

# The Cultural Revolution: Memories and Legacies 50 Years On

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The year 2016 marks the 50th anniversary of the launch of the Cultural Revolution in China, where controversy continues to rage over its meaning and its legacies. The Communist Party's unequivocal condemnatory labelling of the entire movement as "a grave 'left' error ... responsible for the most severe setback and the heaviest losses suffered by the Party, the state and the people since the founding of the People's Republic" has remained in place since 1981.<sup>1</sup> Yet, even decades after the Party's official resolution, the Cultural Revolution remains a lightning rod for contention, particularly in Chinese cyberspace.<sup>2</sup> As a result, in March 2016, with the anniversary of the start of the Cultural Revolution still months away, the Party tabloid, *Global Times* (*Huanqiu shibao* 环球时报), issued an ominous warning against "small groups" that might seek to generate "a totally chaotic misunderstanding of the Cultural Revolution." The editorial sternly reminded *Global Times* readers that "discussions strictly should not depart from the Party's decided politics or thinking,"<sup>3</sup> a prohibition that appears to have short-circuited both popular discussion and scholarly reflection on this critical watershed in 20th-century Chinese politics.

This issue of *The China Quarterly* is not concerned with further excavation into what happened during that tumultuous decade; that has been amply covered in a wealth of new scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Instead, we focus on how the Cultural Revolution is remembered today and what its legacies are, both in the People's Republic of China (PRC) as well as elsewhere across the globe. Five decades after Mao declared the beginning of a new movement to "touch people to their very

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1 "Resolution on certain questions in the history of our Party since the founding of the People's Republic of China." Adopted by the sixth plenary session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on 27 June 1981. See <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/history/01.htm>. Accessed 29 June 2016.

2 Yang 2007.

3 "Mao Zedong wannian weihe youlū 'wenge' zhe yi yichan bei xiuzheng?" (Why did Mao worry in his later years that the legacy of the Cultural Revolution would be altered?), *Huanqiu shibao*, 29 March 2016, [http://history.huanqiu.com/china/2016-03/8788346\\_3.html](http://history.huanqiu.com/china/2016-03/8788346_3.html). Accessed 21 June 2016.

4 MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006; Andreas 2009; Walder 2009; Wu 2014; Dikötter 2016; Mittler 2013; Clark 2008; Leese 2013.

souls,” how are we to assess its relevance for China today? In this special issue of *The China Quarterly*, we offer a range of contemporary perspectives on the Cultural Revolution as reflected in memory – both individual and collective – and through a range of historical legacies that continue to exert impacts on China’s contemporary social, political and economic realities.

Engaging with the Cultural Revolution is fraught with difficulty. The Xi Jinping 习近平 regime’s statements on the socialist past have been taken by some as signs of a softening in the regime’s position on the Mao era, but not one that enables or encourages scholarly enquiry into the topic. Only months after assuming power, in January 2013 Xi summed up the spirit of the 18th Party Congress by drawing a clear distinction between two periods of PRC history: before Deng Xiaoping’s 邓小平 “reform and openness,” and after. Despite acknowledging profound ideological and policy differences, Xi argued that the two periods form an indivisible whole, with each period playing an indispensable role in the construction of Chinese socialism: “One cannot use the historical period following reform and opening to negate the historical period prior to reform and opening, and one cannot use the historical period prior to reform and opening to negate the historical period following reform and opening.”<sup>5</sup>

This theme of simultaneously recognizing the fundamental differences between the two periods and denying the power of the inherent contradiction between them was reiterated again in March 2013, in the infamous Document No. 9, an internal notice promulgated by the General Office of the Party Central Committee.<sup>6</sup> Further instruction from the Party leadership on this thorny issue came in November, on the day before the third plenum opened, in the form of a full-page article placed by the CCP Central Party History Research Office in the *People’s Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 人民日报) entitled, “Correctly view the historical periods, before and after reform and opening.” Repeating the condemnatory language laid down in the “1981 Resolution on certain questions in the history of our Party since the founding of the People’s Republic of China,” the *People’s Daily* article noted that the Cultural Revolution “brought untold disasters to the Party, state, and the people of all nationalities,” but nevertheless warned against “deliberately negating Comrade Mao Zedong’s mistakes in his later years, much less completely negating Comrade Mao Zedong and Mao Zedong Thought.” On the contrary, the “two historical periods” (i.e. before and after reform) “are never separated from each other, let alone fundamentally opposed to each other.”<sup>7</sup>

5 “Haobu dongyao jianchi he fazhan Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi zai shijian zhong buduan yousuo faxian yousuo chuangzao yousuo qianjin” (Unhesitatingly uphold and develop socialism with Chinese characteristics; have some new discoveries, some new innovations, and some advances in the course of practice), *Renmin ribao*, 6 January 2013.

6 Document No. 9 was published on 19 August 2013 in *Mingjing yuekan*; the above translation appeared in Fewsmith 2014, 5.

7 Central Party History Research Office. 2013. “Zhengque kandai gaige kaifang qianhou liangge lishi shiqi” (Correctly view the two historical periods prior to and after reform and opening up), *Renmin ribao*, 8 November.

Xi's new directive, along with the restrictions that have since followed on public and scholarly discussion of the meaning and import of the Mao era in the present, has greatly hampered reflection on the pivotal event in the final decade of Mao's life, the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The "case closed" official line on the post-1949 past provoked Chinese scientist Fang Lizhi 方励之 to write his essay "The Chinese amnesia" whilst sheltering in the American embassy in Beijing in 1989.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the sustained official effort to produce, maintain and police a certain type of cultural amnesia can itself be claimed as one of the legacies of the Cultural Revolution, even as individual and collective memories of the late Mao era persistently break out of the confinement imposed upon them by the officially constructed "master narrative" laid out in the 1981 Resolution.<sup>9</sup>

Among social scientists who seek to explain precisely how history matters, legacies are understood to represent deeper underlying historical continuities that continue to shape contemporary realities in profound and complex ways. Yet, while continuity and change have long been central in the study of politics and society, it is clear that we do not yet fully understand the criteria by which claims of such continuity can be made. How are we to understand and investigate the difference between continuity and change from the past? Historical legacies have emerged as a key social science variable in many explanations of contemporary outcomes in authoritarian, transitional and hybrid regimes, although there is still no clear understanding of what a legacy is or how legacy arguments actually work.

Many political scientists have chosen to hone in on "communist legacies," including cultural practices, encompassing attitudes, beliefs, and shared knowledge and experience acquired during the communist period. Anna Grzymała-Busse, for example, has recently drawn attention to the skills developed and retained by communist parties over several decades that have allowed them to weather the transition to new political environments and demands.<sup>10</sup> Jan Kubik has argued that the hybrid mix of nationalism and socialism that proved inimical to liberal values has slowed the progress of reform in post-communist regimes, and Phineas Baxandall has traced how beliefs and expert knowledge about how centrally planned markets work continue to affect economic planning in post-communist countries attempting to undertake market reform.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, as we attempt to identify how legacies continue to affect contemporary outcomes, a number of important analytic and conceptual distinctions emerge. First, and perhaps most clearly, not all outcomes that appear at the end of causal chains can be construed as legacies. Social scientists agree that there is a need to establish the existence of a measurable outcome or influence on the present that is rooted in the past. It also follows that a necessary (although not sufficient)

8 Fang 1990.

9 Yang 2005, 14–15.

10 Grzymała-Busse 2003.

11 Kubik 2003; Baxandall 2004.

condition for a phenomenon to be considered as a legacy is that it has to exist in at least two time periods, and that it must refer *explicitly* to the past and, at the same time, *implicitly* to the present. Jason Wittenberg identifies various sorts of legacies, including cultural legacies (which may include political beliefs or proclivities that are collectively held as a result of past experiences), material legacies (for example, a lack of infrastructure), and institutional legacies (i.e. the persistence of old regime institutions such as centralized economic planning), all of which keep vestiges of the past alive in the present day.<sup>12</sup> With respect to the Cultural Revolution, Hung Yung Lee has argued that its most immediate political legacies have included the rise of the political influence of the PLA, the decentralization and devolution of political power to local leaders, and the waxing influence of mass groups previously allied with conservative forces.<sup>13</sup> Writing in 1985, Thomas Gold argued that the Cultural Revolution “left a deleterious economic, political and moral legacy for personal relations” that paved the way for the instrumentalization and commodification of social life early in the reform era.<sup>14</sup> Six years later, Chen Yizi noted that, insofar as the original proposal for rural reform had been developed by a group of young scholars who had been dispatched to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, post-Mao rural reforms must be counted as one of the more salient legacies of the sent-down movement.<sup>15</sup>

Turning to memory, it is clear that although it overlaps in some cases with legacy, not all memory can be regarded as legacy. Memory is far more fluid and mutable, admitting no clear boundaries between past and present, but most often presents as a fusion of the two. Pierre Nora, for example, argues that memory “remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present.”<sup>16</sup>

To also qualify as legacy, memory has to have an effect in and on the present, and on social, cultural and historical features of the present that go beyond the individual. Recently, an older contestant on a Chinese reality show sang about his memories of his family’s suffering during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>17</sup> As long as Yang Le 杨乐 kept those memories to himself, few would consider them to be a legacy. But does injecting them into the public domain through his performance qualify them as a “legacy”? Certainly, the performance visibly moved many of the listeners in the television studio and commanded a lot of media attention; however, perhaps even in these circumstances, we can say that

12 Wittenberg 2013.

13 Lee 1980, 10.

14 Gold 1985.

15 Chen 1991.

16 Nora 1989, 8.

17 Phillips 2016.

by putting personal memories into public space and culture in this way, Yang Le invoked the broader collective memory from his audience, thereby creating the potential for them to become a recognizable cultural legacy.

Distinctions like these between different analytical categories and types of memory underpin the field of memory studies, although the issue of legacy itself is not often directly discussed in the field. All the scholars who work on memory understand it as something that is constructed and sustained through various practices of telling and retelling. However, for the major writers in the field as it has developed over the years, a primary distinction is between informal and often unrecorded memory and official memory. For example, this distinction is often taken to characterize the key difference between the approaches of the two scholars now understood to be the founding fathers of the field. On the one hand, Maurice Halbwachs' "collective memory" stands in contrast to both the discipline of history's interest in times beyond the reach of memory and the interest of his contemporaries such as Freud and Bergson in individual memory. Halbwachs stressed the social nature of collective memory as something sustained in various ways, but especially in those ways that are dependent on informal and taken-for-granted interactions.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, where Halbwachs' interest leads to a focus on the ephemeral, Nora's work on memory sites, or *lieux de mémoire*, focuses more on material sites, which of course are generally more formal and often officially endorsed.<sup>19</sup>

Jan Assmann makes a similar distinction in his discussion of "cultural memory" and "communicative memory." The way in which he understands cultural memory positions it as similar to Nora's concept, because it emphasizes memories that are material, ritualized, and so on. Communicative memory, on the other hand, comprises memories that come into being and are sustained through everyday interactions and can be seen as part of the larger field of oral history.<sup>20</sup> To this we could also add John Bodnar's distinction between "vernacular" and "official" memory, and William Hirst and David Manier's distinction between "lived" and "distant" memory.<sup>21</sup>

In the case of the Cultural Revolution, to adopt Assmann's terminology, the state attempts to police both communicative memories disseminated through gatherings of former Red Guards or sent-down youth, and cultural memory in terms of the absence of official memorials. Many of the essays collected here analyse not only what gets remembered but also where and how that memory is circulated and sustained. Various issues are at stake in these contestations and negotiations around memory, and in particular efforts to not only sustain communicative memory but also produce cultural memory. Recognition of various wrongs in the past would not only imply acknowledgment by the state but also

18 Halbwachs 1992.

19 Nora 1996–98.

20 Assman 2008.

21 Bodnar 1992, 13–20; Hirst and Manier 2008, 183–200.

carries with it the possibility of financial compensation and the pursuit of justice through the legal system. Concerns such as these subtend the efforts of former sent-down youth, as discussed in Michel Bonnin's essay in this volume, and the efforts to determine and discuss killings, as discussed in Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik and Cui Jinke's essay.

For scholars, we need to recognize that writing about memories of the Cultural Revolution also participates in their production. Although this is usually motivated by scholarly aims concerning the pursuit of deeper knowledge and understanding of what happened during the Cultural Revolution, we need to acknowledge that scholarship is in this way implicated in extending the impact of the Cultural Revolution into the present, and therefore plays a role, however small or unintended, in the production of legacy.

These issues are reflected in the range of contributions we have assembled here. Broadly speaking, after Roderick MacFarquhar's timely foreword, the essays move from considerations of legacy and the international impact of the Cultural Revolution (Andrew Walder, Julia Lovell, and Alessandro Russo), to Chinese politics (Changchang Wu, Patricia Thornton, and Michael Dutton), and then on to everyday life, the archive, and memory (Michel Bonnin, Peidong Sun, and Frank Dikötter). However, all the essays engage with memory and legacy to lesser and greater degrees.

On the one hand, Michel Bonnin's article documents a resurgence of latent *zhiqing* memory and nostalgia in the wake of the massacre on 4 June 1989 that in turn gave rise to the phenomenon of *zhiqing* restaurants and other "places where memory sits," which participated in remaking the shared past in the present. Nora reminds us that, "at the heart of history is a critical discourse that is antithetical to spontaneous memory. History is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it."<sup>22</sup> And, of course, this is particularly and spectacularly true of the contemporary party-state, which is actively engaged in tightly controlling, if not eliminating altogether, unofficial discussion of the Cultural Revolution era. Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik and Cui Jinke's examination of the apologies offered by former Red Guards and the larger context of the absence of prosecution further illustrates the ongoing nature of these tensions around history and memory.

Both Changchang Wu and Patricia Thornton touch upon the contradictions inherent in the Party's struggle to suppress debate regarding the alternative possible futures contained within the radical Maoist past. As Wu demonstrates, the key tension within the debate turns on concepts raised by the liberal and reform-minded constitutionalists on the one hand, and "the Maoist constitutional movement" on the other. Likewise, Thornton concurs that one chief historical legacy is the unresolved struggle between the liberal bourgeois model of constitutional and parliamentary democracy, and the unrealized potential of radical alternatives.

<sup>22</sup> Nora 1989, 8.

By contrast, Michael Dutton proposes that rather than focusing on questions of representation, the concept of the Maoist political “on the ground” raises the possibility of a new dynamic at work: a question of politico-affective flows and the technologies devised “to harness affective energy flows and channel them towards a productive intensity” as the “basis of a particular and unique mode of being political.” Alessandro Russo agrees that the Maoist political offered unique but largely unrealized possibilities, but also sees three intertwined legacies at work: a radical impasse in the practices of modern egalitarian politics, a significant but also less visible alteration in the sphere of the government, and an even more profound change in the overall organization of knowledge.

Finally, the actual working of a historical legacy may – as both Andrew Walder and Frank Dikötter demonstrate – be hidden or counter-intuitive, and alter the historical trajectory of a nation, a party-state and a people, as the adoption of market reform under the reconsolidated rule of the CCP has done. What all of the papers seem to show is that the chief legacies of the Cultural Revolution were either unintended by Mao and his supporters at the time, or very nearly the exact opposite of what the initiators of the movement were attempting to achieve at the time. Walder goes so far as to assert that “China today is the very definition of what the Cultural Revolution was intended to forestall. It is a caricature of a genuine Maoist’s worst nightmare: the degeneration of the Party into a capitalist oligarchy with unprecedented levels of corruption and inequality”; whereas Dikötter’s portrait of a paralysed Party machine presiding over a restive and resiliently entrepreneurial peasantry produces a “silent revolution” by default. Peidong Sun also discovers deep roots for today’s more individualist China in her research data revealing the huge variety of everyday resistance to power in the form of clothing choices. Julia Lovell casts a wider net to show that the original enthusiasm for the Cultural Revolution experienced across Western Europe, the United States and parts of South-East Asia helped to splinter the radical left, thereby facilitating the consolidation of the political power of the right through the 1980s and beyond.

We have attempted to ensure that the widest possible range of disciplines and positions on the Cultural Revolution are included in this special issue. To diversify the academic milieu the scholars contributing to the volume are drawn from, we have held workshops in Shanghai and London and invited scholars from around the world to contribute. We hope the result constitutes a stimulating and thought-provoking set of reflections and engagements with the topic of memory and legacy. Certainly, the positions taken here are diverse to the extent of being sometimes mutually incompatible. While that may increase the likelihood that no reader will agree with every essay, we hope that although, of course, not everything is covered, most readers will feel satisfied with the variety.



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