."[59] A totally different view is put forward by the editors of an anthology, which offers insights into the Chinese soul. Interviews apparently showed "that beneath the surface calm, the Chinese do remember the pain and suffering of what they experienced during the years of radical Maoism and in earlier historical brutality and danger. How these emotions of hurt and resentment affect their current lives is not so clear."[60] The British-Chinese journalist Xue Xinran describes similar multifaceted emotions of the eyewitness generation, whose unofficial reminiscences provide alternative versions of the state-approved historiography. Her interviewees describe difficulties in cross-generation communication about historic events, including a lack of interest on the part of the children as well as the worry whether the people from the younger generation actually can and want to make an effort to understand the suffering of the previous generations.[61] This then brings up the following question, which indicates a currently insurmountable barrier to Chinese efforts to come to terms with the past: "How can they convince their uncomprehending or doubting children that stories and events that have left no physical historical trace really took place?"[62]

Xinran's interviewees describe difficulties in cross-generation communication about historic events, including a lack of interest on the part of the children.

The difficulties affecting the future of Chinese efforts to come to terms with the past lie not only in the voluntary or occasionally decreed tendency among the population to forget and stay silent, partly caused by shame, as exempli-

59 | Plänkers (ed.), n. 31, 164.
60 | "Introduction", in: Arthur Kleinman, Yunxiang Yan, Jing Jun, Sing Lee, Everett Zhang, Pan Tianshu, Wu Fei and Guo Jinhua (eds.), *Deep China. The Moral Life of the Person*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2011, 7.
61 | Xinran, n. 5, 248.
62 | Ibid., 15.

fied by the memories of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, but also in the consequences: namely the ignorance about cataclysmic events of contemporary history amongst subsequent generations. It is difficult to remember something that was kept hidden for decades and is only mentioned by the way in history books, if at all. It is not possible in such circumstances to engage in the work of remembrance because there are no reference points available, neither through days of remembrance nor records in textbooks or reminiscences passed down from parents and grandparents. And in China, these efforts are all the more difficult because of the party-political constraints that set the ground rules. Party historiography determines which events are to be remembered and which forgotten. The flexible adaptability of the decreed remembrance, how cleverly the party exploits history to benefit the current political agenda. The state-imposed work of remembrance thus does prove adaptable in response to the variable agenda of the official actors, but without society being allowed to play an active part in this process. The independent attempts to make efforts to come to terms with the past in the 1980s represented a temporary exception.

Although the CCP does all it can through its selective culture of remembrance to let critical moments in its own past fade away without working through the grief it is coming under increasing pressure from unofficial actors disclosing alternative interpretations of the past. Current online debates prove that the boundaries of the map of history for unofficial versions of Chinese historiography will keep shifting under the influence of the Internet. However, as long as the Chinese government prohibits a differentiated examination of the country's own history, the official and unofficial views of the past will continue to differ drastically. This impedes the work of remembrance as understood by Mitscherlich,[63] which allows the individual to grieve about past events.

It is clear that there is not a great deal of scope for such work of remembrance diverging from the party line – apart from a few digital exceptions. The CCP will be intent on

63 | Margarete Mitscherlich, *Erinnerungsarbeit. Zur Psychoanalyse der Unfähigkeit zu trauern*, S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2006, 113-120.

continuing its existing history policy in order to determine the presence and future of the country through control over the past. 2016 will see the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Critical work of remembrance will be required to break up the boundaries of forgetting on China's map of history for good. China's past is still to come.

The article was completed on 12 March 2013.