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

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

Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik

ABSTRACT Since the Yan'an Rectification Campaign the Communist Party of China has dominated the interpretation of modern Chinese history. With its 1981 resolution it renewed its claim, but a close look at official and unofficial publications on 20th-century Chinese history reveals its loss of control. There is no longer a CCP-designed master narrative of modern Chinese history. This article uses the case of the Cultural Revolution to show how much post-1949 history is contested in mainland China today. It argues that the CCP is unable to impose its interpretation of the "ten years of chaos" on society. Instead many divergent and highly fragmentized views circulate in society, and there is no overwhelmingly acceptable view on this period of post-1949 history. While this is a positive sign of diversification, it leaves unsatisfied both inside and outside observers who hope that the Chinese people might eventually come to terms with their own troublesome history.

In his paper on official histories published on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) William Kirby expressed his surprise at the (curious) absence of a master narrative on 20th-century Chinese history. He reported that there was an enormous number of publications focusing on a myriad of different aspects of "national history," full of historical details and sources, but he was unable to detect a coherent master narrative undergirding this plethora of detail.[1] Left unexplored was the larger question of why PRC historiography was unable to present such a narrative on such an important commemorative occasion. This is particularly surprising, as through such exercises as the Yan'an (延安) Rectification Campaign and the "Resolution on some historical questions"[2] the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) defined a frame for the interpretation of post-Opium War history that has served as the unchallengeable basis for official history writing in the PRC.

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1. William C. Kirby, "Reflections on official histories in 20th century China," paper presented to the International Conference on Modern Chinese Historiography and Historical Thinking, Heidelberg, May 2001.

2. "Guanyu ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi" ("Some questions concerning history"), in Mao Zedong, *Xuanji* (*Selected Works*), Vol. 3 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1953), pp. 975–995.

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Textbooks for middle-school and university students are still written according to this resolution, and history examinations are based on what the resolution has to say about the period between 1840 and 1945.

The period since 1945 was brought into the realm of official history with the "Resolution on some questions regarding the history of the Party since the founding of the PRC"[3] of 1981. However, it has so far not been able to claim as much authority as the 1945 Resolution. Indeed, instead of dominating the interpretation of 20th-century Chinese history, the CCP has increasingly been unable to hinder alternative interpretations from entering the discussion. This article analyses the process of writing and re-writing history in the PRC trying to give an answer to why the CCP has lost its ability to define a master narrative for post-1949 Chinese history and why other forces have so far not been strong enough to replace the CCP historiography with an alternative dominant interpretation.

History and Identity

The whole question of whether a master narrative is necessary or desirable is much contested. For 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."[4] However, recent discussions stress the multiplicity of grant-narratives and the necessity to accept divergent ways of writing history in the context of different cultures. The French philosopher Lyotard as one of the major proponents of this idea stresses:

> 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.[5]

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. If people do not have an idea of the past that they can share they are unable to develop ideas for the

3. "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"), *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*), 1 July 1981, pp. 1–7.

4. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 44.

5. Gary A. Olson, "Resisting a discourse of mastery: a conversation with Jean-Francois Lyotard," in http://jac.gsu.edu/jac/15.3/Articles/1.htm, last seen 8 February 2006.

future. That is why authors like Arif Dirlik, known for his in-depth research on Chinese historiography, now acknowledge the fact that "master narratives" are not only imposed on communities by states or particular elites, but can also serve to empower social groups in their contest for authority and recognition.[6]

History is contested, and yet societies strive for a shared understanding of history. The German Egyptologist Jan Assman combines the necessity of contestation with the possibility of a common understanding of history.[7] Although far removed from the substance of the historiography of the PRC, Jan Assman's work on ancient Egypt offers insights into how history is produced that are extremely useful in understanding the current state of Chinese historiography and its lack of a master narrative. He distinguishes between two different forms of memory – cultural memory and communicative memory[8] – and defines the former as written into sacred texts which explain to their readers the origin of the society and polity they live in. As life in the present is rooted way back in the past, cultural memory does not have to stand the test of reality. It merely 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. Cultural memory is what people who belong to one community relate to whenever they try to define their identity on the basis of a shared understanding of their history.

Communicative memory, in contrast, is within living memory; it is the memory of the 100 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 in 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.[9]

6. Arif Dirlik, *After the Revolution: Waking to Global Capitalism* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p. 89.

7. Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. München (Beck) 2001. For an English translation of the introductory chapter see: Jan Assmann, "Cultural memory: script, recollection, and political identity in early civilizations," *Historiography East and West*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2003), pp. 154–177.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Compare Maurice Halbwachs (ed., trans. and intro. Lewis A. Coser), *On Collective Memory* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Chinese historiography since the beginning of the 20th century has been acutely aware of the effect history writing might have on communities.[10] 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 national history.[11] The historiography of the early 20th century in China is a radical departure from dynastic history writing in form and style, though not necessarily in content, and it has to fulfil the task – according to Liang Qichao – of uniting the nation and informing the citizens of this new polity on their common identity.[12]

At the time of writing, the end of dynastic rule and the beginning of the Republican era in China do not exceed the 100 years suggested by Assman as the appropriate time frame for communicative memory. During the "century of revolutions," the Chinese nation lived through several beginnings and endings, and historians (particularly official historians) have 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. In both mainland China and Taiwan, historians have produced texts that belong to the time span of communicative memory, while claiming authority for these texts as if they belonged to cultural memory. Up until recently, the CCP used its power monopoly to impose its version of Chinese history since the Opium Wars on the nation. And even though recent developments in the context of the magazine *Freezing Point* (*Bingdian* 冰点)[13] show that it still tries to use its power monopoly to suppress open debates on history, this article shows by the example of the Cultural Revolution that the CCP is no longer able to dominate the

10. For an analysis of Chinese historiography from its beginning to the present, see Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, 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)

11. See Peter Zarrow, "Old myth into new history. The building blocks of Liang Qichao's new history," paper given on the AAS Conference in Washington DC, 2002. See also Axel Schneider, *Wahrheit und Geschichte. Zwei chinesische Historiker auf der Suche nach einer modernen Identität für China* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997). For the state of the art of scholarly discussions in China on Liang Qichao see Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "Chinese historiography and globalization: the case of Liang Qichao," in Martin Jandl and Kurt Greiner (eds.), *Science, Medicine and Culture. Festschrift for Fritz G. Wallner* (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 176–198.

12. *Ibid.*

13. "Freezing point" is a supplement to the widely read newspaper *Chinese Youth* (*Zhongguo qingnianbao*). It was closed on the directive of the Propaganda Department of the CCP after publishing an article by Yuan Weishi under the title of "Modernization and history textbooks" (*Xiandaihua yu lishi jiaokeshu*). Yuan, Professor at Sun Yatsen University in Canton, criticized textbooks in the PRC for not basing arguments on facts and for sticking to an outdated and xenophobic way of interpreting post-1840 Chinese history. The editor in chief Li Datong was expelled from office because of allowing this article to appear. See "Zhong qing bao biangdian chushi wenzhang: xiandaihua yu lishi jiaokeshu" ("The article which triggered events at the Chinese Youth supplement 'Freezing point': modernization and history textbooks"), blog.chinesenewsnet.com/?p=7085 (last seen on 27 January 2006).

interpretation of contemporary history. The CCP version of the master narrative of 20th-century Chinese history no longer exists.

Official Historiography in Crisis

In the PRC, the writing of modern and contemporary history has been based on the "sacred texts" edited and published as Mao Zedong's *Selected Works* and framed by the CCP Central Committee's resolution "On some historical questions"[14] passed shortly before the Seventh Party Congress in 1945. Even though the CCP went through several rounds of internal struggle, the textbooks based on these documents have changed less than most people would expect.[15] Up until today, they reiterate the master narrative on how the CCP legitimately took over mainland China as if it were part of the nation's cultural memory.

The 1981 resolution "On some questions regarding the history of the Party since the founding of the PRC"[16] was passed by the Central Committee on the 60th anniversary of the founding of the CCP, only five years after Mao had died. It underlines the importance and validity of the 1945 resolution and frames the interpretation of the time period between 1945 and 1976. However, it has so far not been able to dominate the discussion on post-1949 PRC history. Instead the field of history writing has split into two different spheres: that of official historiography including Party historiography; and unofficial historiography comprising 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; the common denominator of unofficial historiography is its attempt to escape from the Party resolutions and break through the taboos of history writing related to China's 20th-century and especially post-1949 history.[17]

14. "Guanyu ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi" ("Some questions concerning history"), in Mao Zedong, *Selected Works*), Vol. 3 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1953), pp. 975–995.

15. Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, *Parteigeschichtsschreibung in der VR China: Typen, Methoden, Themen und Funktionen* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1984). For an English-language article on the topic see Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "Party historiography in the People's Republic of China," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No.17 (January 1987), pp. 77–95.

16. On some questions concerning the history of the Party since the founding of the PRC," pp. 1–7.

17. On the difference between official and unofficial historiography see Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik,"Die chinesische Historiographie in den 90ger Jahren: Zwischen Erkenntnistheorie und Marktwirtschaft," in Hartmut Kaelble and Dietmar Rothermund (eds.), *Comparativ. Leipziger Beiträge zur Universalgeschichte and vergleichenden Geschichtsforschung, 11.Jahrgang, Heft 4, 2001: Nichtwestliche Geschichtswissenschaften seit 1945*, pp. 53–79. For an early analysis of unofficial historiography see: Geremie Barmé, "Using the past to save the present: Dai Qing's historiographical dissent," *East Asian History*, No. 1 (1991), pp. 141–181.

The two different spheres of history writing, though very much apart, influence each other. Post-1949 history used to be a field official historiography would not dare to write about. As up until 1981 no Party resolution covered this time period and Mao's post-1949 speeches had not been officially published, textbooks on CCP history had very little to say about this period. Only after unofficial historians such as Ye Yonglie (叶永烈)[18] started writing on issues related to post-1949 history did the period gain more attention. Today the post-1949 period is under heavy contestation, and official historiography is pushed into publishing on events so far left uncovered.

The CCP leadership had already lost control over what people knew about CCP history during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). With Red Guards storming archives and digging into the histories of leading intellectuals and Party cadres, their understanding of the communist revolution had become more complex and more realistic. Instead of reading textbooks on the Chinese Revolution young people had the chance to read the life stories of individuals. However, after the death of Mao Zedong and the 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-1949 history, and the Party, in order to adjust history to the needs of the present, had to re-write its own history. During the years 1976 to 1981, Party historiography was preoccupied with re-defining the role of Mao Zedong and Mao Zedong Thought. Consequently, the hermetic 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 the only aspects of CCP history which were included in the narrative were those that were able to make the 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 master narrative that had evolved from the Yan'an (延安) Rectification Campaign[19] had institutionalized itself during the 1950s and 1960s,[20] supplying the basic concepts and assessments every candidate for a position in post-1949 Chinese bureaucracy had to be able to reproduce. When "de-Maofication" was put on to the agenda, Party historiography did not dare to deconstruct the general principles and basic assessments. Instead it broadened the scope of data to be included in the narrative.

18. See for example: Ye Yonglie, *Chenzhong de 1957* (*The Heavy Year 1957*) (Hong Kong: Mingxing chubanshe, 1988), *Zhonggong milu* (*Secret History of the CCP*) (Hong Kong: Liwen chubanshe, 1993), *Lishi beige: Fan youpai neimu* (*A Tragedy of History: The Inside Story of the Movement against Rightist Elements*) (Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu youxian gongsi, 1995).

19. See David E. Apter, "Discourse as power: Yan'an and the Chinese revolution," in Tony Saich and Hans van de Ven (eds.), *New Perspectives on the Chinese Communist Revolution* (Armonk, M.E. Sharpe, 1995), pp. 193–234.

20. See n. 15.

By allowing their readers to become acquainted with so far unknown details of history, Party historiographers were able to reduce the role of Mao Zedong without deconstructing Mao Zedong Thought. They hence tried to solve two problems at once: they complied with the Party's needs to adapt Party history to the necessity of collective leadership, and they accommodated their readers who were tired of only reading about principles and eager to know more facts. However, the gradual augmentation of facts would sooner or later hit the limits of the hermetic system. Li Honglin's (李洪林) call for breaking through the taboos of Party history[21] made clear to everybody that in the many books and textbooks published not even half the story had been told. The more the details leaked out, the more the system stumbled into crisis.

While re-writing pre-1949 history, Party historiographers still shied away from writing about the post-1949 period. Although the fifth volume of Mao Zedong's *Selected Works*[22] covering this period was eventually published by a group of editors under the then Party chairman Hua Guofeng (华国锋), internal struggles among the leadership did not allow it to gain uncontested authority. Just as the strategy of reform and opening initiated by the CCP Central Committee in 1978 lacked a theoretical foundation, so the writing of history on the Maoist period was devoid of "theoretical guidance" and teleological orientation. Party historiography cannot establish truth without theoretical guidance, and the theory cannot claim to be true without victory. The credibility of the master narrative on pre-1949 history was built on the indisputable victory of the revolution; the writing of post-1949 history lacked this credibility by the absence of success.

As soon as the Party declared the dismissal of the Gang of Four and allowed criticism of the Cultural Revolution under the disguise of criticizing the Gang of Four, reality started working against historiography. The hermetic system of Party historiography gradually lost its authority as the CCP leadership admitted past mistakes in order to gain support for the future. Consequently, Party historiographers had to cope with a new paradox: when writing about the Maoist era they inevitably ran the risk of creating a counter-narrative subversive to the post-1978 system. If they radically criticized the Maoist era they separated the CCP from its historical and ideological roots. But if they applauded what Mao had designed as his path to socialism they inevitably contradicted the policy of reform and opening. When the Party finally took control of the situation in 1981 the only solution it found to the dilemma was the 70:30 assessment: Mao Zedong's contributions to the Chinese revolution were 70 per cent good and only 30 per cent mistaken.

21. Li Honglin, "Dapo danshi jinqu" ("Break through the taboos of Party history"), *Lishi yanjiu*, No. 1 (1979), p. 20.
22. Mao Zedong, *Selected Works*, Vol. 5 (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1977).

The Cultural Revolution was among many other things a form of re-enacted memory. 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* 老一辈无产阶级革命家). However, with Mao putting the question of successors for the revolutionary cause on the table, the sons and daughters of the old revolutionaries had to answer some difficult questions. How could they prove their merit as successors to the revolutionary cause without going through the same kind of dangers and hardships as the older generation? 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 to the revolutionary cause.

Soon the younger generation had to realize that they had learned the wrong lesson. Even the bravest among them were sent to the countryside with no hope of their dreams coming true. Some were even imprisoned 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 storybook 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 network access 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 students turned their backs on Party historiography after the end of the Cultural Revolution and the obligatory programme on Party history for university students was cancelled during the 1980s.

Unofficial historiography started flourishing under these conditions. Writers from the Red Guard generation, in most cases not professional historians, circumvented official control in search for answers to the many historical questions the CCP and Party historians had so far left unanswered. As they were denied access to the archives, their investigative methods had to be unconventional. They successfully broke through the taboos of Party history and gained credibility by penetrating into the realm of communicative memory. Some years before oral history was discussed[23] and finally accepted by official historians,[24] Ye Yonglie (叶永烈) and Dai Qing (戴晴) had already started interviewing old cadres and expelled former Party members to

23. Shen Guchao, "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 lessons it contains for us"), *Shixue lilun yanjiu*, No. 2 (1995), pp. 98–107.

24. See Liu Xiaomeng: *Zhongguo zhiqing koushushi* (*Oral History of Sent-Down Chinese Youths*) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehuikexue chubanshe, 2004), pp. 10–14.

collect material.[25] Through their books and articles, they showed that the problem of the lack of teleological orientation and theoretical guidance could be solved by writing 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 engages in a dialogue with the many publications spreading news about what the Party has passed over in silence. Today, official historiography is trying to catch up with unofficial historiography. This is especially true for the case of the Cultural Revolution.

Framing the Memory of the Cultural Revolution

There is a widespread belief both in and outside China that the CCP has imposed total silence on questions related to the Cultural Revolution. The well-known slogan about looking for money (*xiang qian kan* 向钱看) and looking at the future (*xiang qian kan* 向前看) reflects a mood which seems to attest to the CCP relying on a lack of interest in the past on the part of the people. A close look at the Chinese book market, however, reveals that this 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 on the internet.[26] A 1999 survey on the ten most important events of 20th-century Chinese history reportedly showed that intellectuals overwhelmingly ranked the Cultural Revolution as the most important.[27]

On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Cultural Revolution in May 2006, the Propaganda Department of the CCP Central Committee tried to ban public discussions on the Cultural Revolution but was apparently unable to prevent a debate on the necessity to remember and re-assess it. In March 2006, an "underground" symposium was held near Beijing, the report on which states that the focus of research on the Cultural Revolution is no longer from outside the PRC. Major inputs and research results now originate

25. See n.17. For Dai Qing see Dai Qing (David E. Apter and Timothy Cheek (eds.)), *Wang Shiwei and the "Wild Lilies." Rectification and Purges in the Chinese Communist Party* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1993); also *Liang Shuming. Wang Shiwei, Zhu Anping* (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1989).

26. For a more detailed discussion on published memory of the Cultural Revolution see Gao Mobo, "Debating the Cultural Revolution. Do we only know what we believe?" *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (2002), pp. 419–434; and Gao Mobo, "Memoirs and interpretations of the Cultural Revolution," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 49–57; Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "Coping with the trauma. Official and unofficial histories of the Cultural Revolution," paper given at the Conference "Rethinking 20th-century Chinese history," Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, July 2005, soon to be published in *Jindaishi yanjiusuo jikan*.

27. Luo Bing, "Guanfang minyi diaocha xiahuai le Zhongnanhai" ("An official survey of popular opinions horrifies Zhongnanhai"), *Zhengming* , No. 1 (2000), pp. 8–9.

from scholars working and living in China.[28] At the same time, the Propaganda Department invited a group of cadres from the older generation to discuss the Cultural Revolution. During this meeting, it was confronted with strong demands to build a museum of the Cultural Revolution (a wish Ba Jin had voiced several times, first in 1986[29]) and to grant compensation to the families of those killed or injured.[30]

In fact, even before the Cultural Revolution was officially declared to have come to an end in 1976, discussion on its assessment had already begun,[31] reaching its first climax at the end of 1976 after Mao's demise and the fall of the Gang of Four. This phase of the 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 full of articles on the individual fates of victims among CCP cadres and intellectuals. As long as the debate on the Cultural Revolution could be linked to criticizing the Gang of Four, hardly anything was taboo and just about everything possible. Because the new leadership under Hua Guofeng was longing for popular support, it allowed a comparatively open debate of the Cultural Revolution and defined the "guiding principle" of this debate to be the idea of universal victimhood. The Gang of Four was held responsible for misinterpreting and misusing Mao Zedong's ideas with the aim of seizing power. People who had participated in the Cultural Revolution with good intentions had been instrumentalized by the Gang of Four and unknowingly misled so they could not be held responsible for the bad results of their actions.

In 1981, the Party leadership re-defined the memory frame with its rough assessment of the Cultural Revolution given in the "Resolution on some questions of Party history since the founding of the PRC."[32] The resolution is full of direct and indirect criticisms of CCP policies since 1949, although it does not match the well-known "secret speech" Krushchev gave repudiating the terror of the Stalinist era in the Soviet Union.[33] Later commentators complained that because of internal

28. Zeng Huiyan, "Renmin bu hui wangji – Yi ge gaoya xia zai Beijing juxing de wenge yantaohui" ("The people will not forget – a symposium on the Cultural Revolution that was held under high pressure in Beijing"), http://www.ncn.org/asp/zwginfo/da.asp?ID=68736&ad=5/24/2006 (last seen 17 June 2006).

29. Li Hui, "'Wenge bowuguan': Ba Jin wan nian de tong yu meng" ("'The Cultural Revolution Museum': pain and hope of old aged Ba Jin"), http://www.sina.com.cn (last seen 16 May 2005).

30. "Zhengming: Wan Li shang shu hu chongping Mao Zedong" ("[A report from] Zhengming: Wan Li writes a letter to the leadership asking for a re-assessment of Mao Zedong"), www.epochtimes.com/gb /6/6/15/n1352522.htm (last seen 17 June 2006).

31. Compare Wang Xizhe's recent article which shows how the meaning of the Cultural Revolution had already been contested while it was still going on. Wang Xizhe, "Wenhua da geming shi pipanshu" ("An article on the ten forms of criticism of the Cultural Revolution"), http://www4.bbsland.com/forums/politics/messages/1503434.html (last seen 17 June 2006).

32. See n. 3.

33. For an English language internet version see http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1956krutshchev_secret1.html (last seen 18 September 2005).

struggles between the then Party leader Hua Guofeng (华国锋) and his opponent Deng Xiaoping (邓小平), the resolution did not "totally negate" (*quanpan fouding* 全盘否定) the Cultural Revolution.[34] Instead it is 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 developing into a civil war lasting for ten years?

The 1981 resolution defines three levels of responsibility. Mao is held responsible for developing 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 being unable to prevent Mao's theories from being put into practice although "the majority of members of the Eighth 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 of "rigging up two counter-revolutionary cliques in an attempt to seize supreme power, taking advantage of Comrade Mao Zedong's errors."[35]

By defining these three levels of responsibility, the CCP 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 supreme leader responsible for the party's inability to inhibit Stalin's terror from spreading throughout the party and the country. In contrast, the 1981 resolution claims universal complicity. Without giving any details, it builds on a widespread feeling of culpability uniting elite and masses. Leading Party cadres had complied with Mao's Zedong's idea of launching the Cultural Revolution in its initial phase, and even when they were targeted by Mao and his supporters they were unable to escape from the Cultural Revolution discourse, trying to defend themselves or admit to their errors in terms defined by their persecutors. Their compliance, reinterpreted as an act of complicity, was well known to the public and therefore hardly deniable. Even after the ordeal was over, they had no way to escape from it.

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 towards the Cultural Revolution, or even resisted and opposed it." Only very few exploited

34. See Lowell Dittmer, "Rethinking China's Cultural Revolution," in Woei Lien Chong (ed.), *China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Master Narratives and Post-Mao Counternarratives* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), pp. 3–26.

35. All quotations from the translation in Michael Schoenhals (ed.), *China's Cultural Revolution, 1966–1969. Not a Dinner Party* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), pp. 297–310.

the situation and "were escalated to high or even key positions."[36] This is all that can be read about the "masses" in the resolution. No word on the Red Guard movement, no word on violence and terror, no word about the many victims, people who were killed or sent to prison, people who lost their property and their health. Instead the "masses" are included in the system of complicity. They "supported" the idea of the Cultural Revolution and only later became sceptical. Did the young people not respond enthusiastically to Mao's appeal? Their involvement was not compliance but an active form of support. Again, the resolution refrains from giving any details; it neither condemns nor applauds the participation of the young generation in the Cultural Revolution. The Red Guards and the "rebels" are neither heroes nor victims. They are accomplices.

One plausible explanation for the curious silence on what many would regard as one of the most important aspects of the Cultural Revolution might be derived from looking at the "family system" still dominating recruitment to the political elite in China. As part of this system, the Party leaders in power during the late 1970s wanted their offspring to take over as soon as the biological factor made this necessary. The Beijing Red Guard movement of the early Cultural Revolution was initiated by the group of young people the CCP needed as future leaders of the country. If the older generation had condemned them for their participation and violent excesses, they would have put the whole system of "revolutionary families" at risk. At present the leadership of the CCP is dominated by the so-called Red Guard generation. Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) and Wen Jiabao (温家宝) are both members of it, with Hu Jintao participating in the so-called "414" faction at Qinghua University (清华大学), one of those places in Cultural Revolution China where armed fighting was extremely fierce. Other members of the leadership who are said to have been actively involved in factional fighting were gradually reintegrated into the political elite without having gone through any investigations related to their Cultural Revolution activities.[37] Also, the early Red Guards had been violent in fighting against intellectuals, not in criticizing Party cadres. Why did the resolution not spare them the official condemnation and instead criticize the "rebels" who had turned against the "capitalist roaders" inside the Party? The truth is that the Party leadership could only condemn both or spare both, or run the risk of continued factionalism. It was forced to leave the assessment of Red Guard and rebel involvement ambiguous in order to prevent Cultural Revolution factionalism from dominating the competition for access to elite positions. Nowadays, insiders clearly remember who among the national, regional and local leadership

36. *Ibid.*

37. "*Pingguo ribao*: wenge shiqi de Hu Jintai, Wen Jiabao" ("*Apple Daily*: Hu Jintao and Wen Jiaobao during the Cultural Revolution"), published 11 May 2006; see also www.ncn.org/asp/zwginfo /da.asp?ID=68706&ad=5/22/2006 (last seen 17 June 2006).

belonged to which faction, but refrain from making a public issue out of it.

For the older generation of intellectuals and especially leading Party cadres, refraining from articulating a clear judgement of Red Guard and rebel factionalism, while solving one problem, generated another. If the members of the younger generation were not denounced as the "real" culprits, even the victims among the leadership of the Party, not to mention those among the rank and file, could not be acknowledged victim status. Up until today, the Party cannot allow mourning its victims in public. Neither the victims from the elite nor those from the grassroots are honoured in commemorative activities.[38]

Deng Xiaoping had hoped for the debate on the Cultural Revolution to end with the 1981 resolution.[39] However, his hopes were not realized. The ambiguity emerging from the idea of overall complicity impeded public debate of the Cultural Revolution and yet incited new rounds of discussion. According to recent accounts, Deng Xiaoping had already asked for a future revision of the 1981 resolution in 1982. He criticized that the resolution "compromised on important issues ..., in some cases argued against its own convictions and was to a certain degree selfish [in its assessment]."[40] In 1985, he again spoke in favour of a revision because he felt that too much blame had been put on the Gang of Four.[41] On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Cultural Revolution, for a very short time during the summer of 1986, public debate re-emerged demanding the "total negation" of the Cultural Revolution and stressing that without this there could be no guarantee against a re-emergence of the "ten years of chaos." Only fundamental change and a reform of the political system could protect the Chinese people from having to go through this kind of turmoil again.[42]

Today, the 1981 resolution is officially regarded as totally negating the Cultural Revolution[43] stressing that there is no need for revision or further discussion. Much in line with this official interpretation,

38. See Mary G. Mazur, "Public space for memory in contemporary civil society: freedom to learn from the mirror of the past?" *The China Quarterly*, No. 160 (1999), pp. 1019–35; Zhou Ziren, "Guanyu ling yi lei shounanzhe de sikao" ("Reflecting on another sort of victim"), *Huaxia wenzhai zengkan*, No. 276 (2001), see http://scenery.cnd.org/CR/ZK01/cr115.hz8.html#1 (last seen 16 June 2006).

39. See Deng Xiaoping in Jin Chunming, *"Wenhua da geming" shigao* (*Outline of the History of the Cultural Revolution*) (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1995), p. 503.

40. See n. 30.

41. *Ibid.*

42. See Dittmer, "Rethinking China's Cultural Revolution," n. 34; "Guanyu 'Wenhua da geming' de zai renshi zuotanhui fayan (zhaideng)" ("Extracts from the roundtable discussion regarding a new assessment of the Cultural Revolution"), *Qingnian luntan*, No. 7 (1986), pp. 1–10.

43. Wen Yanshan, "Chongwen Deng Xiaoping deng gemingjia lunshu: jianchi tuanjie yizhi xiang qian kan" ("Let's appreciate Deng Xiaoping's and other revolutionaries' assessment: stick to solidarity and to looking into the future"), http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1026/4376050.html (last seen 17 June 2006).

Wang Xizhe regards the idea of totally negating the Cultural Revolution as the programme of those who took over the leadership after Mao's death hoping to reinstall a regime similar to that before 1966. He therefore clearly argues against the CCP totally negating the Cultural Revolution. He wants to rescue the Cultural Revolution by looking at it as a form of popular resistance against a dictatorial regime. That is why totally negating the Cultural Revolution in his view serves the aim of stabilizing the communist regime in China and is therefore in the interest of today's leading elite.

Anita Chan who analysed the debate in 1986 sees it in a different light. The then leadership of the Party tried to stop the discussion for fear of factionalism rather than for fear of debates on the future democratization of the political system.[44] If her assessment is true, it helps to explain why the CCP decided to turn away from the idea of universal victimhood and instead define complicity as the basis for 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 suffering, if not compensation for their losses, and this idea included the rehabilitation of persecuted cadres and intellectuals. To a certain extent, it even helped making rehabilitations possible as – *pars pro toto* – they stood for the rehabilitation of all and thus underlined the idea of universal victimhood. Those who had victimized others, however, had not been relieved although they were officially pardoned and included into universal victimhood. As long as the victims were publicly acknowledged as such, the victimizers had to fear that the rehabilitated cadres or intellectuals who had regained their standing in society would demand revenge. The 1981 resolution with its idea of universal complicity tried to avoid revenge. When the discussion came back to the surface in 1986, it showed that factionalism and revenge were two sides of the same coin and both were a major threat to the idea of a peaceful society trying to catch up with the world's most advanced nations.

The Party's two attempts at framing the memory of the Cultural Revolution were not 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 was no longer a feasible option. The 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 the Party tried to impose silence on society for the years to come.

44. Anita Chan, "Editor's introduction," in Liu Guokai, "A brief analysis of the Cultural Revolution," *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* (Winter 1986–87), pp. 3–13.

Communicative Memory as Fragmentized Memory

Some years went by without many publications on the Cultural Revolution. It seemed as if the Party had been successful in imposing amnesia on society.[45] However, this only attests to the lack of public debate on the Cultural Revolution. In fact, the discussion went on especially among those who had actively participated in the event or had otherwise been involved more than the average population. Liu Xiaomeng (刘小萌) describes in his book how groups of sent-down youths who had been together in the same village tended to keep in touch and help each other re-integrate into urban society.[46] However, groups who share common experiences, whether positive or negative, are rarely able to overcome their own limitations and need support in accessing the public. Mary Mazur reports survivor groups coming together and mourning the deaths of their siblings, friends or colleagues, even though their activities are looked upon as subversive by the Party leadership.[47] The families of Wu Han (吴晗) and Liao Mosha (廖沫沙) she writes about belong to the survivor group of intellectuals and cadres who voice their opinions in public through the well-known journal *Yanhuang chunqiu* (炎黄春秋).[48]

But even if survivor groups have access to the public and spokespersons informing the public, the realm of communicative memory dealing with a contested past does not necessarily generate a view that is more than one narrative among others. Looking through the many publications on the Cultural Revolution I have so far been unable to find a single one that surpasses the perspective of its author and the respective constituency he or she is writing for. Whether in memoirs or in essays trying to explain the Cultural Revolution in more theoretical terms, the fragmentation of Chinese society that surfaced during that period 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[49]; memoirs of old cadres

45. On imposing silence and amnesia see Luisa Passerini, "Memories between silence and oblivion," in Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (eds.), *The Politics of Memory* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 238–254; and as a discussion in the context of PRC history, Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "Trauma and memory: the case of the great famine in the People's Republic of China (1959–1961)," *Historiography East and West*, Vol. 1, No.1 (2003), pp. 39–67.

46. Liu Xiaomeng, *Oral History of Sent-Down Chinese Youths*, pp. 15–21.

47. See n. 38.

48. For a recent example of public mourning and remembering see *Yanhuang chunqiu*, No. 11 (2005) with a choice of articles on Hu Yaobang.

49. As examples see Fang Su, "Wenge – yi chang honghong lieliede da geming" ("The Cultural Revolution: a grand and spectacular great revolution"), *Huaxia wenzhai zengkan*, No. 84 (1996), http://www.cnd.org/CR/ZK96/zk84.hz8.html#1 (last seen 17 June 2006); Zheng Yi, "Jin yi ci wen jinian wenhua da geming zhong suoyou junanzhe" ("Only to commemorate with this text all those who were in fear of trouble during the Great Cultural Revolution"), *Huaxia wenzhai zengkan*, No. 83 (1996), http://www.cnd.org/CR/ZK96/zk83.hz8.html#2 (last seen 17 June 2006). For a new development in this field combined with the explicit hope to overcome fragmentation see Wang Xizhe, "The ten forms of criticism of the Cultural Revolution."

targeted during the Cultural Revolution, even though more inclined toward reconciliation, still reflect the enormous generation gap that had become apparent[50]; prominent intellectuals often refrain from voicing their remembrances and leave it to their sons, daughters or disciples to write their stories of disillusionment, anger and despair.[51] 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 implicitly repel the CCP leadership's idea of continuity with the Maoist era.[52] No matter what the Party resolution says, recent discussions reveal how complicity is re-interpreted into victimization. By now, everybody is Mao's victim, no matter whether beaten, thrown into prison, criticized or re-educated, no matter whether once an ardent supporter, a fellow-traveller or an observer.[53] Everybody is assumed to have gone through an initial phase of admiring Mao and his idea of launching a Cultural Revolution followed 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 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 hope and disillusion can be found in all the different genres of publications on the Cultural Revolution. Feng Jicai's (冯骥才) *Ten Years in the Lives of 100 People*[54] abounds with this kind of narrative. Even official Party history accounts cannot do without it, and internet publications which speak in favour of a more positive assessment of

50. For examples see Wu Guang, *Bu shi meng – 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).

51. 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"), Vols. 1–6 (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 1986).

52. This is true for all the publications mentioned in nn. 49 and 50, and especially clear in Xi Dong, "'Liangge wenge' haishi yi ge wenge?" ("'Two Cultural Revolutions' or one Cultural Revolution?") *Huaxia wenzhai zengkan*, No. 83 (1996), http://www.cwrank.com/NewRank/show.php?id=49 (last seen 22 January 2005); as examples of official Party historiography see also Jin Chunming, *"Wenhua da geming" shigao* (*Outline of the History of the "Great Cultural Revolution"*) (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1995); on the question of victimization see Edward Friedman, "Modernity's bourgeoisie: victim or victimizer?" *China Information*, Vol. 11, Nos. 2–3 (1996), pp. 89–98. For a recent intervention see the report on Wang Li's letter to the Central Committee as cited in n. 30.

53. 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); Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik (Wei Gelin), "Ruhe miandui wenhua geming de lishi" ("How to face the history of the Cultural Revolution"), *Ershiyi shiji*, No. 93 (2006), pp. 12–18.

54. Feng Jicai , *Yi bai ge ren de shi nian* (*Ten Years in the Life of 100 People*) (Changchun: Shidai wenyi chubanshe, 2001).

the Cultural Revolution reiterate the idea that it was Mao who destroyed it when he turned against his own intentions and all those who had supported him.[55] Arif Dirlik speaks of Mao's turnaround as the trauma of the Cultural Revolution.[56] Is this form of looking at Chinese society as the victim of Mao Zedong's policies and theories the guiding principle which a future master narrative of 20th-century Chinese history could build on?

The Memory of the Cultural Revolution in Comparative Perspective

Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich who analysed the situation in post-war Germany observed that fragmentation and self-victimization were common traits of memory after the Second World War.[57] They explained this phenomenon by the experience of having lost the supreme leader in a situation of defeat and chaos. While 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 this figure caused a sudden loss of self esteem for every individual involved. Communicating memories in such a situation serves the purpose of re-establishing self esteem which means that the aspects of the past selected for public communication are those that have the potential to gain respect from relevant peer groups. The peer groups that form under these circumstances are survivor groups with membership 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 an emergency measure to avoid melancholia. In a situation where the state is in chaos, people have to rely on their own strength 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. The tendency to shy away from personal responsibility is morally unacceptable, yet it is socially legitimated when it comes to matters of life and death. However, as people live in a situation of depravation, they look upon themselves as victims of the present. And the more they are victims of the present, the more they project this experience on to 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

55. See n. 52.

56. Arif Dirlik, "The politics of the Cultural Revolution in historical perspective," in Kam-yee Law (ed.), *The Chinese Cultural Revolution Reconsidered. Beyond Purge and Holocaust* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 158–183.

57. Alexander Mitscherlich and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn. Principals of Collective Behaviour* (New York: Grove Press, 1975).

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. While often criticized as a materialistic denial of moral standards, it seems to be a much more complicated phenomenon. It is not only a form of getting rid of memories related to the incriminating past, but also 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 the whole country into a devastating war had to be replaced by a reality of which everyone could be proud. The disillusionment people went through opened the door for a matter-of-fact attitude towards themselves which, in combination with their striving for excellence, triggered the enormous creativity which has been the basis of the post-war economic boom in Germany.

As noted above, nearly all accounts of the Cultural Revolution written in mainland China – both official and 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.[58] The loss of the supreme leader had already taken place before Mao died when he turned against his ardent supporters: no wonder that 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 towards the present and the future including a turn away from illusions or visions towards the reality of present-day life and economic success.

The main differences relate to the important fact that intellectuals were among the major targets of the Cultural Revolution, 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 these factors can help in the search for an explanation of why the master narrative on

58. See nn. 49 and 52. 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 Caiqing (eds.), *Huishou "wenge" (A Look Back on the "Cultural Revolution")*, 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe 1999), pp. 694–730.

the Cultural Revolution has not yet evolved from public or semi-public debate.

For memories to be communicated publicly, survivor groups need the attention of intellectuals who take over the task of articulating memories on behalf of those who do not have access to the public sphere.[59] Only those survivor groups which attract intellectuals enter the contest of interpretations as carrier groups. They access the public sphere with their view on the past claiming that their interpretation be accepted not only by the majority of survivors, but especially by those generations that were born after the event. This is how fragmentation can eventually be overcome. In Germany, the allied forces were not able to impose their interpretation of Nazi Germany on to 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.[60]

The fact that intellectuals were among the main 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. The memories of the intellectuals are themselves fragmentized according to their different experiences during the Cultural Revolution.[61] They form survivor groups according to the Red Guard faction 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* 知识青年) and form survivor groups along the lines of the villages they were sent to.[62] As intellectuals, they have direct access to the public sphere and do not need support from outside to communicate their memories publicly. Thus fragmentation and contestation are not as clearly separated as seems to have been the case in Germany. The survivor group is a carrier group *per se*, and communicating memories is not only related to recovering self esteem but also to gaining social status as a group.

59. See Passerini, "Memories between silence and oblivion." For the idea of carrier group see Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma. Slavery, and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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

61. 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 (*The Victims of the Cultural Revolution*); 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"), www.haichuan.net/BBS_Data/1/600/1000/400/500385.asp (last seen 28 March 2005), and Wang Xizhe, "Huo gai! Shui yao ni ba xuesheng peiyangcheng lang. Wo dui Wang Youqin de yanjiu cunzai gaodu de baoliu" ("Well served! Who asked you to teach students to become wolves? I have my reserves about Wang Youqin's research"), www.haichuan.net/BBS_Data/1/600/1000/400/500385.asp, (last seen 28 March 2005).

62. Liu Xiaomeng, *Oral History of Sent-Down Youths.*

Intellectuals occupy such a prominent position in the debate on the Cultural Revolution that survivor groups of other social backgrounds hardly have any chance to communicate their memories in public. Thus quite a lot is known about intellectuals, Party cadres and students during the Cultural Revolution. A lot less is known 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 have a hard time in finding intellectuals who support them in accessing the public sphere.

Fragmentized memory is a product of historical events that cannot be easily integrated into existing narratives of the past. However, it is also a survival strategy and in the Chinese case one of the means that made life after the event possible with people from different factions sitting side by side in one office. Fragmentation allows for memories to be exchanged without attracting public attention. Thus the realm of communicative memory established by survivor groups opens a window for voicing memories without political aims. These memories do not necessarily challenge the Party's interpretation or define an alternative frame for the explanation of the Cultural Revolution that could eventually be overwhelmingly accepted. They simply need to be articulated.

As long as memories are fragmentized and exchanged within survivor groups, they cannot transgress generational boundaries. The post-Cultural Revolution generation was kept uninformed about what had happened during the years 1966 to 1976, and Xu Youyu (徐友渔) as a member of the Red Guard generation blames not only the Party but also his friends and colleagues for this.[63] Only recently have there been signs of growing interest in finding out about what the older generation does not talk about in public. The 2006 "underground" symposium on the Cultural Revolution included young writers and intellectuals who were born in the 1970s and 1980s who voiced their criticism regarding the tendency towards universal victimhood combined with a lack of interest in public debate on the Cultural Revolution.[64] In comparison to the German situation, the post-Cultural Revolution generation lacks the outside support and incentive to demand their parents to face the past and bear witness to their share of the responsibility. China's post-1976 generation is interested in the present and the future, and 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 the Second World War. Student demonstrations in 1989 and 2005, however, show that consumerism can distract attention but not fill the

63. Xu Youyu, "Women gan bu gan zhimian lishi" ("Do we dare to face history?"), first published in *Qingnian baokan shijie* No. 4 (1995), see http://www.cnd.org/CR/ZK02 /cr131.hz8.html#3 (last seen 17 June 2006).

64. See n. 28.

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 cannot generate from society under these circumstances. Neither is the CCP capable of dominating the discourse with its version, nor has the public contest of different interpretations yet generated a dominant position. The fact that this situation has been pending for so long is the consequence of a communist party too weak to act as the generator of the master narrative and a society not strong enough (and perhaps also unused) to establish alternatives by itself.

Do We Need a Master Narrative on Post-1949 Chinese History?

To go back to Lyotard's 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 like in a pluralistic society. Different interest groups compete with each other for resources in terms of symbolic and economic capital. The realm of communicative memory is active in the PRC, and divergent views of the past compete with each other 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 authoritative enough to be imposed on or accepted by the people.

However, if the Cultural Revolution is focused on as one major event of post-1949 Chinese history, the question of 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 Chinese society to work through the trauma of the Cultural Revolution collectively. Recently, in the context of discussing Japan and the Second World War in China, the discussion on this question has become even more heated as Chinese intellectuals reminded the Chinese public of its inability to face the many unfortunate events of recent history, especially the Cultural Revolution. "Doing research on the Cultural Revolution is of enormous importance," says Xu Youyu, author of a book on the Red Guard movement[65] and professor at the Academy for Social Science in Beijing:

> Compared to what the Germans did after the end of the Second World War in terms of self-questioning and repent, nearly all Chinese feel angry about the attitude of the Japanese 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

65. 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).

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?[66]

If we compare the situation in the PRC today with the situation in Germany 60 years after the end of the Second World War, we tend to stress the differences. Many applaud 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 German situation 20 to 30 years after the Second World War with what we can observe in China today, there is a striking amount of similarity. Both societies have gone through a phase of turning away from public debate during which they concentrate on building a new future. Simultaneously, intellectuals start demanding a process of self-questioning and repentance. 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 Third Reich. The outcome of this debate is Germany's official stand today. Germany has a master narrative on its past that is public and official, taught in schools and accepted by people and governments outside the country. It is supposed to prevent national-socialism from re-emerging in Germany.

If people ask for a master narrative of post-1949 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 a process of reconciliation after the end of the Cultural Revolution. That is why the survivors of the Cultural Revolution continue battling in their memories over the conflicts that had come to the surface during that period. 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. But ongoing discussions show that the struggle over whose memory of the Cultural Revolution can dominate the overall assessment is gaining momentum. This struggle is not about respect, it is about power.

66. See Xu Youyu in Zhang Min, "Hong ba yue" de huiyi yu fansi (er zhi er)" ("Remembering and reassessing the 'Red August,' two out of two"), *Huaxia wenzhai zengkan*, No. 227 (2000), http://museums.cnd.org/CR/ZK00/zk227.hz8.html#1 (last seen 17 June 2006).