In Search of a Master Narrative for 20th Century Chinese History

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In his paper on official histories (minguoshi) as published on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) William Kirby voiced his astonishment about the absence of a master narrative on 20th century Chinese history. He reported on many publications focusing on a myriad of different aspects related to “national history”, full of historical details and sources, but was unable to detect the master mind giving guidance to the different narratives. He did not ask the question why PRC historiography was unable to present a master narrative on its own as well as the history of the revolution which had paved the way to its founding on such an important occasion. This paper analyses the process of writing and re-writing post-49 history in the PRC trying to give an answer to this puzzling question.

What is a Master Narrative?

The French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard is known for his “incredulity toward master or meta-narratives”. For him and many post-modern philosophers, the very core of post-modern thought consists of “modernist total ‘grand narratives’ being continually repudiated by different forms of post-modern scepticism”. However, in a more recent interview Lyotard does not applaud to the deconstruction of grand narratives as the main aim of post-modern thought. What he is concerned with today is the co-existence of many grand narratives and the necessity to relativize the “grand narrative of emancipation”: “It seems to me that there is now a sort of comprehension of the so-called multiple ways of understanding the meaning of communities in Africa, South America, North America, India, Russia, or Asia, and so to be vigilant against grand narratives is precisely to be prudent and aware of the capacity for human communities to have different ways of narrating their stories. It’s not destroying these narratives, and it’s not necessarily protecting them; it’s just respecting them.”

Instead of repudiating the idea of a grand or master narrative, Lyotard seems to stress that the “meaning of communities” is established through narratives that relate to the past and that define the identity of the community. It is the diversity of grand narratives that he is concerned with, and it is the difference between them that he wants to be respected. Arif Dirlik also argues in favour of diversity in history when he says: “Post-modernism, articulating the condition of the globe in the age of flexible production has done a great theoretical service by challenging the tyrannical unilinearity of inherited conceptions of history and society.” He also argues in favour of respect for different views of and on history, however, his repudiation of the idea that post-modern man can live without a master-narrative stems from his concept of “the subject in history” and his idea of political activism. If people

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4 Ibid., 44.


do not have an idea of the past that they can share they are unable to develop ideas for the future. That is how, as Cyderman summarizes Dirlik’s idea, “the ‘happy-pluralism’ of post-colonialism – does not so much oppose elite narratives of nations and cultures as it reinforces them”.

The German Egyptologist Jan Assmann and his theory of cultural and communicative memory tries to combine the necessity of contestation related to history with the possibility of a common history fulfilling the task in answering questions concerning the origin of the identity shared by a collective. By developing his theory on the basis of ancient Egypt historiography and by intentionally linking it to the present, he reminds us of the fact that contestation is part and parcel of history writing while history writing is part and parcel of defining shared meaning and identity. He does not go into detail in dealing with the problem of national history which is closely linked to nation building, but the difference he makes between cultural memory going back to the very origin of mankind and recent history as the realm of contestation in the form of communicative memory can help us to understand why the PRC leadership stressed the necessity of a common understanding of history for so long, and why, as I will try to show, it is no longer able to impose a shared view of 20th century Chinese history, especially post-49 PRC history, on society in the PRC.

Cultural versus Communicative Memory

Jan Assmann distinguishes between two different forms of memory: cultural memory and communicative memory. Based on his studies of the ancient culture of Egypt he defines cultural memory as written into sacred texts which explain to their readers the very origin of the society and polity they live in. As the origin of life in the present is assumed to lie way back in the past, cultural memory does not have to stand the test of reality. It has to give a plausible account of how things came into being, and it has to leave enough room for interpretation so that readers can find answers to their questions raised against the background of changing everyday experiences in the present. Cultural memory in ancient civilizations is based on myth written into narratives by specialists who very often were not trained to explore the past, but to foresee the future.

Communicative memory is the memory of the one hundred years people in their respective presents can look back on and to which the three generations that live simultaneously can relate with their own experiences. As the writing of history on this time period has to stand the test of divergent personal memories, it is not regarded as producing “sacred texts” and changes with time and perspective. Communicative memory is always contested as different social groups and different individuals not only exchange their views on the recent past, but also voice their interpretations in order to gain acclaim and support. The memory of a family is not the sum of divergent memories held by its members, it is a selection of memories which form the basis for a narrative that empowers some and marginalizes others. The outcome of this bargaining process is a commonly held view of the past that is object to change as soon as

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9 Ibid.
the power structures change both inside the family and also in its relation to the outside world.\(^\text{10}\)

If we look at Chinese historiography on the basis of what Jan Assmann tells us about the ancient high culture of Egypt, we will detect important similarities and differences. The differences relate to the interesting gap between the time covered by what he calls cultural memory and communicative memory related to the last 100 years of history. As a matter of fact, traditional Chinese historiography not only produced a master narrative that could justly be called cultural memory. It has always been extremely interested in filling the gap between the remote past and the most recent years of history by writing the history of the preceding dynasty in a form that would legitimize the change of regime while contributing to the persistence of the empire. The 24 dynastic histories comprise a well defined and never changing selection of information on the 24 dynasties. They do not comprise a master narrative in the sense of a plausible and commonly acceptable story on what happened in the past. But with their selection of information, they pre-structured the understanding of future generations without making a change of interpretation impossible. The 24 dynastic histories cannot be re-written, they can only be re-interpreted.\(^\text{11}\)

In China, it was most prominently Liang Qichao who vigorously demanded a new way of writing history parallel to his call for a change of the dynastic system. The transition from empire to nation had to be accompanied by a transition from dynastic historiography to writing the history of the nation.\(^\text{12}\) The historiography of the early 20\(^{th}\) century in China is a radical departure from dynastic history writing in form and style, not necessarily in contents, and it is for a totally new readership as it has to fulfil the task – according to Liang Qichao – to unite the nation and inform the citizens of this new polity on their common identity.\(^\text{13}\)

Not even 100 years have passed since the end of dynastic rule and the beginning of the republican era in China. During the “century of revolutions”, the Chinese nation lived through several beginnings and endings, and historians had to explain the necessity of change and continuity against the test of eyewitness observations and in competition with each other on both sides of the strait. On their respective territories, they produced texts that in terms of the time span they cover belong to the realm of communicative memory, but in terms of the authority they claim pretend to be as sacred as the texts belonging to the realm of cultural memory.

In the PRC, the writing of modern and contemporary history has been based on those “sacred texts” edited and published as Mao Zedong’s Selected Works and framed by the CCP Central Committee’s resolution “On Some Historical Questions”\(^\text{14}\) passed shortly before the 7\(^{th}\) Party Congress in 1945. Even though the CCP went through several rounds of internal struggle, the textbooks based on the above mentioned documents changed less than most people would

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10 This example is taken from an oral report by Prof. Dr. Helm Stierlin, Univ. of Heidelberg. The basic idea is to be found in: Halbwachs, Maurice, *On Collective Memory*. Edited, translated and with an introduction by Lews A. Coser. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

11 For an analysis of Chinese historiography from its beginning to the present, see: Schmidt-Glintzer, Helwig, Achim Mittag and Jörn Rüsen (eds.), *Historical Truth, Historical Criticism, and Ideology. Chinese Historiography and Historical Culture from a New Comparative Perspective*. Leiden (Brill) 2005.


13 Ibid.

They reiterated a master narrative on how the CCP legitimately took over mainland China that was not to be changed. It had to be treated as if it were part of the nation’s cultural memory. The 1981 resolution “On Some Questions Regarding the History since the Founding of the PRC”16 was passed by the Central Committee on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the founding of the CCP, only 5 years after Mao had passed away. It underlines the importance and validity of the 1945 Resolution and offers an interpretation of the time period between 1945 and 1976. However, it has so far not been able to dominate the discussion on post-49 PRC history. Instead the field of history writing has split into at least two different spheres: the sphere of official historiography including party historiography, and the sphere of unofficial historiography which includes everything from documentary literature and memoirs to eyewitness accounts, historical documentaries and history books written by people from outside the field of academic historiography. The common denominator of official historiography is its compliance with the two above mentioned resolutions and Mao’s selected works; the common denominator of unofficial historiography is its attempt to escape from the authority of the party resolutions and break through the taboos of history writing related to the China’s 20th century and especially post-49 history.17 The two different spheres of history writing influence each other even if they very often seem so far apart that they do not take notice of each other. Post-49 history used to be a field that official historiography would not dare to write about as up until 1981 no Party resolution covered this time period and Mao’s post-49 speeches had not been officially published. It was discovered as a time span of concern on the side of the readers by unofficial historiography, and today both spheres of historiography compete with each other for readers and for dominance by publishing on the post-49 period more than on the pre-49 period. The post-49 period is under heavy contestation, and what so far has emerged from the debate is not the new master narrative. Instead we find different versions and different approaches. What Jan Assman defined as the realm of communicative memory has finally become visible and is claiming its due.

Official Historiography in Crisis

Already during the days of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) did the CCP leadership lose control over what people knew about CCP history. With Red Guards storming archives and digging into the histories of leading intellectuals and party cadres the understanding of the process of revolution had with necessity become more complex and more realistic in the sense that instead of reading textbooks on the Chinese Revolution young people were reading into the life stories of individuals. However, it took until the end of the Cultural Revolution for the phenomenon of “incredulity” to come to the surface. After the death of Mao Zedong and the

16 Guanyu jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi [On some questions concerning the history of the Party since the founding of the PRC]. In: Renmin Ribao July 1, 1981, pp.1-7.
dismissal of the Gang of Four, two problems occurred simultaneously: Those who had actively participated in the Cultural Revolution knew too much to be able to submit to the then prevalent interpretation of post-49 history, and the Party in order to adjust history to the present, had to re-write its own history.

Party historiography during the years 1976 to 1981 was preoccupied with re-defining the role of Mao Zedong and Mao-Zedong-Thought. Consequently, the neatly knit system of party historiography in which history was identical with Mao-Zedong-Thought and Mao-Zedong-Thought was supposed to be the product of history started to dissolve. While in pre-Cultural-Revolution times only those aspects of CCP history had been included into the narrative that were able to make basic assumptions of Mao-Zedong-Thought plausible, post-Cultural-Revolution historiography had to explain how the Party could exist and succeed without Mao Zedong. The hermetic character of history writing that had evolved from the Yan’an Rectification Campaign and had institutionalized itself during the 1950s and 1960s formed the basis of the master narrative on CCP as well as revolutionary history, with the 1945 resolution on Party history supplying the basic concepts and assessments which every candidate for a position in post-49 Chinese bureaucracy had to be able to reproduce. When de-Maofication was put onto the agenda, party historiography did not start out by deconstructing the general principles and basic assessments. Instead it broadened the scope of data to be included into the narrative. By allowing their readers to become acquainted with events in history that so far had not been talked about party historiographers were able to relativize the role of Mao Zedong in history without decomposing Mao-Zedong-Thought. That is how they tried to solve two problems at a time: they complied with the Party’s needs in adapting party history to the necessity of change in the generational structure of the leadership, and they adapted to the expectations of their readers tired of reading only about principles and eager to know more facts. However, the gradual augmentation of facts included into party history textbooks would sooner or later reveal the limits of the hermetic system. Li Honglin’s call for breaking through the taboos of party history made clear to everybody that in the many books and textbooks published on party history not even half of the story had been told. The more the details leaked out, the more party historiographers satisfied their readers, and the more the system stumbled into crisis.

While re-writing pre-49 history in compliance with the necessity of de-Maofication, party historiographers shied away from writing post-49 history. For this period, they lacked a party resolution as well as an official selection of Mao Zedong’s works. Although the fifth volume of Mao Zedong’s selected works was eventually published by a group of editors under the then party chairman Hua Guofeng, internal struggles among the leadership did not allow for this volume to gain uncontested authority. As much as the strategy of reform and opening, initiated by the CCP Central Committee in 1978, has been lacking a theoretical foundation did the writing of history on the Maoist period of post-49 history lack “theoretical guidance”. If compared to the pre-49 period of revolutionary history, the writing of post-49 history was hit with the problem that in contrast to the earlier part of the revolution which was crowned by victory the latter part of the revolution had no teleological orientation. Pre-49 history gained part of its credibility by the very fact of victory, post-49 history was lacking this credibility by the absence of success.

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19 See fn. 15.

20 See fn.14.

21 Li Honglin: Dapo danshi jinqu (Break through the taboos of party history). In: *Lishi yanjiu* 1979/1, p.20.

This relationship between credibility and success shows how much the writing of revolutionary history in China belongs to the realm of communicative memory although by institutionalizing party historiography the CCP tried to bestow party history with the authority of cultural memory. As revolutionary history belongs to the realm of communicative memory it is not only under permanent contestation, it also has to stand the “reality test”. The reality of victory helped the CCP imposing its view of revolutionary history in China on the educated “masses”. As soon as the party had to declare its own defeat by dismissing the Gang of Four from office and allowing for a critic of the Cultural Revolution, reality worked against historiography. The hermetic system of party historiography started deteriorating when it was obliged to fulfil political tasks it could not fulfil without deconstructing itself. But it lost its authority the more the CCP leadership decided to admit mistakes in the past in order to gain support for the future. Consequently, party historiographers had to cope with the paradox that writing about the Maoist era more and more turned into a counter-narrative to the post-78 system. If they radically criticized the Maoist era, they would have separated the CCP from its historical as well as ideological roots, which is why the 1981 Resolution did not decide to go into this direction. If they applauded to what Mao had designed as the way to socialism, they inevitably would have contradicted the policy of reform and opening, which is why the 1981 party, of course, could not allow for this version of CCP history to gain official status. When the party finally took control of the situation in 1981 the only solution it found to the dilemma is the 70:30 assessment: Mao Zedong’s contributions to the Chinese revolution were 70% good and only 30% mistaken. However, the ambiguity of this assessment did not help to regain the kind of authority the party would have liked to bestow its own resolution with. The 1981 Resolution therefore did not constitute the basis for an adapted new version of the master narrative on post-49 history.

The Cultural Revolution was among many other things a form of re-enacted memory and contested history. Through party history textbooks and films the Red Guard generation had learnt to admire the heroism of the “generation of old proletarian revolutionaries” (lao yi bei wuchanjieji gemingjia). With Mao putting the question of successors for the revolutionary cause on the table, the sons and daughters of the old revolutionaries were confronted with a dilemma: how could they prove to merit being successors for the revolutionary cause without going through the kind of dangers and hardships the older generation had gone through? How should they prove their willingness to sacrifice everything, including their own lives, as members of a privileged elite sheltered against any kind of danger and hardship? Only by re-enacting the revolution could they show that they were revolutionaries and qualify as successors for the revolutionary cause.

However, the young generation re-enacting revolutionary history through responding to Mao launching the Cultural Revolution had to realize that they had learned the wrong story. Even those among them who were the bravest were sent to the countryside with no hope for their dreams to come true. Some of them were even sent to prison as their revolutionary enthusiasm was regarded as dangerous. The revolution had turned against its protagonists while it was still going on and by doing so, it switched from one story book to the other: access to elite positions did not have a front door designed for revolutionary spirit and sacrifice; it only had a back door defined by networks related to the educational system. The farewell from revolution took place long before the Cultural Revolution was officially declared to have come to an end. No wonder that party historiography fell into a crisis of credibility reflected by a loss of interest which should eventually lead to cancelling the obligatory program on party history for university students.

Under these conditions, unofficial historiography started flourishing. Writers from the Red Guard generation, in most cases not professional historians, started to look for answers to the many historical questions the CCP and party historians were unable to answer. As they usually could not count on being granted access to the archives, their investigative methods
had to be unconventional. Already some years before oral history was discussed\textsuperscript{23} and finally accepted by official historians\textsuperscript{24} did Ye Yonglie and Dai Qing start interviewing old cadres and expelled former party members as a basis of their narratives\textsuperscript{25}. Thus they successfully broke through the taboos of party history and gained credibility by using the advantages of the realm of communicative memory in order to confront all those questions official historiography was shying away from. Simultaneously, they showed that the problem of lacking teleological orientation as well as theoretical guidance could be solved by history into a story with a convincing plot-structure. As a result, even though the 1981 Resolution is still respected by official historiography, party historiography could not but engage in a dialogue with the many publications spreading news about what they had tried to keep secret. Today, we observe official historiography trying to catch up with unofficial historiography. In the case of the Cultural Revolution, this can be seen quite clearly.

\textit{Framing the Memory of the Cultural Revolution}

There is a wide spread belief both in and outside China that the CCP has imposed total silence on questions related to the Cultural Revolution. The well known saying stressing that looking for money (\textit{xiang qian kan}) and looking at the future (\textit{xiang qian kan}) is what counts reflects a mood which seems to testify to the CCP relying with its imposed silence on the lack of interest in the past on the side of the people. A close look at the Chinese book market, however, reveals that the imposed silence assumption is not matched by facts. The Cultural Revolution is everywhere, in films, in novels and poems, but also in official and unofficial accounts, in memoirs and in many articles published in conventional journals as well as in the internet.\textsuperscript{26} A 1999 survey on the ten most important events of 20\textsuperscript{th} century Chinese history reportedly showed that the intellectuals asked for their assessment overwhelmingly ranked the Cultural Revolution as the most important event in recent Chinese history.\textsuperscript{27} As a matter of fact, this tendency has been going on for a long time. Even before the Cultural Revolution was officially declared to have come to an end in 1976, the discussion on the assessment of the Cultural Revolution had already begun, and it reached its first climax at the end of 1976 after Mao’s demise and the fall of the Gang of Four. This initial debate was closely related to the denunciation of the Gang of Four and the rehabilitations on all levels of Chinese society, newspapers and magazines were filled with articles on the individual fates of the many victims among CCP cadres and intellectuals. As long as the debate on the Cultural Revolution could be linked to criticizing the Gang of Four, nothing was tabooed and everything was possible. Because the new leadership under Hua Guofeng was longing for popular support, it allowed for an open debate of the Cultural Revolution to take place and defined the “guiding principle” of this debate to be the idea of universal victimhood. The Gang of Our was held responsible for misinterpreting and misusing Mao Zedong’s ideas with

\textsuperscript{23} Shen Guchao 1995: Yu renmin gongxie lishi - xifang koushushi de fazhan tedian jiqi dui women de qifa (To Write History with the People - The Particularity of the Development of Oral History in the West and Lesson it Contains for Us). In: Shixue Lilun Yanjiu No.2, pp.98-107.


\textsuperscript{25} See fn.17.


the aim of gaining power. People who had participated in the Cultural Revolution had been instrumentalized by the Gang of Four and unknowingly misled into actions the bad results of which they could not be held responsible for.

While the CCP allowed for memories of the Cultural Revolution to be expressed quite freely within the frame of universal victimhood, it re-defined the memory frame in 1981 with its rough assessment of the Cultural Revolution given in the “Resolution on Some Questions of Party History since the Founding of the PRC”. The Resolution is full of direct and indirect criticisms of CCP policies since 1949, however, it does not match with the well known “Secret Speech” Krushchev gave repudiating the terror of the Stalinist era in the Soviet Union and later commentators complained that because of internal struggles going on between the then Party leader Hua Guofeng and his opponent Deng Xiaoping, the resolution did not “totally negate” (quanpan fouding) the Cultural Revolution. Instead it is rather ambiguous by avoiding clear answers to questions like: Who are the culprits and who are the victims? What was right and what was wrong behaviour? And what are the reasons for a mass movement like the Cultural Revolution to develop into a form of civil war lasting for 10 years?

The 1981 Resolution defines three levels of responsibility: Mao is held responsible for having developed the idea of the Cultural Revolution as a logical consequence of the theoretical considerations he had been pursuing since the late 1950s. The Party is held responsible for having been unable to prevent Mao’s theories from being put into practice although “the majority of members of the 8th Central Committee of the Party and the members it elected to its Political Bureau, Standing Committee, and Secretariat” are all assessed as good comrades standing on the right side of the struggle. Last but not least, the Gang of Four is held responsible for the negative consequences as they “rigged up two counter-revolutionaries cliques in an attempt to seize supreme power, taking advantage of Comrade Mao Zedong’s errors”.

By defining these three levels of responsibility, the CCP clearly deviated from the model of Krushchev’s “Secret Speech”. Krushchev had drawn a clear line between Stalin as the culprit and the party as the victim making the cult of the individual responsible for the party’s inability to inhibit Stalin’s terror from spreading to the whole of the Party and the country. The most notable characteristic of the 1981 Resolution, however, is its open admission on universal complicity. Not only did leading party cadres of the Party comply with Mao’s Zedong’s idea of launching the Cultural Revolution in its first phase, even when they were targeted by Mao and his supporters were they unable to escape from the Cultural Revolution logic and tried to either defend themselves or admit to their errors in terms defined by their persecutors. Much in contrast to the situation in the Soviet Union, their complicity was well known in public and therefore hardly deniable. Even after the ordeal was over, they had no way to escape from this prison.

How about the masses? Did they show more wisdom than the leaders in dealing with Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution? According to the 1981 Resolution, people believed in Mao, then began “to adopt a sceptical or wait-and-see attitude toward the Cultural Revolution, or even resisted and opposed to it.” Only very few exploited the situation and “were escalated to high or even key positions”. This is all we can read about the “masses” in the resolution. No word on the Red Guard movement with its many factions, no word on the different forms of violence and terror, no word about the many victims, about people who were killed or sent

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31 Ibid.
to prison, people who lost their property and their health. Instead the 1981 Resolution includes the “masses” into the system of complicity. The masses “supported” the idea of the Cultural Revolution and only later became sceptical. This is especially true for the involvement of young people in the Cultural Revolution. They were involved and later victimized, but their involvement was not compliance, but an active form of support which the Resolution does not mention in spite of the many victims this involvement caused.

One plausible explanation for the “old generation of revolutionaries” refraining from negating the legitimacy of the Red Guard movement in all its different colours is the idea that rather than looking at the many young people willing and able to become their successors, those party leaders that held power during the late 1970s wanted their offspring to take over as soon as the biological factor would make this necessary. The Red Guard movement of the early Cultural Revolution was initiated by the very young people the CCP needed as future leaders of the country. If the older generation had condemned them for their participation in the Red Guard movement, they would have put the whole system of “revolutionary families” at risk. However, keeping silent about the Red Guard movement also meant that no negative assessment could be voiced concerning the later “rebel” factions. Refraining from a negative judgement in both cases was supposed to keep both sides silent rather than annoying either or both of them and thus running the risk of continual factionalism. This logic has the natural consequence that even the victims among the leadership of the party could not be acknowledged victim status, not to speak of the many, many victims who did not belong to the leading elite of the PRC. If the Party refrains from honouring its own victims, how could society claim to commemorate those who were killed during the Cultural Revolution?

Through declaring universal complicity the CCP saw itself forced to cover the question of the Cultural Revolution with a curtain of ambiguity that had many advantages, but also some severe disadvantages. One of the really severe disadvantages is the fact that – as we know of today – the CCP gave up its avant-garde role in defining the frame for the memory of the Cultural Revolution. Both its inability to overcome ambiguity in assessing the Cultural Revolution and its taking over responsibility for not having been able to stop Mao Zedong from launching the Cultural Revolution made it impossible for the CCP to claim its otherwise uncontested avant-garde position anymore.

Deng Xiaoping had hoped for the debate on the Cultural Revolution to end with the 1981 Resolution. Instead a next round of discussions took place in 1986 on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the end of the Cultural Revolution. The necessity that the Cultural Revolution be “totally negated” forms the focus of a discussion that comes to the surface for only a very short period of time during the summer of 1986, but soon looses momentum. The argument goes that without “totally negating” the Cultural Revolution there can be no guarantee against a repetition of the “ten years of chaos”. Only fundamental change and a reform of the political system can protect the Chinese people from having to go through this kind of turmoil again.

However, as Anita China analyses this debate, not the radical demands for a democratization of the political system were responsible for the sudden silence of this round of discussions. It was the fear of a resurgence of the kind of factionalism that had dominated the first years of the Cultural Revolution.

If her assessment of the situation is true, it helps us to understand why the CCP decided to turn away from the idea of universal victimhood and instead define complicity as the basis for

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33 See Dittmer, Lowell, fn.29; Qingnian luntan: Extracts from the roundtable discussion regarding a new assessment of the Cultural Revolution (Guanyu “Wenhua da geming” de zai renshi renshi zuotanhu fayan (zhaideng)). In: Qingnian luntan, 1986.7, pp.1-10.
assessing the Cultural Revolution. As long as the idea of victimhood dominated the discussion, survivors who were undeniably maltreated during the Cultural Revolution could speak up openly about their experiences and demand recognition for their sufferings, if not compensation for their losses. That is why the idea of universal victimhood went along with the rehabilitation of persecuted cadres and intellectuals, and to a certain degree even helped making these rehabilitations possible as their rehabilitation could be interpreted as the rehabilitation of all. Those who became victims by victimizing others, however, could only claim to be victims without being granted the privilege of an official pardoning. They had to fear that sooner or later those who had regained their standing in society by the act of rehabilitation would use their power to not only push their former adversaries aside, but also to demand revenge. The 1981 Resolution propagated the idea of universal complicity instead and thus tried to avoid the idea of revenge. When the discussion came back to the surface in 1986, it showed that factionalism and revenge were very close to each other and both a major threat to the idea of a peaceful society trying to catch up with the world’s most advanced nations. The discussion around the year 1986 shows that the Party’s two attempts at framing the memory of the Cultural Revolution had not been successful. Neither the idea of universal victimhood nor the idea of universal complicity had been able to reconcile Chinese society to a point where revenge no longer was a feasible option. This fear of continual factionalism and the inability to achieve reconciliation put the CCP into a position where it could no longer act as the focus in Chinese society producing the ideas and texts that would eventually form the basis of the master narrative. No wonder that the Party tried to impose silence on society for the next years to come.

Communicative Memory as Fragmentized Memory

Some years got by without a lot of publications on the Cultural Revolution. It seemed as if the Party had been successful in imposing amnesia on society. However, this only testifies to the problems of debating the experience of the Cultural Revolution in public, and from what we know of today, the discussion went on especially among those who had actively participated in the event or were else involved to a higher degree than the average population. Liu Xiaomeng describes in some detail in his book on youths sent to the countryside how those who had been in the same village together tended to keep in touch with each other and help each other re-integrate into urban society. However, these groups who share common experiences in the positive as well as negative sense of the word are very often unable to overcome their own limitations and need help in accessing the public. Mary Mazur also testifies to survivor groups coming together and mourning the deaths of their siblings, friends or colleagues, and she underlines that these groups are looked upon as subversive by the Party leadership. Nevertheless, they have the journal “Yanhuang Chunqiu” to discuss their remembrances in public and to influence the ongoing discussion on the assessment of the Cultural Revolution through this journal.

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38 For a recent example of public mourning and remembering see: Yanhuang Chunqiu 11.2005 with a choice of articles on Hu Yaobang.
But even if survivor groups have access to the public and if they have spokespersons informing the public, the realm of communicative memory dealing with a contested past does not generate a master narrative that could be more than one master narrative among others voicing the particular memory of a particular survivor group. When looking through the many publications on the Cultural Revolution we have access to I have so far been unable to find a single publication that surpasses the very perspective of its author and the respective constituency he or she is writing for. No matter whether we look at memoirs or essays trying to explain the Cultural Revolution in more theoretical terms, the fragmentation of Chinese society that surfaced during the Cultural Revolution is reproduced by the fragmentation of communicative memory today. Authors from the Rebel factions still give explanations for their own behaviour rather then trying to understand the other side of the struggle; memoirs of old cadres targeted during the Cultural Revolution, even though more inclined toward reconciliation, still reflect the enormous generation gap that had become apparent during the Cultural Revolution; prominent intellectuals often refrain from voicing their remembrances and leave it to their sons, daughters or else disciples to write their stories of disillusionment, anger and despair. The more individual the account, the more it reveals how the complicity complex makes coping with the experience of the Cultural Revolution so difficult.

The only solution all authors come up with (and which surpasses the fragmentation) is to focus on the role of Mao Zedong and thus repel the CCP leadership’s idea of continuity with the Maoist era. Even though the Party Resolution aims at obliging everybody to accept the idea of complicity, recent discussion reveal how the complicity complex is re-interpreted into an experience of victimization. By now, everybody is Mao’s victim, no matter whether having been beaten, thrown into prison, criticized or re-educated, no matter whether once an ardent supporter, a fellow-traveller or an observer. Everybody is assumed to have gone through an initial phase of admiring Mao and his idea of launching a Cultural Revolution which is replaced by disillusionment as a common experience related to the second phase. Through the experience of disillusionment even those who were not victimized in the literal sense of the word can be regarded as deceived, if not trapped by Mao Zedong. They are victims of their own idealism and hope that would never have arisen if not ignited by Mao Zedong. This pattern of initial hope and total disillusion in the end can be found in all the different genres of

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40 For examples see: Wu Guang, Bu shi me ng – dui „wenge” niandai de huiyi [This was not a dream – memories of the times of the „Cultural Revolution“, Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 2000; Ma Shitu, Cangsang shinian [Ten years of vicissitudes], Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 1999.

41 For a most prominent example, see: Zhou Ming, Lishi zai zheli chensi, 1966-1976 nian jishi [This is where history is reflecting upon, a report on the years 1966-1976], Vol.1-6, Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 1986.


43 On the question of empathy for those who died during the Cultural Revolution, see: Wang Youqin, Wenge shounanzhe [The victims of the Cultural Revolution], Hong Kong: Kaifang zazhi chubanshe, 2004; Weigel-Schwiedrzik, Susanne: Vergangenheitsbewältigung in der VR China. Erkundungen zur Moral des Erinnerns. To be published in the Festschrift für Wolfgang Kubin.
publications on the Cultural Revolution. Feng Jicai’s “10 Years in the lives of 100 people”\(^{44}\) abound with this kind of narratives. Even official party history accounts of the Cultural Revolution cannot do without it, and internet publications which speak in favour of a more positive assessment of the Cultural Revolution reiterate the idea that it was Mao who destroyed the Cultural Revolution when he turned against his own intentions and all those who had supported him.\(^{45}\) Arif Dirlik speaks of Mao’s turn around as the trauma of the Cultural Revolution.\(^{46}\) Is this form of looking at Chinese society as the victim of Mao Zedong’s policies and theories the guiding principle on which a future master narrative of 20\(^{th}\) century Chinese history could build on?

The Memory of the Cultural Revolution in Comparative Perspective

Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich who analyzed the situation in post-war Germany also observed that fragmentation and self-victimization were common traits of memory after WW II.\(^{47}\) They explained this phenomenon by the experience of having lost the supreme leader in a situation of total defeat and chaos. While the admiration of the supreme leader had bestowed people with a level of self esteem they could never have reached by relying on their own strength, the loss of the supreme leader was prompted by a sudden loss of self esteem on the side of every individual involved. Communicating memories in such a situation serves the very purpose of re-establishing self esteem which means that those aspects of the past are selected for public communication that have the potential of gaining respect from relevant peer groups. The peer groups that form under these circumstances are survivor groups the membership of which is based on a common experience: soldiers of the same army unit, refugees from the same place, people from the same city. As long as communicative memory is confined to exchanging memories among insiders it cannot overcome fragmentation and generate a narrative that is accepted beyond the limits of the peer group.

Self victimization is explained by the Mitscherlichs as a survival strategy avoiding melancholia. In a situation where the state is in chaos, people have to totally rely on their own strengths for their survival. If they focus on trying to find an explanation for their behaviour in the past they will be impeded in developing the necessary survival strategies. As much as the tendency to shy away from personal responsibility is morally unacceptable, it is socially legitimated in a situation of life and death. However, in order to cope with the moral side of the problem, to stress one’s status as a victim is a logical solution. As people live in a situation of depravation, they look upon themselves as victims in the present. And the more they are victims of the present situation, the more do they project this experience into the past and thus solve the problem of personal responsibility and guilt. In the German context of post war chaos, the defeat and the loss of the supreme leader served as legitimation for universal self victimization. Whoever ran against this tide was met with disgust and isolation.

The third characteristic the Mitscherlichs spotted when analysing Germany’s post-war situation is the enormous drive people developed in building their own future. This drive while often criticized as a materialistic denial of moral standards is a very complicated phenomenon. It is not only a form of getting rid of memories related to the incriminating past. I would suppose that it is an indirect form of “practical self criticism”. By rebuilding their country with as much success as possible people admitted that the illusions which had driven

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\(^{44}\) Feng Jicai , *Yi bai ge ren de shi nian* [Ten years in the life of hundred people], Changchun: Shidai wenyi chubanshe, 2001.

\(^{45}\) See fn. 24.


every individual as well as the whole country into a devastating war had to be replaced by a reality they could be proud of. The disillusionment they went through opened the door for a matter of fact attitude towards themselves which in combination with their striving for excellence triggered off the enormous creativity which is the basis of the post war economic boom in Germany.

The so called generation of 68s which demanded public debate on the 3rd Reich and WW II was not concerned with survival any more when it started reproaching their parents of their silence and inability to face the past. They raised questions about the past in times when social and political stability as well as economic growth were guaranteed. Their demand to publicly face the past is often misinterpreted as bearing the merit of forcing Germany into remembering the 1933 to 1945 period after more than ten years of silence. It seems more adequate to say that the student movement of the 1960s managed to raise the communication of memories to the level of public debate and thus laid the foundation for what is today overwhelmingly accepted as the master narrative for Germany’s history during the 20th century.

For memories to be communicated publicly, survivor groups need the attention of intellectuals who take over the task of articulating memories for those who do not have access to the public sphere. Only those survivor groups which attract intellectuals enter the contest of interpretations as carrier groups accessing the public sphere with their interpretation of the past and claiming that this interpretation be accepted not only by the majority of survivors, but especially by those generations that were born after the event under debate. This is how fragmentation was finally overcome. In Germany, the allied forces were not able to impose their interpretation of Nazi Germany onto the public. The post war generation of intellectuals was needed to make this interpretation acceptable as the master narrative evolving from the debate of the 1960s.

As noted above, nearly all accounts of the Cultural Revolution written in mainland China – no matter whether they belong to the realm of official or unofficial histories – are structured by initial adoration of and confidence in the supreme leader and a second phase of deep disappointment and disillusionment. Even when it comes to evaluating the Cultural Revolution strategy with its advantages and disadvantages for China, dissidents and official party historians alike stress that the initial hope was not only disappointed by the development of events, but especially by the unexpected and to this day unexplainable turns Mao took in the course of the events. The loss of the supreme leader took place already before he died when Mao turned against his ardent supporters. The loss of the supreme leader as a similarity evolving from the Chinese and the German experiences has to my knowledge so far been overlooked or covered up by the many differences that make the two historical events otherwise difficult to compare. Because of this similarity all three characteristics of the German post war situation can be traced in China as well. There is the tendency to shy away from publicly reflecting on the past, the fragmentation of memories in survivor groups and the orientation toward the present and the future including the turn away from illusions or visions toward the reality of present day life and its economic side.


49 For an overview over the debate see: Jürgen, Peter, Der Historikerstreit und die Suche nach einer nationalen Identität der achtziger Jahre, Frankfurt/Main:Lang, 1995.

50 See fn.24. For a most astonishing assessment of the Red Guard movement which is also shaped by this pattern, see as a publication from the realm of official historiography: Yin Hongbiao, Hongweibing yundong pingshu [An evaluation of the Red Guard movement], in: Zhang Hua and Su Caqing (eds.), Huishou “wenge” [A look back on the “Cultural Revolution”), 2 vols., Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe 1999, pp.694-730.
The main differences between the development of communicative memory on the Cultural Revolution and the German situation is the important fact that intellectuals were among the major targets of the movement, that survivors among the victims had to live side by side with their persecutors after the nightmare was over and that the post Cultural Revolution generation has so far not demanded to establish a master narrative surpassing fragmentized memories. All of these three factors can serve as an explanation to why the master narrative on the Cultural Revolution has not yet evolved.

The fact that intellectuals were among the major targets of the Cultural Revolution explains that compared to other events in 20th century Chinese history the Cultural Revolution attracts a lot of attention. However, this does not mean that interpretations surpassing the perspective of the survivor groups generate more easily. To the contrary, the memories of the intellectuals are themselves fragmentized according to the different constellations they experienced during the Cultural Revolution.\(^{51}\) They form survivor groups according to the Red Guard factions they belonged to, or according to the city in which they lived during the Cultural Revolution. If their memories of the early phase are not vivid enough, they go back to their experience as sent down youth (zhishi qingnian) and form survivor groups along the lines of the villages they were sent to.\(^{52}\) In as much as they themselves were involved into the Cultural Revolution do they lose their interest to act as a bridge between the individual survivor groups of different social backgrounds and the public. But as they have direct access to the public sphere and do not need to attract the attention of other social groups in order to communicate their memories publicly, fragmentation and contestation are not as clearly separated as this seems to be the case in Germany. The survivor group is a carrier group per se, and communicating memories is from the very beginning not only a question of individually recovering self esteem, but also of collectively gaining recognition with the aim of occupying a favourable position in society.

On the other hand, intellectuals occupy such a prominent position in the debate on the Cultural Revolution that other survivor groups of other social backgrounds hardly have any chance to communicate their memories to the public. Thus we know quite a lot about intellectuals, party cadres and students and their experiences during the Cultural Revolution. We know a lot less about the so called workers, peasants and soldiers. Their memories of the 1966 to 1976 period have not yet surfaced to the level of publicly communicated memory. They are restricted to internal exchange within survivor groups and obviously have a hard time in finding intellectuals which support them in accessing the public sphere.

Self victimization is – as referred to above – a widespread phenomenon. It is closely linked to the question of post Cultural Revolution reconciliation. While the CCP’s effort to interpret the situation in the sense of universal complicity is challenged by the experience of victimization despite collaboration, society’s effort to unite under the idea of victimization clashes with the victim’s reluctance to level their hardships with those of their persecutors. That is why under the idea of universal complicity as well as under the idea of universal victimization reconciliation could not be achieved and factionalism persisted. Other means had to be invented to make life after the event possible with people from different factions sitting side

\(^{51}\) A very interesting example in this context is the reaction in the internet to Wang Youqin’s publication on teachers who were beaten to death during the Cultural Revolution. For her publication see fn. 26, for a reaction that falls into the pattern of fragmentation see: Liu Guokai, Ping Hong Zhisheng 85% lun bing zai zhi Wang Youqin, Hu Ping ji Da Hanzi, Ban Suni [Commenting on Hong Zhisheng’s theory of 85% and addressing again Wang Youqin., Hu Ping. Da Hanzi and Ban Suni], in: www.haichuan.net/BBS_Data/1/600/1000/400/500385.asp, last seen March 28, 2005, and Wang Xizhe, Huo gai! Shui yao ni ba xuesheng peiyangcheng lang. Wo dui Wang Youqin de yanjiu cunzai gaodu de ba oliu [Well served! Who asked you to teach students to become wolves? I have my reserves about Wang Youqin’s research], in: www.haichuan.net/BBS_Data/1/600/1000/400/500385.asp, last seen March 28, 2005.

by side in one office. Fragmentation is the only means to allow for memories to be exchanged without allowing for them to attract public attention. Thus communicative memory on the level of survivor groups is a vent for voicing memories. However, as long as memories are only exchanged in survivor groups, they cannot transgress generational boundaries. The post Cultural Revolution generation was kept mostly uninformed about what had happened during the years 1966 to 1976. Only recently do we see signs of growing interest in finding out about what the older generation does not talk about in public. In comparison to the German situation, the post Cultural Revolution generation lacks the outside support and incentive to demand from their parents to face the past and bear witness to their share of the responsibility. China’s post 76 generation is interested in the present and the future, and it is interested in the outside world. Deng Xiaoping’s appeal to look for money and head for the future is as welcome in Chinese society as it was in Germany in the aftermath of WW II. Student demonstrations in 1989 and 2005, however, show that consumerism can distract attention but not fill the void that the survivors of the Cultural Revolution transfer to the next generation by excluding them from their exchange of memories.

The master narrative on the Cultural Revolution that is more than one master narrative among others cannot generate from society under the above mentioned circumstances. Neither is the CCP capable of dominating the discourse with its version, nor has the public contest of different interpretations generated a dominant position yet. The fact that this situation has been pending for so long is the consequence of a Communist Party too weak to act as the enlightened ruler or avant-garde and a society not strong enough (and maybe also unused) to establish alternatives by itself.

Do we need a master narrative on post-49 Chinese history?

If we go back to Lyotard and his idea of deconstructing the “master narrative of emancipation” and replacing it by multiple master narratives the situation of historiography in the PRC as described above complies very much with what one would expect it to be in a pluralistic society in which different interest groups compete with each other for resources in terms of symbolic and economic capital. Under these circumstances, there is no need for a master narrative surpassing the perspectives of individual carrier groups. Even though the CCP is still monopolizing the political system, it is no longer able to monopolize the public sphere and dominate the interpretation of the past. Assmann would come to the conclusion that the realm of communicative memory is extremely active in the PRC and that contesting views of the past coexist with no view strong enough to exclude others. Compared to the years before 1976, China is going through a period of normalization and therefore has no master narrative on its own history anymore.

If we focus on the Cultural Revolution as one major event of post-49 Chinese history, the question whether or not a master narrative is necessary or welcome might find a different answer. As in the case of Germany trying to come to terms with its past, outside observers expect China to work through the trauma of the Cultural Revolution collectively. Lately, the discussion on this question has become even more heated as Chinese intellectuals reminded the Chinese public of its inability to face the many negative elements of recent history, especially the Cultural Revolution, in the context of discussing Japan and WW II in China. “Doing research on the Cultural Revolution is of enormous importance”, says Xu Youyu, author on a book on the Red Guard movement53 who is professor at the Academy for Social Science in Beijing. Compared to what the Germans did after the end of WW II in terms of self-questioning and repent, nearly all Chinese feel angry about the attitude of the Japanese, 

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53 Xu Youyu: Xingxing sese de zaofan – Hongweibing jingshen sushi de xingcheng yanbian (All kinds of rebels – The emergence and development of the spirit of Red Guards). Hong Kong 1999
because they refuse to take over responsibility and to seriously question themselves with regard to the violent occupation of the past. However we should ask ourselves: How hard have we been self-questioning what we did during what we call the catastrophic Cultural Revolution? Most of the victims of the Cultural Revolution are still alive; the generation of enthusiastic participants and fanatical followers is now the backbone of Chinese society. But how many are able to explain what the Cultural Revolution was really about?"  

If we compare the situation in the PRC today with the situation in Germany 60 years after the end of WW II, we tend to stress the differences, and some even applaud to the success Germany has achieved in coming to terms with its own past while criticizing China for keeping silent about the Cultural Revolution. However, if we compare the situation 20 years after WW II to what we can observe in China today, we find a striking amount of similarities. Both societies have gone through a phase of turning away from public debate of their pasts during which they concentrate on building a new future. Simultaneously, intellectuals start demanding a process of self-questioning and repent. In Germany they were eventually supported, if not surpassed, by the post-war young generation asking for a collective act of taking over responsibility for what happened during the 3rd Reich. This is how the public started debating the assessment of Germany’s past, and the outcome of this debate is what is applauded as Germany’s official stand today. Germany has a master narrative on its past that is public and official, it is taught in schools and accepted by people and governments outside Germany. It is suppose to prevent anything like the 3rd Reich from re-emerging in Germany. If people are asking for a master narrative of post-49 Chinese history, that is what they want. Societies in South-America and South-Africa decided to go through an institutionalized process of reconciliation after experiencing extreme political turmoil, oppression and exclusion. The PRC government and the CCP decided not to organize the process of reconciliation after the end of the Cultural Revolution and instead allowed for society to continue battling in their memories over the conflicts that had come to the surface during the Cultural Revolution. By trying to oblige society into accepting the idea of universal complicity, the CCP hoped to avoid factionalism and revenge and to let time heal the wounds. So far victims as well as victimizers seem to be able to live with this kind of ambiguity. But the lively discussion that is going on shows that the struggle over whose memory of the Cultural Revolution can dominate the overall assessment is still going on. This struggle is a form of contesting memories which is not aimed at what Lyotard hopes for. It is not about respect, it is about power.