BOOK REVIEW
Lingchei Letty Chen, *The Great Leap Backward: Forgetting and Representing the Mao Years* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2020)

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Lingchei Letty Chen's monograph, *The Great Leap Backward: Forgetting and Representing the Mao Years*, seeks to address a crisis of memory emerging from the diversity and divergence of post-Mao memory discourses about the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward. This crisis of memory—a term she borrows from Holocaust studies scholar Susan Rubin Suleiman—is created when personal memory (what matters to an individual) and collective memory (what matters to a larger group) conflict to produce a condition of amnesia. Chen calls for a new interpretive framework that can remind individuals and the collective in Chinese society of what they have forgotten or are forgetting to remember: the victims of Maoist era policies. For Chen, the way to ensure that such suffering is remembered and never repeated is to establish a shift in framework that understands Mao era political campaigns as one long string of persecutions and the suppression of ordinary citizens. Chen boldly asks readers to view such campaigns as 1) human atrocities, 2) genocide which she defines as "the deliberate or systematic destruction of a racial, political, or cultural group" and 3) holocaust which she defines as "a mass slaughter of people" (Merriam Webster, Chen 238). Chen argues that within this framework traumatic narratives (fiction and nonfiction works) about the Mao era can be studied as public and popular acts of remembering made outside of "officially sanctioned parameters" (6). When viewed as acts of self-representation, critical self-reflection, and re-creations of the past in the present, the memories motivating these narratives can be treated as evidential testimony of the psychological, behavioral, and sociocultural ramifications of the historical trauma—a trauma that has paved the way for the power and prosperity of the 21st century.

Chen's monograph can be situated among early 21st century works on memory and trauma studies in modern Chinese literary and cultural studies.[1] Chen observes that scholarship to date has established trauma as a central theme. It has engaged the concern that history has been used and abused by ideologues to serve politics. It has also focused more on the formal features, stylistic changes, and theoretical signifiers of narratives rather than the human and ethical aspects of the works. Identifying a need for a systematic study of narratives as testimonies, Chen sets out to create a more rigorous set of analytics with which to examine the pain, suffering, and casualties of the Cultural Revolution period as represented in literature and documentary. Her study is the first of its kind to treat Holocaust research and analysis as a prism to understand the consequences of Maoist political campaigns. By using the same methodologies applied to the study other genocides, Chen creates a system of critical vocabulary and theoretical methodologies that can be applied to the particularities of the Mao era and historiography about that era. Chen's singularly unapologetic premise that Maoist political campaigns were disasters enables her to make methodological advances regarding the study of participants, their memories, and the documentation of the extreme suffering of the period's casualties. Chen's text is corrective study and a humanist call to accountability and action.

Chen is original in her diagnosis of the state of collective memory in post-Mao China that she describes as "unreflective remembering" and "uncritical forgetting." She coins the term "memory lite" to describe memories about the Mao era that feature only positive tales or tales of personal suffering that fail to disclose the causes and

repercussions of the Cultural Revolution period. These tales are produced in response to government censors and personal guilt. She then shows how this collective memory has been complicated by a 21st century memory boom of individual, commercial, and media narratives made possible by economic development, a formidable middle class, and social media network. Chen's call for a reconciliation of official, personal, and popular narratives lest the critical facts related to the period's casualties be lost forever. She requests cooperation from the larger community of writers and scholars who have access to the people and pasts of the period.

Chen also introduces the concept of anamnesis, a term used by Holocaust studies scholars, to think about memories brought back from the subconscious as evidence. Anamnesis is a type of remembering unique to experiences of displacement, loss, catastrophe, and exile (Funkenstein). It has the ability to create a new language constructed from involuntary or unbidden flashes of events that disrupt collective memory and that participate in the creation of another language (Bernard-Donals).[2] Avant garde writer Can Xue's idea of deep memory—an intervention where memories are brought from the subconscious through the act of creation—illustrates how anamnesis as literature can be treated as an "empirical artifact." For Chen, documenting traumatic memories in literature about the Mao era is one way of correcting the ideological uses and abuses of memory found in the "memory lite" literature that has produced a collective amnesia about the suffering of ordinary citizens during the Mao era. Chen asks scholars to who study the Mao era to treat memories of trauma as evidential testimony of Mao era abuses.

Chen's monograph is organized around Paul Ricouer's three categories of abused memory (blocked, manipulated, and obligated memory) and the pathological, practical, and ethical domains they intersect. Chen applies the first category of pathological blocked memory to understand scar literature about the Cultural Revolution as a way of speaking, remembering, and mourning one's losses. Chen applies the second practical category of manipulated memory to understand the creation of a collective narrative governed by power and ideology coalescing in the form of Red Guard and educated youth memories, museums, and commercial media. Despite these narratives' common failure to identify the root causes of Mao era political campaigns and suffering, Chen concedes ala Andrea Huyssen that that this type of memory category is an entrance point for individuals to engage with their own accounts and experiences. Chen applies the third ethical category of obligated memory to fiction to convey the underlying message of her book: memory is the only help that is left to the dead. Because the act of forgetting occurs even as one remembers, our obligation to the dead goes beyond representing our own individual pasts; it extends to telling the stories of the dead and supporting them with factual evidence that prevents the world from forgetting them.

Chapter 1, "Literary Memory and Postmemory of a Traumatic Past," presents the thesis that Holocaust studies terminology can help scholars rethink the trauma inherent in the traumatic literature produced in the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. Rather than focusing on the textual aspects of scar literature, Chen links the tendency of writers to avert their gaze from the real causes of their pain in their written memories of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution to a multi-generational condition of post-traumatic stress disorder and a pathological condition of blocked memory. Chen also differentiates between writers that she marks as first generation and 1.5 generation survivors. These categories have been defined by Holocaust studies scholar Susan Rubin Suleiman as adult survivors and their children who were too young to have had an adult understanding of their experiences. For Chen first generation writing is punctuated by silences rooted in the suppression of accountability and a denial of responsibility. Works by the 1.5 generation feature traumatic realism and "postmemory" or the exploration of fragmented, indirect, and incoherent impressions of trauma at a generational remove.

Chapter 2, "Confronting Specters of the Past," Chen makes visible some particularities of the Chinese experience by rethinking the historical subjects of the Holocaust—victims, perpetrators, and bystanders—in a Chinese context. Chen observes that the distinctions between perpetrator, victim, and bystander were ambiguous and complex during the

Cultural Revolution. There were no bystanders; perpetrators were victims; victims were collaborators; and all perpetrators were ordinary people with the capacity to choose and act freely despite their social-political contexts and varying levels of emotional maturity. Chen builds a typology of traumatic knowledge by close reading literary texts written by first generation and 1.5-generation Cultural Revolution witnesses and participants like Dai Houying (first gen) and Yu Hua (1.5 gen). Chen investigates how perpetrators have used fiction writing to deal with issues of repentance and redemption, guilt and confession. She concludes that not only do the texts blur the boundary between victims and perpetrators but they also refrain from naming perpetrators which leads the reader to the dead end of an unnamed enemy and collective amnesia. Chen calls for the recapturing of memories of perpetrators for two purposes. Her first purpose is to correct the imbalance of memories or dearth of collected memories by those who participated in the Cultural Revolution culture of cruelty. Her second purpose is to preserve historical truth, break down the binary of victim and perpetrator, and make possible the kind of happy forgetting (Ricouer) that can engender the kind of forgiving and healing needed in Chinese society. Chen directs the reader's attention to Marianne Hirsch's idea of "postmemory" to demonstrate how the children of survivors and perpetrators have both reimagined their inherited trauma and destabilized state-sanctioned historiography. This chapter is a successful example of how to employ systematic methods and methodologies to understand the meanings of victimhood and perpetration in the Maoist context.

Chapter 3, "Where Documentary Proof and Memory Intersect," focuses on the victims of the Great Famine and advances the idea that historical writing need not be privileged over literary writing[3]. Chen offers an accounting of valuable narratives that have emerged from the testimonies of survivors or eye-witnesses and explores the idea of "memory as evidence" in three different genres. Her examination of two filmed documentaries by Zou Xueping (*Satiated Village* and *Starving Village*) from Wu Wenguang's *Memory Project* demonstrates the role of interviewers in transcribing testimony into archival documents and primary sources that provide documentary proof to historians. Her treatment of Yang Jisheng's investigative reportage in *Mubei* (*Tombstone*, 2008)—the most comprehensive research and reporting on the Great Famine available to date—demonstrates how Yang's personal narrative engages the narratives of over 100 survivors and eye-witnesses of the period. His reportage provides evidence that local cadres and provincial officials systematically suppressed reports of cruelty, starvation, and death and that the central leadership of the CCP failed to correct "grossly erroneous policies" for three full years (124). Lastly, Chen situates Yang Xianhui's novel *Chronicles of Jiabiangou* in a state between oral history and literary intervention, offering subjective and objective evidence of survivors' memories. Chen uses this chapter to draw attention to the truth-seeking endeavors of individuals who reside at the intersection of memory and documentary proof. History and literature intertwine in their works.

Chapter 4, "History's Doppelganger" explores the moral failings of fiction writers to represent the majority of victims, i.e. peasants, during the Great Leap Forward. Focusing primarily on Yan Lianke's work *The Four Books* (2010), Chen argues that Yan's book is a witness against the historicity of the Great Famine. Chen critiques the book's narrative form, content, allegorical texture, deterministic biblical language and mythological overtones. She views Yan's choice of casting the guiltiest person in the novel as a child savior or a naive and ahistorical character as "ethically unacceptable" and "historically irresponsible"—how can one blame a child for the harm he has caused when he can't take responsibility for his actions? (180) Chen believes that Yan's exploration of intellectuals' roles in and after the disaster avoids bearing historical witness of the Great Famine's horrific realities. While seeking redemption for their cruelties, they are forgetting the peasants who suffered the most. Yan's text triggers Chen's fear that inquiry into the real Great Famine will end before it even begins. This chapter pointedly asks writers not to reduce memory to cultural triviality and to play a part in preventing a second holocaust.

Chapter Five, "Palimpsests of Identity: Memory Lite Writings of the Cultural Revolution," explores the nonlinear processes of identity and memory. Chen

borrows the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of palimpsest—"a manuscript or piece of writing material on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing but of which traces remain." Chen applies it to make her final case regarding the use and abuse of memory in the identity politics of Cultural Revolution memoirs written by Chinese expatriates abroad and Chinese citizens at home. Chen observes that both groups of memoirists produce identities of victimhood for commercial audiences. However, their different socio-cultural conditions are characterized by Cold War human rights rhetoric and Chinese Communist Party nationalist narratives, respectively.

Chen notices that Anglophone literature on the Cultural Revolution uses Maoist-style binary denunciations to fashion their own identities as victims. Her close reading of Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* observes Chung's use of Maoist-style denunciations. Using the prevalent practice of condemnation that she herself had witnessed and participated during the Mao era, Chung denounces Mao to position herself as a torch carrier for truth and individual courage against totalitarian suppression. For Chen, this new identity created using the very practices that she despised fails to transcend the East West political debate about human rights and falls short of meaningful self-reflection and moral accountability. The corrective collection of memoirs about the Mao era, *Some of Us*, works to show how the Cultural Revolution was more complex and multifaceted than historical representations of it. Despite its high levels of self-reflection, Chen sees this collection as an overcorrection that downplays the drama of the period and depoliticizes personal memories of trauma. Its selective remembering (and selective forgetting) does not bear historical witness to the victims of the Cultural Revolution. Similarly, mainland narratives or bildungsroman memoirs written by the first "sent-down youth" and Red Guards turned "educated youth," feature "no regret" attitudes and nostalgia for a time when they acted on their beliefs that they were fighting for the proletariat of the world. Chen critiques the apolitical, nostalgic, jovial reflections of sent down youth and staged photographs by photographers working for the party that are being presented as historical documentation of the period. For Chen the popular consumption of memory lite products and the creation of false memories of the past is what she calls the use and abuse of memory to fashion new identities at the expense of truth.

To conclude, Chen's monograph is admirable for its unwavering dedication to combatting collective amnesia, its extensive application of Holocaust study methodologies, and its impressive re-analysis of traumatic literature and documentary materials about the Cultural Revolution and the less commonly represented Great Leap Forward. Chen makes a solid case for using traumatic literature as evidential testimony of the trauma experienced during historical periods in need of greater documentation and understanding. Despite the monograph's provocative title which initially gave me pause, her self-reflective humanist study push readers and scholars to a higher level of ethical and moral accountability in their representations and studies of the Mao era. As for areas in need of clarification, I would have appreciated clarifying distinctions between the Mao years and Maoist political campaigns. Does this text operate from the baseline assumption that Maoist political campaigns have a synechdocal relationship to the Mao years?

My questions for Professor Chen are oriented towards understanding scholarship as reparation and activism, the role of time, the limits of paradigms, and what we can reasonably expect from literature. First, I appreciate the activism inherent in your text. Your study has motivated me to self-reflect on the degree to which I lose sight of the victims of the Mao era in my studies of gender, cultural production, and performance during the Cultural Revolution. What kinds of acknowledgements, admissions, and accountability would you like to see within PRC scholarship today? How might they compare to the practice of acknowledging settler-colonialism in email signatures or prior to formal talks and classroom proceedings? What cautions and encouragement might you share with scholars who explore this period as a history of alternatives, aspirations, and cultural creativity?

My next set of questions deals with the timing and limitations of labels and analytical categories. Your argument operates under very specific conditions that the Mao years be viewed as genocide and

holocaust. From this framework, you aptly demonstrate that traumatic literature can serve as evidential testimony for a period lacking historical documentation on systematic, avoidable acts of violence committed against ordinary people. But it also seems that this term is a device that you are using to jolt scholars into feelings of urgency toward documenting and recalling the causes and consequences of the period. How might the classification of the Cultural Revolution and Great Leap Forward as complete calamities preclude other scholarly investigations and discoveries about the period, i.e. studies about music, dance, open-air film screenings, typewriters, dresses, the act of reading, and so forth? To what degree do such discoveries matter when the suffering, causes and consequences of period have yet to be documented and remembered? Once the causes of the period are explicitly identified, perpetrators are named and held accountable, and memories of the suffering of ordinary people are preserved in collective and historical memory, does this framework leave room for additional discovery or does it become a single vision paradigm, leaving only one way of reading the period? What do you see as redeemable from the Mao era? What kinds of studies in Holocaust studies have examined the creativity and generativity of the participants?

Lastly, I'd like to engage with your close analysis of Yan Lianke's *The Four Books*, that holds Yan to a higher standard of accountability for representing the horrors and madness of the period. As you point out, Yan's choice of characters, i.e. the Writer, Scholar, Musician, Theologian, and Child, represent a subset of people who cannot stand in for the millions of peasants who died during the famine. Yet, your critiques of Yan's text and its satirical and sweeping presentation of a particularly maniacal history increased my interest in Yan's text. What do you think of the idea that identifiable inaccuracy can encourage research on a particular period? Or what do you think of the idea that the flagrant use of the inappropriate and unfamiliar, i.e. biblical rhetoric, teleology, and symbolism in a Chinese context, is a way to direct the reader's attention to preventable acts of history in need of accounting? In thinking about your excellent close readings and their patterns of memory use and abuse, what do you think about reading the narratives of individuals who are unable to name their enemies and who are only able to spin their testimonies in a positive and nation-building light as good faith narratives? By good faith narrative, I mean narratives that tell all that can be told in a certain moment and at a certain stage in an individual's and community's path through trauma? From this perspective, can and will memory lite transition into the epicenter of a spate of literature and scholarship that examines the period in more accurate and accountable detail?

[1] Some of those texts include Yomi Braester's *Witness Against History* (2003), David Der-wei Wang's *The Monster that is History* (2004), Ban Wang's *Illuminations from the Past* (2004), Sabina Knight's *Heart of Time* (2006), Yibin Huang's *Contemporary Chinese Literature* (2007), and Michael Berry's *A History of Pain* (2008). Chen's text has emerged alongside Jie Li's most recent monograph on memory studies, *Utopian Ruins: A Memorial Museum of the Mao Era* (2020), that refrains from favoring one end of the spectrum of attitudes about the Mao years over the other.

[2] Funkenstein, Amos. *Perceptions of Jewish History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. Bernard-Donals, Michael. "If I Forget Thee, O Jerusalem," *After Representation? The Holocaust, Literature, and Culture*, edited by R. Clifton Spargo and Robert M. Ehrenreich. New Brunswick, NY: Rutgers University Press, 2010, pp. 119-120.

[3] Chen notes that memory is a representation of traces left behind by the experience of the event. This is similar to the idea that history is a re-presentation of carefully selected primary sources from archives and documentary sources that are simultaneously remembered and forgotten.

Response

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I'd like to first acknowledge Professor Mei Li Inouye's fair and careful review of my monograph, *The Great Leap Backward: Forgetting and Representing the Mao Years.* A book like mine can indeed, as shown by Professor Inouye initial pause, invite preconceived biased notion of what the book's position and the author's political intention might be. Only a patient and open-minded reader can see beyond the veneer of a book such as *The Great Leap Backward* to recognize the humanist approach I painstakingly applied in analyzing the complexity inherent in every case study and the politico-historical context in which each is situated. Professor Inouye is certainly such a reader. I appreciate her thoughtful review of my book. At the end of the review Professor Inouye posits a series of sharp and poignant questions, many of which are open-ended that should inspire further reflection and deeper investigation. I will try to answer them the best I can, keeping in mind this format of response.

Before I respond to more general questions, let me answer a more specific question posited by Professor Inouye about whether I view the Maoist campaigns and the Mao years as synecdochic. The answer is yes. In fact I would have liked to include the Anti-Rightist Movement but felt adding the extra materials would make the manuscript too long.

Now moving on to Professor Inouye's first set of questions concerning the role of the scholar and their scholarship. First and foremost, I have always held the belief that scholars should nor can hide behind their scholarship by claiming scientific objectivity and political (broadly defined) neutrality. There is always the human factor, the individual, behind any project— be it scholarly, scientific, or artistic. This is the same principle I applied to my study of the Maoist calamities and the victims, perpetrators, collaborators and bystanders that were made by the calamitous situation. We scholars are trained analysts who are taught to be careful thinkers. But when we approach data or empirical evidence, we are not only a thoughtful analyst, but simultaneously we are individual human beings endeavoring to study and understand human conditions. We all are limited by our situatedness but are cable of lifting ourselves out of our limitation through empathy and humility.

Regarding the second set of questions, on issues surrounding labels and analytical categories— these were in fact the most challenging aspect while I was working on this book: how to construct a vigorous analytical framework. To achieve this requires constant reevaluation and modification, and much of the adjustment depends on the overall objective of the research project. In the cases such as Professor Inouye mentions— studies of Mao era's performing cultures and audience reception, or of objects such as typewriters and dresses— while they seem to be more of a culture study type of research, I think it would be fruitful and may add an additional dimension to discoveries if we keep in mind the performer, viewer, and user. Because I am a comparatist by training, my instinct is always to look for comparable methodologies and theoretical applications. Holocaust studies and memory studies have greatly informed me when I was trying to better frame my own analyses of the primary material. Comparative methodology comes with the burden of having to always justify contextual differences and robustly reevaluate and remodify one's analytical framework, all the while not losing sight of the project's main objective. China's socialist period is a fascinating period to me. It is unique and can yield so much insight to our understanding of the country and society's current condition. *Great Leap Backward* is my attempt to offer a new interpretive frame through which to examine the Mao era, and with that, hopefully, can contribute to our collective effort to comprehend the Xi era at a minimum, and at a maximum, the path of the long 20th century on which modern China has traversed.

Finally to the last set of questions, particularly the one about potentials of memory-lite narratives. They are valuable testimony to and reflection of then (when prior lived experiences happened) and now (when such writing is produced). How to *read* such writings will depend on the reader-researcher. We literary scholars are trained professional readers, and I believe this is where literary scholarship can make the most contribution to humanity.

A word about Yan Lianke. Front and center, I want to make it clear that he has my uttermost respect—for his artistry and courage to write for the Chinese people while putting himself at risk of provoking the ire of the PRC government. I believe all his major works deserve the world's attention, including *The Four Books* which, in my view, is a spectacular and yet most productive artistic failure.