

BOOK REVIEW
Sebastian Veg, ed.,
*Popular Memories of the Mao Era:
From Critical Debate to Reassessing History*
(Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019)

Vera Schwarcz, *Wesleyan University*

How does history become memory? This is an especially troublesome question when amnesia is enforced by the state. The case of China during and after the reign of Mao Zedong provides a unique angle of vision upon dilemmas that plague authoritarian societies and also survivors of historical trauma. Sebastian Veg, a senior scholar at the School of Advanced Studies in Social Sciences in Paris is to be commended for gathering a distinguished group of researchers to reflect upon the multitude of strategies used for generating non-official and anti-official memories of the Mao era despite the strictures of communist authorities.

Two conferences on Chinese history and memory, one in Paris and one in Hong Kong, resulted in this exceptionally thoughtful volume that documents the polyphony possible under the most repressive circumstances. This finding is both inspiring and distressing. During the last three years, suppression of historical truth has intensified on the mainland. As a result, memory work has become even harder than Veg and his colleagues imagined in 2016. Xi Jinping is going to great length to celebrate China's "Red Heritage" upon the very terrain singed by the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution.¹ Recent events in Hong Kong have also augmented the weight of the unremembered past—especially the suppression of the Beijing Spring in June 1989.

Enforced amnesia and spiritual resistance are not simply—or merely—Chinese dilemmas in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The three stages of coping with historical atrocity outlined in Sebastian Veg's introduction are relevant today as much as in the Mao era: trauma, nostalgia, and the challenge of critical debate haunt Rwanda, Cambodia, Israel, Germany, Japan, and Poland—just to mention a few of the cultural sites where memory wars are still being fiercely fought.

The ten essays in this volume develop Veg's paradigm with new sources and very sophisticated use of comparative theories—including the work of Pierre Nora on French history and memory, Saul Friedlander on Jewish survivor testimonies about the Shoah, and Elemer Hankiss on the operations of "a second society" in communist Hungary and beyond. Part I: "Unofficial Memories in the Public Sphere" probes semi-official journals, the Internet and museums as avenues for expressing memories of the Mao era. Part II: "Critical Memory and Cultural Practices" deepens further the sources for

recollection from literature to film and much more. Part III: "Unofficial Sources and Popular Historiography" casts the net even wider to vivify the remembrances of ordinary citizens, beyond the familiar saga of victimized intellectuals.

All three sections provide ample evidence for a will to recall atrocities despite the dense shadows masking historical memory in China today. The Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo (brilliantly translated into French by Jean-Phillipe Béja, an author in the Veg volume) is but one exemplar of the determination to bear witness to the past through the work of scrupulous recollection. Before dying in jail Liu warned:

Man is a spiritual animal, memory is the foundation of spiritual life, an individual without memory is a vegetable and for a nation, not having memory is a kind of spiritual suicide. If after every catastrophe, survivors are not able to reflect over the disaster, they are at best useless bodies. And even if they enjoy the happiness of relative prosperity, what they enjoy is only the happiness of pigs in a pigsty.

(Veg, pp. 40-41)

Reading about popular memories of the Mao era in this volume one cannot but be assured that China, with its distinguished tradition of historical recollection, is in no danger of national suicide. The burden of crafting history into memory, however, remains great, and grows heavier each day. The happiness of the pigsty beckons to many in the People's Republic.

Nonetheless, the voices of those willing to write, record, film and speak about historical disasters grow louder as well. These voices, as this book documents so well, include professional historians, writers and film directors and also ordinary folks who have accessed a wide range of media to document their miseries during the long Mao era.

Memory production under a totalitarian regime such as Maoist China is not a subject that lends itself to dispassionate inquiry. It requires an ethical commitment in addition to language skills and a willingness to read between the lines of official propaganda. Many of the writers in this volume may be characterized as participant-observers in the heroic attempt to

tell the truth against all odds. Wu Si, former editor of the semi-official *Annals of the Yellow Emperor* and Aihe Wang, a painter who contributed to non-official art during the Cultural Revolution were direct actors in the events they describe. Their Western collaborators including Sebastian Veg, Jean-Phillipe Béja, Kirk Denton, Frank Dikötter, and Michel Bonnin are equally important figures in the effort to bear witness to the possibilities of recollection in the face of state suppression of facts about the Great Famine and the other ruinations of human life during the Mao era.

These are scholars with a moral mission. Their writings challenge others working on the parameters of permissible research on the Chinese mainland. An exceptionally skilled use of unorthodox sources combined with meaningful theoretical inquiries make the book uniquely useful to students of history, art, anthropology, sociology and communications who are not specialists in Chinese studies.

By delving into a willfully “forgotten” event such as the Great Famine of 1958-1961, authors in this volume force readers to reflect upon how numbers mute and also accentuate the horror of historical trauma. When Yang Jisheng, author of *Tombstone*, first mentioned the figure of thirty million unnatural deaths, he (and the supporters of his research in the *Annals of the Yellow Emperor*) suffered fierce attacks by Party historians. While public authorities crack down again and again on allusions to the crimes of the communist regime, strategies for evading censors multiply as well. Creative ways of debating the disasters of the Great Famine, the Cultural Revolution, June 4th and the Hong Kong protests bear witness to spiritual resilience and moral commitment among intellectuals and ordinary citizens as well.

Documentary films play a special role in this project of bearing witness to atrocity. Hu Jie’s pathbreaking work *Looking for Lin Zhao’s Soul* (2005) is discussed by several writers in this book. It is featured among others in Judith Pernin’s excellent “filmography” (Veg, pp. 157-160)—an exhaustive, useful listing of all independent documentaries of the Mao era produced between 1992 and 2005. Ai Xiaoming, quoted in the Pernin essay raises an ethical challenge that goes far beyond filmmaking. She asks artists and writers to produce reliable “evidence” to be “brought to the court of society.” (Veg, p. 143)

Moving as these words may be, they are shadowed by a lack of reference to previous calls for conscientious documentation from public figures such as Liu Binyan. Liu, a famous journalist who was labeled as a rightist in 1957 took a courageous stand in 1979. In his first public speech after being “rehabilitated,” Liu Binyan called upon fellow writers to stop remaining “auditors in the courtroom of history.”² They must bring testimony on behalf of the silenced masses who cannot voice their pain and grievances—a predicament all too evident in China today. Yet Liu Binyan’s name and famous speech do not appear in any of the essays in this volume or in the index.

Forgetting predecessors in the history of memory contestations does not serve well those seeking to counter enforced amnesia about the Mao era. Aihe Wang, for example, waxes eloquently

about the subtle messages in a painting called “Medicine,” without even a passing nod to Lu Xun’s famous story with the same title. The spiritual efforts to unmask autocracy in China predate the temporal framework of this volume. They need to be taken into account in order to do full justice to courage needed to bear witness under totalitarian regimes. Even the Cultural Revolution needs to be placed in a larger context, for example such the one as provided by Shelley Drake Hawks’s study *The Art of Resistance: Painting by Candlelight in Mao’s China* (2017)—another significant work not found in the bibliographies of the volume.

What scholarly sources may be missing, however, are more than compensated for by the wide range of materials used to document the lives of ordinary citizens in the darkest years of the Mao era. In addition to paintings, Weibo, films and oral history archives, this volume contains an innovative essay by Daniel Leese based on “case files”—legal fragments rescued from accusations faced by petty thieves and others deemed “criminal” by the regime. Salvaged from destruction, these case files offer an unexpected glimpse into the life of an ordinary woman picked up for selling household goods at a busy road intersection.

One legal-political interrogation unfolds the tale of the “poor” Li family of Dalian who managed to survive as well as profiteer during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. This dense and surprising account calls to mind Natalie Zemon Davis’s marvelous study, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Harvard University Press, 1984), which scoured legal and notarial records to bring to life the loves and trials of one peasant in sixteenth-century France. One can only hope that Leese will develop further these discarded files to unearth more strategies for endurance in Mao’s China.

These are not case studies of intellectual or spiritual resistance. Rather, they are exemplars of raw, clever and fallible survival in the darkest years of relentless political campaigns. Common folks subverted policies only to be caught in the web of mutual accusations at the local level. “Speech crimes” also took their toll as co-workers accused each other of being “renegade,” “traitor” “scab” and worse. Incriminating oneself became a clever attempt at survival as standards of veracity shifted with the winds of change. When one “counter-revolutionary” states in self-defense: “History has produced (me), this rotten piece of flesh,” (Veg, p. 207) he ends up speaking the truth wittingly.

History—the remembered, the forgotten, the repressed and the recorded—produced much rotten flesh upon the Chinese landscape.³ Some of the flesh was metaphorical. Much, alas, was all too real as beatings, incarceration and starvation took their toll upon the body politic. What remains today in the wake of all these corpses is the challenge of integrating shards of personal memory across into an enduring history.

This challenge is not limited to China alone. Some aspects of popular memory surveyed in this book are urgently relevant to dilemmas faced by other cultures as well. For example, when the writer Ba Jin argued for the creation of Cultural Revolution Museum, he proposed a space in which citizens are forced to

face their culpability without masks of self-deceit (Veg, p. 116). This was to be a space for reflection that would challenge both victims and perpetrators of atrocity alike. Having visited Auschwitz in the 1950s, Ba Jin had a larger repertoire of historical and cultural references at hand than is possible—or permissible—for current museum builders such as Fan Jianchuan—who built a veritable “museum industrial complex” outside of Chengdu in Sichuan.⁴ While Fan expands his collection of Mao memorabilia, other museum efforts are being thwarted all across China today.

The range of permissible recollection has narrowed during the reign of Xi Jinping. Challenging the red heritage becomes more daunting every day. Yet voices on the Internet will not be silenced. Spiritual suicide in the form of amnesia is not an option in a culture with such rich resources for encoding historical memory as Confucian China. Despite the hijacking of traditional historiography by the current communist regime, scholars and ordinary citizens remember too much beyond the Party line. Michel Bonnin sums up with volume with a “cautiously optimistic conclusion:”

The existence of real history contained in different forms of popular memory and historical recording seems to guarantee that those in the future who will want to know will be able to know. This is comfort for historians and a great satisfaction for those who have lived through that period. (Veg, p. 233).

Today, only the will to know remains a question, not the wealth of information embedded in various sources of non-official

¹ Chris Buckley, “Xi Extols China’s Red Heritage in a Land Haunted by Famine Under Mao,” *The New York Times* (September 30, 2019) p. 3.

² Liu Binyan, *Two Kinds of Truth* (Bloomington: University Indiana Press, 2006) p. 147.

³ For a further discussion of varieties of historical recording and invention in a comparative context, see: Bernard Lewis,

memory. Future generations will have to answer and take on what Bonnin himself described as the “*héritage douloureux du maoïsme*.”⁵

The sadness of this legacy, however, is not limited to the Mao era. Its dark wings have spread over Chinese youths fighting and arguing on the streets of Hong Kong, New York, Melbourne, and beyond. Their arguments cannot be settled on the streets—only in the courtroom of history. In a few decades, another volume of essays will have to map the fate of memory under autocracy all over again. One can only hope it will be an effort as thorough and as heartening as this volume edited by Sebastian Veg.

QUESTIONS FOR SEBASTIAN VEG

- How has increased repression in China since the conferences in 2016 affected the production and preservation of popular, non-official memory?
- How does Veg imagine another volume on this subject in ten years? Twenty? What possibly new sources, new angles of vision are likely to emerge and to thrive?
- How has the French school of philosophical history starting from Maurice Halbwachs’s theories about collective memory and Pierre Nora’s work on memory and memorials enrich and shape Chinese studies today?
- What were Veg’s most difficult moments in collecting unofficial voices and visions in the course of his own research? How do we protect, reveal and use sources, which pose dangers for our interlocutors?

History: History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented (New York: Touchstone Books 1987).

⁴ Barclay Bran Shoemaker, “Fan Jianchuan’s Museum Industrial Complex,” *At the Jianchuan Chongqing* vol. 40 no.2 25.1.2018 p. 22

⁵ Michel Bonnin, “Shanghai et l’héritage douloureux du maoïsme” in N. Idier, editor, *Shanghai* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2010) pp. 931-72.

Response

Sebastian Veg, *EHESS*

As the editor of the reviewed volume, I feel touched and humbled by Vera Schwarcz's generous and wide-ranging review essay. She is of course right to point to the longer traditions of unofficial memory reaching back to Liu Binyan and Lu Xun, whose essay "In Memory of Miss Liu Hezhen" would probably be the foundational text for any modern anthology of the genre.

While this is not the place to rewrite the book, I do want to submit a few short replies to her penetrating questions, central to the book project and the broader set of endeavors that this edited volume is only a small part of.

Since Xi Jinping took power in late 2012, the repression of unofficial memories of the Mao era has undoubtedly been at the core of his political project, which aims to consolidate the historical legitimacy of the Mao era, on par with Deng's reform period. "Historical nihilism" was designated a danger to Party rule in Document no. 9 of 2013. A purge of unofficial publications took place during the fiftieth anniversary of the Cultural Revolution in 2016, including the forced reorganization of the journal *Yanhuang Chunqiu* and shuttering of the influential website Consensus Net (Gongshiwang). Defaming communist heroes and martyrs was introduced as an offense in China's first civil code adopted in March 2017. Wu Wenguang's Caochangdi base was forced to move in 2014, and journals like *Jiyi* had to reduce their circulation. But despite the higher cost, many amateur historians have been continuing their important work, just like the filmmakers involved in the Folk Memory Project, who continue to talk to the famine survivors in their villages each winter around the time of Lunar New Year and record their fading memories using cameras. New niches and possibilities continue to appear in cyberspace. So, although it is a bit early to predict the future evolutions of unofficial memories, I am fairly confident there will be material for further studies in ten or twenty years.

On the theoretical level, an interesting aspect of dealing with the canonical place of Pierre Nora's work in France is that his dichotomy of state-led memory that is gradually challenged by a critical history nurtured within society, upends the dominant approach of China scholars, who have tended to contrast state-led history writing with memories fostered within society. This should certainly lead us to further question implicit dichotomies of state and society that don't always translate seamlessly across cultural divides.

Finally, collecting materials related to unofficial history and memory is indeed a growing challenge in China. Even buying an officially published collection of historical materials can sometimes get researchers into trouble, as illustrated by the recent detention of Professor Nobu Iwatani of Hokkaido University, a historian specializing in early twentieth-century

Kuomintang politics and the Second Sino-Japanese War. Having been detained for over a month from September 2019, Iwatani was released after confessing to "collecting inappropriate historical materials:" a book of documents relating to 20th century Kuomintang Party history he had purchased at a bookstore. (Shaun O'Dwyer, "China's Growing Threat to Academic Freedom", *Japan Times*, 25 November 2019). Of course, dangers faced by Chinese scholars are generally far greater and more pervasive than those confronting foreigners. Providing adequate protection and anonymity for sources, even published sources, will certainly continue to be a major challenge for anyone working in this area.