

**Cultural Revolution Narratives:  
Rethinking History through the Prism of Post-Mao Literature**

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## ABSTRACT

DÁŠA PEJCHAR MORTENSEN: Cultural Revolution Narratives: Rethinking History  
through the Prism of Post-Mao Literature  
(Under the direction of Michael Tsin)

Chinese “educated youth,” or *zhiqing*, who were sent to the countryside for re-education during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), began to re-frame their historical narratives of this tumultuous decade in the post-Mao period. This essay examines how two distinct genres of post-Mao literature, the “Literature of the Wounded (*shanghen wenxue*)” and “Nostalgic Literature (*huaijiu wenxue*),” reproduced an imaginary binary between individual memories of the Cultural Revolution and the officially-sanctioned history of this period, while a third genre of literature, the “Narration of the Absurd (*huangdan xushi*),” rejected a memory/history dichotomy. Instead of relying on a single narratorial voice, which silences the plurality of voices located in and out of the historical record, the Narration of the Absurd opened up radically new possibilities for narrating, in a non-linear fashion, a multiplicity of perspectives, memories, and uncertainties about the past.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

With the commencement of the “Reform and Opening” (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) policy in the aftermath of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Chinese intellectuals began to publically voice their challenges to the Chinese Communist Party’s shifting vision of China’s recent past.<sup>1</sup> A torrent of Cultural Revolution memoirs and literature flooded the market in the 1980s and 1990s, and the Chinese public, facing a gulf between their experiential memories of the Cultural Revolution and the ways in which published historiographies silenced or co-opted these memories, increasingly turned to literature to help them make sense of their lived pasts.<sup>2</sup> This booming Chinese “memory

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<sup>1</sup> In the post-Mao period, economic development replaced proletarian revolution as the guiding principle of the Chinese Communist Party. With this ideological shift, socialist ideals, which formed the basis for evaluating earlier “stages” of Chinese history, became increasingly sidelined in official historiography. The Party’s narrative of the Cultural Revolution transformed dramatically from one that glorified self-sacrifice, manual labor, and sometimes violent class struggle in the Mao era, to one that dismissed radical Red Guard activism as adolescent “hooliganism” and cast aside the egalitarian idealism of the period as impractical in the reform era. While Party history in the reform era “totally negated (*chedi fouding* 彻底否定)” the guiding theories of the Cultural Revolution, the ambiguous nature of this negation was exemplified by the Party’s declaration that Mao had attempted to aim the movement in the right direction, but was ultimately led astray by radical Leftist members of the Party. For more on the Party’s shifting interpretation of China’s recent history, see Chapter II.

<sup>2</sup> Two of the earliest book-length histories of the Cultural Revolution were published in China in the late 1980s. See Yan Jiaqi 嚴家其 and Gao Gao 高皋, *Zhongguo “wenge” shinian shi* [中国文革十年史; *The Ten Year History of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*] (Taipei: Zhongguo wenti yanjiu chubanshe, 1988); and Wang Nianyi 王年一, *Dadongluan de niandai* [大动乱的年代; *Years of Great Turmoil*] (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1988). For an insightful analysis of the kind of disconnect that many educated “sent-down youth” noticed between their experiences in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution and the way that these experiences were portrayed in the two monographs mentioned above, see David Davies, “Remembering Red: Memory and Nostalgia for the Cultural Revolution in Late 1990s China” (PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 2002), 4-5.

industry” coincided with a heightened interest in the field of memory studies in Western academia in the 1980s and 1990s. Western scholars were thus inclined to herald post-Mao literature as a signifier of the scope and the scale of Chinese popular resistance to the Chinese Communist Party’s hegemonic narrative of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>3</sup> Yet, despite the initial claims made by Western scholars and Chinese dissidents, one of the major genres of literature published in the early post-Mao period, the “Literature of the Wounded (*shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学),”<sup>4</sup> not only failed to subvert state-sponsored historical accounts, but actually bolstered the post-Mao government’s legitimacy in the Chinese public’s eyes. This genre of literature, which focused on the physical and psychological suffering that permeated Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution, substantiated the Chinese Communist Party’s assertion in the reform era that economic development, rather than ongoing class struggle, would most benefit the Chinese people.

This essay will examine how, in the face of shifting state discourses about the Cultural Revolution, the former educated youth (*zhishi qingnian* 知识青年), who were “sent down” to rural townships in mainland China for re-education in the 1960s and 1970s, have

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the earliest theories to come out of the field of “memory studies” emphasized a binary relationship between memory and history, with memory supposedly representing a more spontaneous, unmediated, egalitarian portal to the past, and with history (often referred to as “History” to emphasize its close ties to state narratives) reportedly providing a collective, constructed, top-down interpretation of the past. For more on such theories, see Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collected Memory*, Lewis Coser, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Tradition,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1-14. Amongst Chinese theorists, Jiwei Ci has been particularly outspoken in defining official history as the “engineering of political amnesia” and juxtaposing history, which he terms “an institution for the social regulation and sanitization of memory,” with natural memory. See Jiwei Ci, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution: From Utopianism to Hedonism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 82.

<sup>4</sup> The primary example of the “Literature of the Wounded” that will be analyzed in this essay is the short story that served as the genesis for, and unwittingly loaned its name to, this literary movement. See Lu Xinhua 卢新华, “*Shanghen* [伤痕; The Wound],” *Wen hui bao* [文汇报] 8 (1978).

(re-)framed their historical narratives of this tumultuous decade.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, it will investigate how two distinct genres of post-Mao literature, the “Literature of the Wounded (*shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学)” and “Nostalgic Literature (*huaijiu wenxue* 怀旧文学),”<sup>6</sup> reproduced an imaginary binary between individual memories of the Cultural Revolution and the officially-sanctioned “history” of this period,<sup>7</sup> while a third genre of literature, the

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<sup>5</sup> From 1968 until 1981, more than seventeen million members of China’s school-age population migrated from their urban residences to the countryside as a result of their participation in a national campaign known as the “Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement (*shangshan xiexiang yundong* 上山下乡运动).” This campaign, which has also been referred to in English as the “Rustification Movement,” was the longest large-scale demographic movement ever organized by the Chinese Communist Party and it deeply influenced an entire generation of Chinese citizens. For a more comprehensive overview of the Rustification Movement see Ding Yizhuang 定宜庄, *Zhongguo zhiqing shi: chulan, 1953-1968* [中国知青史—初澜 (1953-1968)]; *A History of the Chinese Zhiqing: The Early Waves, 1953-1968* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1998); and Liu Xiaomeng 刘晓梦, *Zhongguo zhiqing shi: dachao, 1966-1980* [中国知青史—大潮 (1966-1980)]; *A History of the Chinese Zhiqing: The High Tide, 1966-1980* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1998). To date, Thomas Bernstein has published the most detailed history of the Rustification Movement in English; see Thomas Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). Yihong Pan has published an updated account of the Rustification Movement; see Yihong Pan, *Tempered in the Revolutionary Furnace: China’s Youth in the Rustification Movement* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Kong Jiasheng’s 1982 novella, “The Southern Bank,” will be discussed in this essay, as it is representative of this kind of nostalgic autobiographical fiction. See Kong Jiasheng 孔捷生, “*Nanfang de an* [南方的岸; The Southern Bank],” *Shi yue* [十月; *October*] 2 (1982), reprinted in *Da lin mang* [大林莽; *The Great Jungle*] (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 1985), 252-397. Liang Xiaosheng’s novella, *Snowstorm Tonight*, will also be analyzed, as it was met with great acclaim when it was published in 1984. See Liang Xiaosheng 梁晓声, *Jintian you baofeng xue* [今夜有暴风雪; *Snowstorm Tonight*], anthologized and reprinted in *Zhiqing xiaoshuo xuan* [知青小说选; *Selections of Short Stories by the Educated Youth*] (Xi’an: Xi’an chubanshe, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> The main government document that will be examined in this essay is “*Guanyu jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi* [关于建国以来党的若干历史问题的决议; Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China],” Sixth Plenum of the Eleventh Chinese Communist Party Central Committee [中国共产党第十一届中央委员会第六次全体会议], *Beijing Review*, December 27, 1981, 20-26, accessed November 11, 2010, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/252/5089/5103/20010428/454968.html>. This Resolution was first published in the *Renmin ribao* [人民日报; *People’s Daily*], July 1, 1981. A more recent Chinese Communist Party internal document that reveals the Yunnan provincial government’s 2005 historical assessment of the Cultural Revolution will also be analyzed. See “*Yunnan ‘Wenhua da geming’ yundong dashi jishi* [云南“文化大革命”运动大事纪实; An Account of the Cultural Revolution Movement in Yunnan],” Zhonggong Yunnan shengwei dangshi yanjiu shibian (neibu ziliao) [中共云南省委党史研究室编 (内部资料)], May 18, 2005, accessed December 1, 2010, <http://ccrd.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/>.

“Narration of the Absurd (*huangdan xushi* 荒诞叙事),”<sup>8</sup> rejected a memory/history dichotomy. The avant-garde literary movement known as the “Narration of the Absurd” broke with the officially approved genre of socialist realism by employing black humor and irony to highlight the problematic relationship between memory, history, and the politics of the present.<sup>9</sup> Chinese authors who embraced this absurdist view of history ridiculed not just the way that the past had been portrayed in official historical accounts, but also the way that Chinese dissidents, along with their Western sympathizers, had naively embraced the idea of counter-narratives. Contemporary political projects related to memory of the Cultural Revolution, including those that reject the utopian ideals of this movement, such as post-Mao Chinese Communist Party narratives and “Literature of the Wounded,” and those that reflect much more positively on the Mao era, such as “Nostalgic Literature,” rely upon a distinctly

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<sup>8</sup> Wang Shuo’s 1991 novel, *Dongwu xiongmeng*, is the representative absurdist literary source that will be analyzed in this essay. See Wang Shuo 王朔, “*Dongwu xiongmeng* [动物凶猛; Wild Beasts],” in *Wang Shuo wenji* [王朔文集; Collected Works of Wang Shuo], vol. 4 (Beijing: Huayi chubanshe, 1992). Additionally, two of Ma Yuan’s works will be discussed; see Ma Yuan 马原, “*Xugou* [虚构; Fabrication],” in *The Lost Boat: Avant-Garde Fiction from China*, ed. Henry Y. H. Zhao (London: Wellsweep, 1993), 101-144; Ma Yuan 马原, *Gangdisi de youhuo* [冈底斯的诱惑; *The Lure of the Gangdisi Mountains*] (Beijing: Zuoji chubanshe, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> The theoretical approach that is used in this essay has been shaped by Shahid Amin’s influential work on memory and history, which emphasizes the fallacy of creating a binary between official history and popular memory. Amin argues that fine lines cannot be drawn between dominant, nationalist discourses on the one hand and individual or collective memories on the other, since memory is not just composed of *what* the public thinks about a particular event, but also *how* the public has been trained to think about that event given the memorializing of the event in national history. As a result of his desire to provide the reader with multiple narratives of the Chauri Chaura incident, an event that took place in India on February 4, 1922 when a market-day boycott called by local nationalist volunteers as part of Mahatma Gandhi’s Noncooperation Movement turned violent, Amin has produced a book that is somewhat disjointed in its structure and elusive in its overall argument. Amin does not adopt a more conventional historical approach to narrative construction, which would be to weigh different versions of an event in order to convey a broader analytical point to the reader. Instead Amin allows the voices that surface in each chapter to speak for themselves, resulting in a narrative that twists and turns, doubling back on itself to produce a wide variety of understandings of the same event. Providing an explanation and justification for his unique approach, Amin writes that “for me it was not a question of counterposing local remembrance against authorized accounts: the process by which historians gain access to the past is richly problematic, as is the relationship between memory and record, and the possibilities of arriving at a more nuanced narrative, a thicker description, seem enhanced by putting the problems on display.” Amin’s narrative approach is not a byproduct of his failure as a historian or a writer, but rather one that he has deliberately taken, as it is fundamental to his goal of exploring new pathways toward a less epistemologically violent form of historical narration. See Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 4.

positivist conception of history. What is fundamentally radical about Chinese avant-garde literature then, is not simply that it pushes back against the state's official narrative, but that it challenges both the state's and the dissidents' very *conception* of history.

The abrupt ideological shifts that took place in China during the last three decades of the twentieth century and the ways in which both Chinese and Western historians responded to these political U-turns in the post-Mao era raise important questions about how contemporary political issues condition the discursive boundaries within which historical writing is produced. How, and by whom, has the “voice” of history been legitimized? How does the present exert its power over historical discourse? Because of their interest in tackling these questions, Chinese avant-garde writers' efforts to re-write history in fictional forms deserve special attention.<sup>10</sup>

The critical historiographical intervention that was made by post-Mao avant-garde literature more than two decades ago, which was to challenge historians' devotion to the singularity of the narratorial voice and the discipline's tendency to valorize the appearance of truth, continues to be just as thought provoking today. Rather than simply offering a new

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<sup>10</sup> These three different literary movements, in which sent-down youth played a major (although not exclusive) role, emerged at distinct historical moments in the reform era due to particular transformations in China's political, social, and cultural landscape. Public interest in the Literature of the Wounded reached its height in the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and waned in the mid-1980s as the sent-down youth (who served as both producers and consumers of this literary genre) began to rewrite their narratives of victimization into narratives of heroism. Market reforms kicked into high gear in the aftermath of Deng Xiaoping's “southern tour” in 1992, which generated widespread public support for the Party's revamped economic policies. Alienated by their compatriots' endorsement of economic pragmatism and repudiation of previously-esteemed socialist ideals, the sent-down youth mobilized nostalgia to defend against commercialism, which threatened to undermine the significance of their experiences in the countryside. While the Literature of the Wounded expressed the educated youth's anger at being victimized by “Leftist” ideology, and Nostalgic Literature expressed their desire to recall the passion of the Mao era, the Narration of the Absurd lacked both anger and excitement. The Chinese literary critic Liu Zaifu 刘再复 sees in avant-garde literature a nihilistic defiance of any formal value system, maintaining that avant-garde writers “no longer appeal to society, nor do they try to prove their values. They are now their own masters, seeking their own positions. Thus literature has passed from the stage of reflection to the stage of pluralistic search.” Cited in Henry Zhao, “Introduction: New Waves in Recent Chinese Fiction,” in *The Lost Boat: Avant-Garde Fiction From China*, ed. Henry Zhao (London: Wellsweep, 1993), 11.

kind of narrative closure, avant-garde fiction is left open-ended, marked by an ironic awareness of the contingency—even the absurdity—of any human effort to recapture the past. Instead of attempting the unachievable task of “retrieving the past,”<sup>11</sup> fiction as historical practice opens up other possibilities for narrating, in a non-linear fashion, a multiplicity of perspectives, memories, and doubts about the meaning of past events. Post-Mao avant-garde literature thus may be viewed as a particularly innovative and fundamentally radical form of historical practice.

Historians working on the relationship between memory and the narration of history in post-1949 China have been greatly hampered by a disciplinary mindset that marginalizes literature as both a historical and historiographical source.<sup>12</sup> The majority of Western scholarship that deals with issues of historical memory in China is based on an analysis of

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<sup>11</sup> Historians’ attempts to empirically record what happened in the past can be traced back to Leopold von Ranke, who arguably has been best remembered for theorizing that historians bear the intellectual and moral burden of explaining “*wie es eigentlich gewesen* (how things actually were).” See Leopold von Ranke, *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514* [*History of the Latin and Teutonic Peoples from 1494 to 1514*]; cited in Fritz Stern, “Preface: Histories of the Latin and Germanic Nations from 1494-1514,” in *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, ed. Fritz Stern (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 57. Ranke’s legacy lives on and continues to be reflected in the work of some contemporary social historians of modern China. One such historian is Christian Henriot, who, upon reflecting on developments in the field after the cultural turn, contended that history is not simply—as Hayden White famously posited—a “fiction-making operation.” The danger that postmodernism and post-structuralism pose to the discipline of history is quite clear, Henriot maintained, for “to give up all intention of truth in historical research, would be tantamount to letting the door open to all kinds of falsifications and, consequently, treasons of memory.” See Christian Henriot, *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai: A Social History, 1849-1949*, trans. Noël Castelino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), xv.

<sup>12</sup> Scholars of memory tend to consider archived sources “historical” rather than “historiographical” because it is largely assumed that history is produced by professional historians, rather than state bureaucrats, journalists, photographers, or memoir writers. Yet, when a narrative about the past is made public—whether it appears in the form of a scholarly article published in a peer-reviewed history journal, a published government statement about a period of national history, a photographic installation, or an avant-garde novel—a historical narrative has been produced and disseminated. When these narratives shape the public’s understanding of the past far more extensively than scholarship produced by professional historians, it may be helpful for historians to reconsider whether “history” ought to be defined purely according to whether it was produced within the academy. In sum, when it comes to the study of memory, to what extent should “historical sources” actually be considered “works of history?” This question becomes even more complicated in countries where the state vigilantly censors scholarship produced by professional historians. Under these circumstances, “fiction” writers, who are often permitted greater license to comment on the past than historians, frequently engage in forms of historical practice that are simply off limits to historians.

archived sources, such as state documents, newspaper articles, and photographs, along with sources that historians have deemed sufficiently “objective” to be historically valuable, such as memoirs, letters, and interviews conducted by oral historians. Yet, literature in the post-Mao era arguably has been far more influential than either state documents or newspaper articles in creating and shaping popular narratives of the “sent-down youth” experience. As a result, literary theorists have often taken the lead in publishing theoretically engaging works on memory in post-1949 China, while scholars operating within the rather more conservative disciplinary confines of history have, with few exceptions, avoided dealing with issues of historical memory.<sup>13</sup>

In order to analyze new forms of historical practice that provide alternatives to nineteenth-century narrative construction, a more inclusive definition of historical and historiographical sources must be embraced. It is for this reason that in this essay, the Chinese government’s official interpretation of the Cultural Revolution is placed in conversation with contending narratives supplied by three distinct genres of “sent-down youth literature (*zhishi qingnian wenxue* 知识青年文学).”

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<sup>13</sup> There are a few notable exceptions to this trend, such as Klaus Mühlhahn, Jeffrey Wasserstrom, and Susan Weigel-Schwiedrzik, who are perhaps the most well known amongst the handful of historians that have written about Chinese memory in the post-1949 period. See Klaus Mühlhahn, “Remembering a Bitter Past’: The Trauma of China’s Labor Camps, 1949-1978,” *History and Memory* 16: 2 (2004): 108-139; Jeffrey Wasserstrom (with Craig Calhoun) “The Cultural Revolution and the Democracy Movement of 1989: Complexity in Historical Connections,” in *The Chinese Cultural Revolution Reconsidered: Beyond Purge and Holocaust*, ed. Kam-ye Law (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 241-261; and Susan Weigel-Schwiedrzik, “Coping with the Cultural Revolution: Contesting Interpretations,” *Thema: Zeithistorische Debatten in Asien* (2009): 1-44.

## CHAPTER II

### THE POLITICAL ROLE OF HISTORY IN POST-1949 CHINA

History under Mao was seen as an important facet of state ideology to be correctly managed in the service of state narratives of progress and socialist modernity. Under the guidance of the Chinese Communist Party, Chinese historians were mandated to fit China's five thousand year-old history into the schemata of historical stages drawn up by Marx and Engels: from primitive communism to slave society and then onward to feudalism, capitalism, and the glorious march to socialism. In the 1950s and 1960s Chinese historians used "scientific methodologies" in an effort to empirically prove the exact timing of each stage of Marxist history. Working under predetermined notions handed down to them by the Party leadership, Chinese historians juggled copious amounts of historical data, attempting to fit it into a Marxist historical framework.

During the Maoist era, official historical narratives were written or rewritten to reflect changing political situations, and the particulars of each new narrative replaced earlier narratives as authorized by the state. Individuals falling from favor were, for example, conveniently removed from old photographs. Mao, like his predecessors, regarded history as a mirror through which ethical standards and moral transgressions pertinent to the present

day could be viewed.<sup>14</sup> Since the writing of history was a political, ideological, and moral concern, it was carefully policed and micro-managed by the Communist Party apparatus.<sup>15</sup> During the Maoist period Chinese historians were denied the intellectual luxury of challenging nineteenth-century historical methodologies and were unable to publish theoretical work that critically appraised the boundaries and limitations of their own discipline.

Although all publishable historical scholarship still had to adhere to clearly-defined political guidelines, a distinct shift in the Chinese government's approach to writing history took place in the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. Starting in the early 1980s, the factual details that shaped official narratives were no longer altered to fit the changing needs of the contemporary political landscape. Instead, Cultural Revolution history was severed from the present, the "correct (*zhengque* 正确)" narrative of Cultural Revolution history was given an official label, and anything that did not adhere to this narrative was made explicitly off limits for discussion.<sup>16</sup> The Chinese Communist Party announced its

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<sup>14</sup> For more on the continuities and discontinuities between China's Confucian historiography and Marxist historiography, see Jonathan Unger, "Introduction," in *Using the Past to Serve the Present: Historiography and Politics in Contemporary China*, ed. Jonathan Unger (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), 2-3.

<sup>15</sup> Chinese historians were mandated to serve as handmaidens to the Communist Party, popularizing and glorifying the history of peasant rebellions in order to legitimize the Communist Party's efforts to wage "class struggle." James Harrison maintains that during the 1950s and 1960s, under the direction of the "guardians of Party ideology," Chinese historians produced a large quantity of stereotypic writing on peasant rebellions, providing the "historical documentation for the most massive attempt at ideological re-education in human history." James Harrison, *The Communists and the Chinese Peasant Rebellions: A Study in the Rewriting of Chinese History* (New York: Antheneum, 1971), 15.

<sup>16</sup> For more on the Chinese government's policy in the reform era regarding the publication of material on the Cultural Revolution, see "*Guanyu chuban 'wenhua dageming' tushu wenti de ruogan guiding* [关于出版“文化大革命”图书问题的若干规定; Regulations Governing the Publication of Books about the 'Great Cultural Revolution']," CCP Central Propaganda Department and State Press and Publications Administration, Reprinted in the PRC State Press and Publications Administration Policy Laws and Regulations Section, ed., *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo xianxing xinwen chuban fagui huibian (1949-1990)* [中华人民共和国现行新闻出版法规汇编 (1949-1990年); *Operative Press and Publishing Laws and Regulations of the People's Republic of China, 1949-1990*] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1991): 231-232.

official narrative of the Cultural Revolution in its 1981 “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China.” Setting the guidelines for future official interpretations of the Cultural Revolution, this document proclaimed the Cultural Revolution to be a decade-long social, cultural, economic, and political disaster:

The “Great Cultural Revolution” from May 1966 to October 1976 caused the most devastating setback and heavy losses to the party, the state, and the people in the history of the People’s Republic, and this “Great Cultural Revolution” was initiated and led by Comrade Mao [Zedong]. Practice has shown that the “Great Cultural Revolution” did not in fact institute a revolution or social progress in any sense, nor could it possibly have done so....History has shown that the “Great Cultural Revolution,” initiated by a leader laboring under a misconception and capitalized on by counter-revolutionary cliques, led to domestic turmoil and brought catastrophe to the party, the state, and the whole people....Comrade Mao...far from making a correct analysis of many problems...confused right and wrong and the people with the enemy....Herein lies his tragedy.<sup>17</sup>

The subtext of this document was that since this muddy period of Chinese history had been officially analyzed, the Chinese public could now move on, allowing any haunting historical memories to slowly fade away.<sup>18</sup> Mainland Chinese historians were told to avoid analyzing the Cultural Revolution in their scholarship and to write straightforward “histories” instead.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Guanyu jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> For the young people in China, this is precisely what has happened. Chen Xiaojing, the former governor of Shanghai (1964-1967) who recently wrote a carefully hedged account of his experiences as a Communist Party leader during the Cultural Revolution, explains that while many young people in China today know that their country was engulfed in a period of turmoil in the 1960s, very few have any real sense of the extreme nature of this revolution. He maintains that events that were once “earth shattering have now turned into words with vague and sketchy meanings.” See Chen Pixian [pseudonym], *Chen Pixian huiyilu: zai “yi yue feng bao” de zhongxin* [陈丕显回忆录: 在“一月风暴”的中心; *Chen Pixian’s Memoir: In the Midst of the January Storm*] (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Zheng Haiyan, “Interview with Gao Gao, the Author of *A History of the Decade of China’s Cultural Revolution*,” *Jiushiniandai Yuekan* [九十年代月刊; *The Nineties Monthly*] 4 (1987): 67.

With this Resolution, momentous events in China's recent past were effectively silenced at the level of the archives as well as at the level of historical analysis.<sup>20</sup>

An internally-circulated document, which was issued by the Yunnan provincial government in 2005, concludes that by learning from past mistakes, the Chinese Communist Party has been able to benefit from the legacy of the Cultural Revolution. The authors of this document discuss how the Party might best explain this period of history now that the ideology of the Cultural Revolution is no longer grounded in Chinese Communist economic or political theory, and has, in fact, been “thoroughly negated (*chedi fouding* 彻底否定)” by the Party.<sup>21</sup> They conclude that the Party should denounce the social, political, and cultural destruction that took place during the Cultural Revolution, yet remain cognizant of the fact that the Cultural Revolution was a historical “windfall” for China's post-Mao political leaders. They quote directly from a speech that Deng Xiaoping made on September 5, 1988, in which he explained that were it not for the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, the Communist Party would not have been able to sell its political ideology of “Reform and Opening” as easily as it did in the 1980s.<sup>22</sup> Since it is assumed that the economic and political reforms which took place in the 1980s were beneficial to the country as a whole, any revolution that pushed the nation toward these reforms should now be judged in light of the rapid economic growth that China subsequently enjoyed.

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<sup>20</sup> The political philosopher Jiwei Ci articulates this point in his work as well, arguing that because “memory is the internalization of history” and “history is the institution for the social regulation of memory,” by controlling the means of regulating collective memory, the Chinese government has been able to successfully maintain its control over China's “history.” See Jiwei Ci, “The Death of Utopia: The Socio-Political Psychology of Modern China” (Unpublished essay presented at Stanford University, 1990), 4.

<sup>21</sup> “Yunnan ‘Wenhua da geming’ yundong dashi jishi.”

<sup>22</sup> Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, “Zongjie lishi shi weile kaipi weilai [总结历史是为了开辟未来; Review the Past to Open up a New Path to the Future]” in *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan: disan juan* [邓小平文选第三卷; *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping Volume 3*] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1993), 271.

The practice of *yiku sitian* 忆苦思甜, or “recalling the bitterness of the past so as to appreciate the sweetness of the present,” has led each successive generation of Chinese Communist Party officials to highlight the mistakes of the past.<sup>23</sup> In so doing, they have been able to strengthen their present claims to political legitimacy. This trend is most apparent when examining the ways in which the Chinese Communist Party selectively refreshed people’s memories of life in China before “liberation (*jiefang* 解放)” in order to strengthen its claims to political power in the post-1949 period. People were encouraged to see speediness of progress and moderate well-being under Communist Party rule where they might otherwise have seen bureaucratic corruption and poverty. In this regard, memory, rather than amnesia, came to the aid of the Party.

Hu Jintao’s 2005 speech to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II points to the Chinese Communist Party’s approach to historical lessons in the twenty-first century. In this speech, Hu criticized the Japanese government for its reluctance to denounce its military aggression against China in the 1930s and 1940s, and he urged both the Chinese and Japanese people of the dangers of amnesia. He contended that when the past is commemorated publically, it can serve as a guide for the future, and that “only by remembering the past and drawing lessons from it can one avoid the repetition of historical tragedies.”<sup>24</sup> However, despite Hu’s public insistence that the Chinese government condemns the white-washing of past tragedies, the government has not been quite as keen to publically commemorate the Cultural Revolution as it has been to recall Japanese aggression during World War II. Most state-sanctioned history textbooks in China mention the Cultural

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<sup>23</sup> Ci, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution*, 82.

<sup>24</sup> “Chinese President’s Speech on War Victory Commemoration,” *People’s Daily Online*, September 3, 2005, accessed March 29, 2010, [http://english.people.com.cn/200509/03/eng20050903\\_206351.html](http://english.people.com.cn/200509/03/eng20050903_206351.html).

Revolution only in passing; they tend to follow the current Party line and sum up the Cultural Revolution simply as a “mistake.”<sup>25</sup> Official Chinese historical narratives, which dismissed the Cultural Revolution as a period marked by senseless violence and ideological extremism, did little to help people make sense of their own, much more ambivalent memories of this decade. Due to its hegemonic and rigid presence in the public spotlight, the Chinese Communist Party’s historical narrative ironically opened the door for the circulation of individual memories of the Cultural Revolution.

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<sup>25</sup> In late 2006, thirty years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, the very first course about this controversial decade was taught in China. Although this Fudan University course broke new ground more than five years ago, Chinese history professors that design courses specifically about the Cultural Revolution, or even refer to the Cultural Revolution in their lectures, are still few and far between. See Roderick MacFarquar, “The Worst Man-Made Catastrophe, Ever,” *New York Review of Books*, February 10, 2011.

## CHAPTER III

### A FLOOD OF COMPETING MEMORIES

The Cultural Revolution is a particularly compelling subject for the study of memory due to the power struggles that took place among all echelons of society, the local variances in participation, and the intensity of the physical and psychological violence that occurred.<sup>26</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, China's youth were mobilized to engage the nation in continuous revolution through class struggle. Between 1966 and 1968 a wave of mass violence swept across China as thousands of "Red Guards" (*hong weibing* 红卫兵) responded to Mao Zedong's call for "Sweeping Away All Monsters and Demons" (class enemies of all descriptions; *Hengsao yiqie niugui sheshen* 横扫一切牛鬼蛇神). The campaign of "Destroying the Four Olds (*po si jiu* 破四旧)," which involved criticizing old ideas, cultures, customs, and habits, led the Red Guards to embrace the violence that was taking place in the schools and use it to transform the entirety of Chinese society. The Cultural Revolution soon spread to involve the military, the urban workers, and the party leadership itself and, in the wake of this tumultuous decade, the country was left in shambles with the political, social, and cultural fabric of the nation significantly torn. Around one

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<sup>26</sup> For more on the kind of violence that took place during the Cultural Revolution, see: Anne Thurston, "Urban Violence During the Cultural Revolution: Who Is to Blame?," in *Violence in China: Essays in Culture and Counterculture*, eds. Jonathan Lipman and Stevan Harrell (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 149-174; Lü Xiuyuan, "A Step Toward Understanding Popular Violence in China's Cultural Revolution," *Pacific Affairs* 67 (4) 1994: 533-563; Yang Su, *Collective Killings in Rural China during the Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

hundred million people, or one tenth of the country's population, physically suffered during the Cultural Revolution, and the estimated number of "unnatural deaths" that occurred during this period varies from one to twenty million.<sup>27</sup>

The Cultural Revolution also stands out as a particularly compelling period through which to analyze the role of language in creating history, since there have been few other political movements in the world in which the participants have been so fully oriented to the written word. The quantity and diversity of written sources reveal that the Cultural Revolution often was experienced quite differently by the young and the old, and by people with opposing class backgrounds. During the Cultural Revolution, diverse numbers of political factions produced reams of wall posters, handbills, newspapers, pamphlets, and even their own historical accounts of the Revolution as it unfolded. Indeed, such an unusually large number of the battles of the Cultural Revolution took place with written records that some former revolutionary Red Guards who actively participated in the violence went so far as to assert that if they actually harmed anyone during the Cultural Revolution, "it was largely a harm committed by ink."<sup>28</sup>

The abundance of original historical sources on the Cultural Revolution that have become accessible to international scholars in recent decades has resulted in a proliferation of international publications about this period of history. More than 7,000 works about the Cultural Revolution were published in various languages in the twentieth century alone.<sup>29</sup>

Song Yongyi, the editor of the digital "Chinese Cultural Revolution Database" who has

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<sup>27</sup> Lü, "A Step Toward Understanding," 536.

<sup>28</sup> Wang Xianghui 王向晖, *Shangye shidai de yingxiong qingjie: Liang Xiaosheng lun* [商业时代的英雄情结—梁晓声论; *Heroic Complex in an Age of Commercialism: On Liang Xiaosheng*] (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2000), 16-17.

<sup>29</sup> Song Yongyi, Daijin Sun, and Eugene Wu, eds., *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A Bibliography, 1966-1996* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

worked with researchers and archivists in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan to collect and compile hundreds of documents related to the Cultural Revolution, has noted a particular paradox in the historiography of the Cultural Revolution. Song maintains that it is possible to track the phenomenon of the “inexhaustible Cultural Revolution” as it exists outside of mainland China even as one deals with the phenomenon of the “forbidden Cultural Revolution” as it exists inside China’s borders.<sup>30</sup> For while scholarly works on the Cultural Revolution have proliferated outside of China, the Cultural Revolution as an overtly historical research subject remains politically taboo within mainland China.

Where official history has been strategically ambiguous or silent about the Cultural Revolution, a plethora of literary works have filled this space. Party history speaks of the past in vague terms as a tragedy and focuses on the machinations and intrigues of party leadership, while post-Mao literature attempts to rework the memory of the Cultural Revolution in ways that are both meaningful and accessible to the public. Short stories and novels engage with “popular (*minjian* 民间)” memories of the lived experience of the Cultural Revolution, which are deliberately left out of “official (*guanfang* 官方)” history.<sup>31</sup>

Since works of “fiction” are not scrutinized by Chinese censors as closely as works that have been labeled “history,” through their short stories and novels Chinese authors have been able to evade government censorship while raising important questions about the politics of historical memory in China.<sup>32</sup> As one of the few outlets available for Chinese

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<sup>30</sup> This phenomenon has been referred to as “the Cultural Revolution in China but the Cultural Revolution school abroad” (*wenge zai zhongguo, wengexue zai guowai* 文革在中国，文革学在国外). Yongyi Song, “Editor’s Preface,” in “Chinese Cultural Revolution Database,” ed. Yongyi Song (2006), accessed December 1, 2010, <http://ccrd.usc.cuhk.edu.hk>.

<sup>31</sup> In China the term *minjian* 民间 is often used to refer to the “civil” as opposed to the “state,” as in *minjian shehui* 民间社会, a Chinese term for civil society.

intellectuals to challenge nineteenth-century historical methodologies, literature in the post-Mao era has been highly influential in not only providing the public with more accessible understandings of the Cultural Revolution, but also in innovating new forms of historical practice.

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<sup>32</sup> Although the role that government censorship has played in shaping Chinese historiography should not be overemphasized, it would also be erroneous to underestimate its influence. For an incisive look at the kind of self-censorship that often takes place during the writing process, see a speech given by Hao Qun, one of China's earliest Internet writers, who gained acclaim for his novel *Leave Me Alone: A Novel of Chengdu*. Murong Xuecun, "Words We Can Use, and Those We Can Not," *The New York Times* February 23, 2011, accessed March 18, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/24/opinion/24iht-edmurong24.html>. Chinese censorship has increasingly become a borderless phenomenon; over the last few decades it has affected academics living both in and outside of China. Some scholars believe that it is now common practice for American researchers to compromise their own academic ideals in order to gain access to research visas in China. See Emily Parker, "Censors without Borders," *New York Times*, May 14, 2010, accessed March 18, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/16/books/review/Parker-t.html?>

## CHAPTER IV

### THE LITERATURE OF THE WOUNDED AND THE POLITICAL LEGITIMACY OF THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY

Chinese dissidents and Western scholars alike heralded the Literature of the Wounded movement as the earliest sign of a popular reassessment of the historical legacy of the Cultural Revolution. This movement, which also came to be known as the “Scar Literature” movement, inherited its name from Lu Xinhua’s 1978 short story, “*Shanghen* (伤痕; The Wound).”<sup>33</sup> In both theme and narrative treatment, this new genre of literature, which was popular in China from 1978 until the mid-1980s, demonstrated a significant shift away from the more mainstream narrative techniques employed by Chinese writers over the previous three decades. The Literature of the Wounded was mostly produced by particular members of the sent-down youth generation who rejected the Maoist narrative of the Cultural Revolution. Rather than extolling the demographic and ideological goals of the Rustification Movement, these authors described their time in the countryside as one of personal deprivation and total psychological and physical fatigue.<sup>34</sup> These memoirs revealed the full

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<sup>33</sup> Lu, “*Shanghen*.” For more examples of wound literature published in the late 1970s and early 1980s, see Liu Xinwu 刘心武, *Banzhuren* [班主任; *The Class Counselor*] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1979); Zhang Xianliang 张贤亮, *Ling yu rou* [灵与肉; *Soul and Body*] (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 1981); and Ye Xin 叶辛, *Cuotuo suiyue* [蹉跎岁月; *The Years Drift By*] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1982).

<sup>34</sup> See, for instance, the literary analyses of Marián Gálík, “Some Remarks on ‘Literature of the Scars’ in the People’s Republic of China (1977-1979),” *Asian and African Studies* 18: 53-74; and Joseph Lau, “The Wounded and the Fatigued: Reflections on post-1976 Chinese Fiction,” *Journal of Oriental Studies* 20 (1982): 129-142.

extent of the horror that took place during the decade-long Cultural Revolution, but they were written almost exclusively from a personal perspective. Moreover, these authors' implicit criticism of the Chinese government was confined to a very specific era in Chinese Communist history, namely the period of upheaval that lasted from 1966-1976.

The Literature of the Wounded movement was endorsed by the group of Communist Party leaders that rose to power after the Cultural Revolution, since it helped vent widespread resentment of the traumatic experiences of the past while deflecting anger away from the current regime. This cathartic literary movement presented the Cultural Revolution as a hysteric blip in Chinese Communist history, caused entirely by Leftist aberration. After gaining power in the late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping and other political leaders who had been persecuted during the Cultural Revolution promoted a new ideology of reform to strengthen the national economy and restructure the Communist Party. Deng Xiaoping's political victory over Hua Guofeng in 1978 and his subsequent return to Chinese politics relied to a great degree on his repudiation of ultra-leftist Maoism, his denunciation of the Cultural Revolution, and his espousal of socialist modernization as the way to save China from popular unrest.

The political targets of the Literature of the Wounded were aligned with the political targets of the Deng regime. A "call to arms" made by one of the most influential literary critics in the early post-Mao period, Feng Mu, demonstrates the extent to which Literature of the Wounded writers offset their criticisms of the Cultural Revolution with their praise for the Party's current leadership:

Our literary production has, along with our socialist enterprise, entered a new era... [we will] cure the scars on our bodies together, sweep away the obstacles on our path

of progress together, and then march bravely together toward the magnificent goal of establishing our country into a strong, modernized socialistic country!<sup>35</sup>

Feng's discontent with the Chinese Communist Party, like that expressed by many other Chinese intellectuals, was directed pragmatically at the pre-Reform-era Party. It is for this reason that the Literature of the Wounded movement was not only tolerated by China's post-Mao government, but was actually actively popularized by the serialized publication of novellas in state-supported literary magazines. The public connected with the moral outrage expressed by the Literature of the Wounded in a profound way and the Party discovered that it could use this new literary movement to carefully frame the Chinese public's understanding of both the past and the present.

Wang Xiaohua 王晓华, a female sent-down youth whose given name means "the dawn of China," is the main character in Lu Xinhua's short story, "The Wound." Upon learning that her mother had been denounced as a renegade Communist Party official, Xiaohua cut off all communication with her and joined the first group of high school graduates to leave Shanghai and work in a commune in Northeast China. After feeling shamed by her mother's "reactionary ways" for nine full years, Xiaohua receives a letter in December of 1977 that reveals her mother's verdict had been reversed long ago and her political character had been rectified. Xiaohua rushes back to Shanghai with relief only to discover that her ailing mother had passed away in the hospital the night before she had arrived. Xiaohua's overwhelming remorse at her own unfeeling actions toward her mother spills over into her anger at the Gang of Four, who she blames for manipulating her into

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<sup>35</sup> Feng Mu 冯牧, *Xinshiqi wenxue de zhuliu* [新时期文学的主流; *The Essential Strands of New-era Literature*] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1979), 3.

denouncing her mother.<sup>36</sup> At the end of the story, Xiaohua stands next to her mother's body and passionately declares:

Dear mother, rest in peace. I will never forget who was responsible for your wounds and mine. I shall never forget the Party's kindness and, in particular, Chairman Hua Guofeng's kindness, and I shall dedicate my life to the cause of the Party.<sup>37</sup>

Although these references to the "Party's kindness" would appear somewhat farcical to a contemporary Chinese reader, in the late 1970s and early 1980s the vast majority of the "Literature of the Wounded" parroted the official historical indictment that held the Gang of Four solely responsible for the sociopolitical disaster that was the Cultural Revolution.

The criticism of the Chinese government that is expressed in these literary works is confined to the Cultural Revolution decade. This is particularly notable given that certain calamitous events prior to the Cultural Revolution affected an even greater proportion of the Chinese population. In contrast with the Cultural Revolution's contested one to twenty million casualties, it is estimated that between twenty and forty million people died from an avoidable famine that was partially caused by the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961),<sup>38</sup> yet in

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<sup>36</sup> The "Gang of Four" (*Siren bang* 四人帮) was the name given to a Chinese Communist Party political faction composed of Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen. These four officials effectively controlled the power organs of the Chinese Communist Party through the latter stages of the Cultural Revolution, although there is still a great deal of scholarly debate about which major decisions were made by Mao Zedong and carried out by the Gang, and which were the result of the Gang of Four's own planning. The Gang of Four, together with disgraced Communist general Lin Biao, were labeled the two major "counter-revolutionary forces" of the Cultural Revolution and officially blamed by the Chinese government for the worst excesses that ensued during the ten years of turmoil. The Gang of Four was arrested on October 6, 1976, a mere month after Mao's death, and subsequently charged with a series of treasonous crimes.

<sup>37</sup> Lu, "*Shanghen*." In the current version of this short story, which is accessible through the Chinese search engine "www.baidu.com," Wang's original proclamation that she would "in particular, never forget Chairman Hua Guofeng's kindness" has been deleted. See <http://baike.baidu.com/view/250433.htm>, accessed on April 10, 2010. This alteration of the original text is not surprising considering that, as Mao's designated successor and the Chairman of the Communist Party of China from 1976-1981, Hua Guofeng insisted on continuing the Maoist line. He was outmaneuvered a few years later by Deng Xiaoping, who, after forcing Hua into early retirement, carefully censored scholarship that gave Hua credit for ending the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>38</sup> The actual number of people who died of "unnatural causes" during the Great Leap Forward is still hotly debated. For a list of competing statistics about the Great Leap Forward death toll, see <http://necrometrics.com/20c5m.htm>, accessed March 30, 2011. For more on the Great Leap Forward and the

comparison to the vast amount of literature that has been produced on the Cultural Revolution, this famine has appeared in only a small number of memoirs, novels, and films. Although in the West this humanitarian disaster is often referred to as the “Great Leap Famine,” a designation that is meant to connect it to the failed policies of Mao’s Great Leap Forward campaign, in China this period is simply known as the “Three Years of Natural Disasters (*sannian ziran zaihai* 三年自然灾害).”<sup>39</sup> For many years the famine of 1959-1961 and its millions of victims received little official recognition.<sup>40</sup> Far more Chinese scholars have written about the Cultural Revolution than about this famine, perhaps because these two disasters affected the Chinese intellectual elite quite differently. The Cultural Revolution had particular symbolic power in China’s history because it directly involved an articulate, literate population with access to the public, whereas the famine that followed the Great Leap Forward predominately affected China’s rural, illiterate population.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, unlike the Cultural Revolution, the political decisions that led to the Great Leap Forward famine have never been denounced by the post-Mao Chinese government.<sup>42</sup>

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famine that immediately followed it, see Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts: Mao’s Secret Famine* (New York: Free Press, 1997); Frank Dikötter, *Mao’s Great Famine: The History of China’s Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962* (New York: Walker & Company, 2010).

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Bernstein, “Stalinism, Famine, and Chinese Peasants: Grain Procurements during the Great Leap Forward,” *Theory and Society* 13: 3 (1984): 339-377.

<sup>40</sup> For example, the Party’s much cited “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China” refers only briefly to this famine. This document maintains that the “three bitter years” of 1959, 1960, and 1961 were brought about by “Leftist” errors, characterized by excessive economic targets, the issuing of arbitrary directives, boastfulness, the stirring up of a “communist wind,” “a succession of natural calamities,” and the “perfidious” withdrawal of Soviet aid. See *Guanyu jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi*.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Zarrow, “Meanings of China’s Cultural Revolution: Memoirs of Exile,” *Positions* 7: 1 (1999): 166.

<sup>42</sup> In a speech given on September 5, 1988, Deng Xiaoping admitted that since he assumed the role of the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in 1956, he is committed to taking “some responsibility for the ‘Left’ mistakes the Party made before the Cultural Revolution.” The Party, he argues, should not “shift all the blame onto Comrade Mao Zedong.” This vague acceptance of partial responsibility is emblematic of how

This is likely due to the fact that the generation of pragmatists that took over the government in the late 1970s were all victimized during the Cultural Revolution, but one of these leaders, Deng Xiaoping, played an important role in planning and carrying out the Great Leap Forward campaign. Due to its spectral presence in Chinese popular memory, memories of the Great Leap Forward could have very well undermined the legitimacy of the Deng regime had the government encouraged the Literature of the Wounded movement to extend back to the late 1950s.<sup>43</sup>

Admitting the “great policy mistake” of the Great Leap Forward famine would have raised uncomfortable questions about the *raison d’être* of the Communist Party. It likely would have also encouraged an explosion of “politically incorrect memories” that would have been directly at odds with future Party efforts to expand “nationally authenticated socialist controls” over China’s rural areas.<sup>44</sup> However, the Cultural Revolution was a comparatively easier policy mistake for the opponents of Mao’s regime to admit—particularly when they could claim to have been victims themselves—and thus they allowed the Literature of the Wounded about the Cultural Revolution to circulate widely at a time when it was clear that China’s intellectuals needed to blow off steam.

The Literature of the Wounded movement, which began in the late 1970s as a spontaneous outpouring of grief for the loss of childhood innocence and political idealism, was initially viewed as somewhat subversive in its implied political critique. However, this

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the Chinese Communist Party has handled the historical link between the Great Leap Forward policy and the disastrous famine that followed it. See Deng, “*Zongjie lishi shi weile kaipi weilai*,” 271.

<sup>43</sup> For more on rural residents’ memories of the Great Leap Forward famine and villagers’ efforts to exorcise the ghosts of this tragic period, see Erik Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts : Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>44</sup> Ralph Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China: Mao’s Great Leap Forward Famine and the Origins of Righteous Resistance in Da Fo Village* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 341.

literary movement turned out to be just one more way of mobilizing individual memories of the Cultural Revolution, which not only failed to undermine the post-Mao Communist Party's historical narrative, but actually bolstered it in powerful ways.

## CHAPTER V

### NOSTALGIC LITERATURE: THE SENT-DOWN YOUTH'S COMMEMORATION OF THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

A wave of nostalgia for the Cultural Revolution swept over China in the early 1990s. On November 25, 1990, a museum exhibit opened in Beijing that was titled “Our Spiritual Attachment to the Black Soil—a Retrospective Exhibit about the Educated Youth of Beidahuang.”<sup>45</sup> The exhibit displayed photographs and various mementos that had been collected from the former educated youth who had spent years in the regions featured in the exhibit. The two-week exhibit attracted 150,000 visitors and inspired a series of similar museum exhibits around the country.<sup>46</sup> In addition to museum exhibits, restaurants decorated in the style of the 1960s opened to cater to this nostalgic generation and albums popular in the 1960s and 1970s were released. Travel agencies even began to organize “homecoming” trips to bring former sent-down youth back to the villages or collective farms where they had spent their adolescence. Moreover, hundreds of books were published that featured photographs and poems composed during the Cultural Revolution. The titles of many of these books tended to refer to the past with emotionally evocative phrases like “deep love,”

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<sup>45</sup> The Chinese title of the exhibit was “*Hunxi Heitudi*; 魂系黑土地.” For more on this exhibit, see Zhang Kai 张凯, *You shuo lao san jie* [又说老三届; *Revisiting the Sent-down High School Graduates*] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1997): 3-4.

<sup>46</sup> Jin Dalu 金大陆, *Shiyun yu mingyun: guanyu laosanjie ren de shengcun yu fazhan* [时运与命运: 关于老三届人的生存与发展; *Social Change and Individual Lives: on the Existence and Development of People of the Three Old Classes*] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1998), 3.

“unforgettable joy,” “years of suffering and joy,” “yearning for the past,” and “reminiscences in tears.”<sup>47</sup>

Born in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the educated youth became known as the first generation to be “born in the new China and raised under the red flag.”<sup>48</sup> As they entered their third decade of life and the reform era commenced, they were decidedly unprepared to deal with the magnitude of the political and social changes that washed over the country. A small percentage of this group took advantage of the new economic opportunities available in the reform period and came to be known as “the successful ones (*chenggong renshi* 成功人士).” However, the majority of the sent-down youth, often referred to as “the losers (*shibaizhe* 失败者)” in the Chinese media, were disproportionately affected by widespread unemployment in the state sector of the economy during the Deng era.<sup>49</sup>

In the early 1990s, when the first wave of nostalgia swept over China, most former educated youth were over forty years old; they found the process of settling back into urban life to be a very difficult one after having been exiled for a decade or more. Many had trouble finding jobs, housing, and marriage partners when they first returned to the cities. The majority had missed out on the opportunity to continue their high school education or to attend college, and thus they found themselves lacking valuable skills in China’s new economy and unable to compete with young workers who had just graduated from universities.<sup>50</sup> Some estimates hold that former educated youth accounted for as much as

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<sup>47</sup> Guobin Yang, “China’s Zhiqing Generation: Nostalgia, Identity, and Cultural Revolution in the 1990s,” *Modern China* 29 (3) 2003: 271.

<sup>48</sup> Pan, *Tempered in the Revolutionary Furnace*, 3.

<sup>49</sup> For more on the stratification among the sent-down youth generation between the nostalgic “losers” and the triumphant “winners,” see Davies, “Remembering Red,” 2002.

forty percent of the total laid-off workforce in 1998, which would explain why this generation felt that there was such a great need to find meaning in their present lives by revisiting the past.<sup>51</sup> News reports that exposed official corruption at all levels of the government only contributed to the educated youth's anger and frustration with a political situation that they viewed as overly complicated and uncertain. Their unstable social and economic situations made them look fondly back at the Maoist era, when their lives seemed simpler and their life goals seemed purer.<sup>52</sup> As an emotional and intellectual tool, nostalgia enabled this "lost generation" to both reevaluate the official narratives of the Cultural Revolution and critically assess the widening social and class distinctions of the reform era.

Kong Jiesheng 孔捷生 is perhaps the most highly acclaimed sent-down youth author to have engaged in a nostalgic portrayal of the Rustification Movement. Born in Guangzhou in 1952 into a family of teachers with close connections to the Chinese diasporic community in the United States, Kong was rusticated to a military farm on Hainan Island where he worked from 1970 until 1976 planting rubber trees and collecting latex. In his 1982 novella, "The Southern Bank (*Nanfang de an* 南方的岸)," Kong describes the profound sense of alienation experienced by two young people when they returned to Guangzhou after living in

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<sup>50</sup> One sent-down youth complained that while he and other young people had learned to farm and shoot guns during their time in the countryside, they had never been able to attain the kind of advanced education that was prized in the reform era, and they therefore found themselves at a distinct disadvantage in China's new economy. He maintained that "what was correct at that time is now incorrect, what is correct now, at that time was wrong." See David Davies, "Visible *Zhiqing*: The Visual Culture of Nostalgia among China's *Zhiqing* Generation," *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: The Politics and Poetics of Collective Memories in Reform China*, Ching Kwan Lee and Guobin Yang, eds. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 174.

<sup>51</sup> Li Yan 立言, *Dadao chaotian: Zhongguo xiagang zhigong shengcun baogao* [大道朝天—中国下岗职工生存报告; *The Open Road: A Report on the Living Conditions of China's Unemployed Population*] (Beijing: Zhongguo chengshi chubanshe, 1998).

<sup>52</sup> Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, "Redemption and Consumption," *Yinxing shuxie: 90 niandai zhongguo wenhua yanjiu* [隐形书写九十年代中国文化研究; *Invisible Writing: a Study of Chinese Culture in the 1990s*] (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2004): 89-90.

a rural area of Hainan Island as educated youth for ten years.<sup>53</sup> These two characters eventually decide to leave behind their comfortable life in Guangzhou and return to Hainan Island, a place that symbolizes their youth, idealism, and commitment to selfless patriotism. In this novella, Kong rejects the materialism of early reform-era China and highlights the educated youth's despair at being abandoned by their political leaders, urban compatriots, and a rapidly changing Chinese political-economic system. More than ten years after he wrote "The Southern Bank," Kong defended his nostalgia for the Rustification Movement, claiming that by being educated in the "classroom of life," he was able to develop emotional and intellectual maturity at a young age:

Thus, to totally negate [the Rustification Movement] would be too simplistic....A person who has gone through such an experience is bound to have a complex worldview. And this worldview is not easy to define.<sup>54</sup>

Yet, even if they were unable to totally negate their experiences during the Cultural Revolution, why would a generation that had endured such hardship in the countryside during the sent-down youth campaign suddenly look back upon this decade with fond memories? Years after returning to the urban areas with high hopes for a new life, the sent-down youth became disappointed with the Deng regime's undelivered promises of economic progress; massive layoffs in the state sector and rampant corruption within the government led them to become even more prone to nostalgic memories of the past.

Unlike the sent-down youth, who were the focus of a plethora of novels, memoirs, and exhibits in the 1990s, the Red Guards were almost entirely left out of this public display of nostalgia. Guobin Yang, a scholar of memory and political participation in the post-Mao

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<sup>53</sup> Kong, "The Southern Bank."

<sup>54</sup> Laifong Leung, *Morning Sun: Interviews with Chinese Writers of the Lost Generation* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 75.

era, has theorized that former Red Guards suffered from ideological fatigue in the reform era. This fatigue led them to forgo publically commemorating their exploits during the Cultural Revolution in order to focus their attention on overcoming current day-to-day challenges.<sup>55</sup> Yet it seems more likely that the Red Guard movement has not been featured much in this nostalgic longing for the past because it has been officially denounced—and, for the most part, publically accepted—as a source of social chaos. The contemporary Chinese government’s fear of social instability explains why the occasional memoir penned by a former Red Guard that offers a less condemnatory account of the Cultural Revolution has not been well received by the Chinese government.<sup>56</sup> These memoirs often fail to adequately emphasize the bitterness of those “ten years of turmoil” (*shinian dongluan* 十年动乱),” and occasionally go so far as to valorize the Red Guards’ actions during the Cultural Revolution. The identity of the Red Guards—as opposed to the sent-down youth, even though these two groups overlapped greatly—has gained negative connotations in the political discourse of contemporary China. In contrast to the images of social unrest and adolescent violence that the term Red Guards evokes, the hardship that the sent-down youth experienced in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution gives the Rustification experience a tint of glory.

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<sup>55</sup> Yang, “China’s Zhiqing Generation,” 289.

<sup>56</sup> See Zarrow, “Meanings of China’s Cultural Revolution” 184; Mobo Gao, *The Battle for China’s Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution* (London: Pluto, 2008). An incident that took place in 1985 in Xianyang, Shaanxi province, highlights the post-Mao government’s attempts to suppress public awareness of some of the more positive aspects of the Cultural Revolution. In 1985 a poster was put up on a wall on Northwest Cotton Factory Number One that proclaimed “*Wenhua da geming hao* 文化大革命好 (The Cultural Revolution Was Good).” The authors of this poster listed what they considered to be the merits of the Cultural Revolution, such as the fact that hybrid rice crops were invented, people became politically energized, and large-scale infrastructure projects such as the Nanjing Bridge were built. The poster alarmed local and national Communist Party officials and an investigative team from Beijing was dispatched to Xianyang to research the incident. A young worker was quickly found guilty and sentenced to ten years in jail. See Wu Zhenrong 武振荣 and Deng Wenbi 邓韞璧, “*Yiyi renshi yu minyun renshi yitong bian* [异议人士与民运人士异同辨; On the Differences and Similarities between Dissidents and Democrats],” *Da cankao* [大参考; *Big News*], April 3, 2004, accessed March 4, 2010, <http://www.bignews.org/20040403.txt>.

The most influential work about the sent-down youth that was published in the 1980s is Liang Xiaosheng's novella, *Snowstorm Tonight* (*Jinye you baofengxue* 今夜有暴风雪). Liang, a member of the sent-down youth generation who volunteered to be sent to Heilongjiang province in June 1968, six months before Mao issued his directive for the Rustification Movement, romanticizes and celebrates the sacrifice, political fervor, and naiveté of the Chinese youth during the Cultural Revolution. Within a few short months after its publication in 1984, *Snowstorm Tonight* had transformed the public image of the sent-down youth from victims to heroes.<sup>57</sup> The storyline in *Snowstorm Tonight* revolves around the heroine, Pei Xiaoyun, who becomes a martyr on her twenty-seventh birthday. As a member of a sent-down youth brigade in Heilongjiang province, she is given a rifle and assigned the honored task of standing sentry all night in a snowstorm to protect a newly built bridge. She faithfully carries out the mission, keeps to her post all night, and by the morning is found frozen to death, still tightly clutching her rifle. Like *Snowstorm Tonight*, many other novellas and short stories that were published in the mid- and late-1980s valorized the sent-down youth's heroic acts of self-sacrifice during the Cultural Revolution. This excessive "memorialization of history" served a distinctly therapeutic role for those sent-down youth intellectuals who came to see themselves as victims of a rapidly developing and forward-thinking Chinese society.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Leung, *Morning Sun*, 120.

<sup>58</sup> Liyan Qin, "The Sublime and the Profane: A Comparative Analysis of Two Fictional Narratives about Sent-down Youth," in *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History*, eds. Joseph Esherick, Paul Pickowicz, and Andrew Walder (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 263.

Viewing nostalgia as a powerful weapon against the “sanitization of memory,”<sup>59</sup> some scholars have heralded this literary genre as a demonstration of popular resistance to the Party’s denunciation of the Cultural Revolution in the post-Mao era.<sup>60</sup> What these scholars have overlooked, however, is that while the Cultural Revolution certainly was condemned by the post-Mao generation of Chinese Communist Party leaders, the Party nonetheless has gained certain benefits from honoring the sent-down youth generation’s willingness to sacrifice their happiness, social status, and educational opportunities for the sake of the nation. The Party has therefore struck a fine balance between honoring the patriotism and selflessness of the sent-down youth, while repudiating the “Leftist” ideology that led to the Cultural Revolution itself. With the collapse of existing socialism and the ascendance of neoliberalism in China in the 1990s, the construction of an anti-Maoist and anti-revolutionary history began.<sup>61</sup> With this narrative firmly entrenched in the public’s mind, the literary genre that subverted this historical discourse the most was not that which expressed nostalgia for the Mao era, but that which highlighted the nonexistence of authentic (much less reliable) memory.

What many urban youth ended up learning during their years spent toiling in the countryside was just how difficult rural life was in comparison to life in the cities.<sup>62</sup> Due to

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<sup>59</sup> Ci, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution*, 82.

<sup>60</sup> Three authors in particular who have recently heralded nostalgia for the Cultural Revolution as evidence of popular resistance on the part of the sent-down youth generation are Guobin Yang, Ming-bao Yue, and David Davies. See Guobin Yang, “Days of Old Are Not Puffs of Smoke: Three Hypotheses on Collective Memories of the Cultural Revolution,” *The China Review: An Interdisciplinary Journal on Greater China* 5: 2 (2005): 13-42; Ming-bao Yue, “Introduction: Gilded-Age Memories of the Cultural Revolution,” *The China Review: An Interdisciplinary Journal on Greater China* 5: 2 (2005): 43-65; and David Davies, “Old Zhiqing Photos: Nostalgia and the ‘Spirit’ of the Cultural Revolution,” *The China Review: An Interdisciplinary Journal on Greater China* 5: 2 (2005): 97-123.

<sup>61</sup> Wang Hui, “The Year 1989 and the Historical Roots of Neoliberalism in China,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 12: 1 (2004): 7-70.

the household registration system, which severely limited rural/urban interaction, the educated youth had been almost entirely cut off from the reality of life in the countryside until they were expelled out of the cities in 1968.<sup>63</sup> Before they were sent to rural areas of the country during the Rustification Movement, many educated youth had been warned that a substantial income gap existed between China's urban and rural populations, yet they were still shocked at the poverty that they witnessed first-hand once they arrived in the countryside. In particular, the educated youth were dismayed to hear the farmers discuss the link between the Great Leap Forward (*Dayuejin* 大跃进) policy and the subsequent famine that was responsible for the death of more than twenty million Chinese peasants. They were also disillusioned by, and gradually came to empathize with, the seemingly lack of authentic revolutionary consciousness held by most villagers. During an interview conducted after he had fled to Hong Kong, one former educated youth who was sent to rural Hunan province during the Rustification Movement expressed his dismay at confronting the harsh reality of peasant life for the first time:

[The peasants] ceaselessly complained about their hard life... Times had been better, they felt, even under the Kuomintang, when a man could work, save some money, invest it, and improve himself... I had thought that only capitalist roaders and counterrevolutionaries had such thoughts. But I had just heard them from the mouth of a revolutionary poor peasant who had worked for the Party for more than twenty

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<sup>62</sup> Tamara Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China: Gender, Migration, and Social Change* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), 40.

<sup>63</sup> In 1953 the *hukou* 户口, or household registration policy, classified every Chinese resident as either a member of an agricultural (*nongmin* 农民) household or a non-agricultural household (*feinongmin* 非农民). This spatial classification system cut off cities/towns from villages and created a caste system that categorized people based on their geographic residence, rather than on the basis of their ethnicity, level of education, or occupation. Because their grain rations were tied to their household registration, if rural residents traveled to an area where they did not have proper household registration papers, they were effectively prevented from receiving their state-allotment of grain. Designed to control the size of the urban population and limit rural-urban migration, this system effectively imprisoned rural residents and their descendants in the geographic location assigned to them in the early 1950s. These rural/urban boundaries only began to blur and assume some of their earlier porosity once market reforms were implemented in the mid 1980s and villagers became less dependent on agricultural production for their survival.

years.... In ten short days my world outlook had been changed by the reality of peasant life and attitudes.<sup>64</sup>

After the educated youth experienced farming life firsthand, they returned to the cities in the late 1970s dispirited by the fact that the Communist Party's portrayal of the peasants as vanguard revolutionaries had been so far removed from reality. The contradictions between what the educated youth witnessed in the countryside and what they had been told by the Communist Party ideological apparatus led them to develop deep-seeded skepticism about the veracity of official narratives.

In addition to coming to terms with widespread socioeconomic inequality—which seemingly had been exacerbated, rather than mitigated, by state policies—the sent-down youth also confronted, and quickly became disillusioned by, the rhetoric of the reform era. The Chinese media overwhelmingly portrayed the “Reform and Opening” of the economy in the early 1980s in positive terms, making ample use of phrases such as “economically vibrant,” “politically stable,” and “focused on economic development.”<sup>65</sup> In contrast, the Cultural Revolution was represented as the antithesis of reform: a dark period in which China was sealed off (*fengbi* 封闭) from the outside world with the government entirely preoccupied by political movements rather than sensible economic policy.

The sent-down youth who participated in China's avant-garde literary movement recognized that this portrayal of the Cultural Revolution as a dark period before the “great transformation” of reform was not a new historical device. During their formative years of childhood and adolescence, these sent-down youth had been told that the establishment of the

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<sup>64</sup> Harry Harding, “The Chinese State in Crisis, 1966-9,” in *The Politics of China: The Eras of Mao and Deng*, ed. Roderick McFarquhar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 246.

<sup>65</sup> Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China After Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

People's Republic of China was a "new era (*xin shiqi* 新时期)" for China, representing a clean break from the "old society (*jiu shehui* 旧社会)" under Chiang Kai-shek, when the Chinese masses were exploited by cruel landlords and corrupt Guomintang officials. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, members of the exploited classes who had suffered in the pre-Communist period were encouraged to speak about the bitterness of the old society. However, just as Mao felt that it was essential to establish the speaking subjects of the "New China (*xin zhongguo* 新中国)" in the immediate post-1949 era, so too did Deng feel that it would be necessary to establish clear criteria for those deemed to be the speaking subjects of new, reform-era China. As a result, in the reform period speaking bitterness (*suku* 诉苦) was once again deployed as a means to distance the Deng regime from the suffering that people faced during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> For more about how the sent-down youth, former Communist Party cadres, intellectuals, and others who suffered during the Cultural Revolution were encouraged to speak about the evils of the past decade, see Ann Anagnost, *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation and Power in China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

## CHAPTER VI

### THE NARRATION OF THE ABSURD: FICTION AS A RADICAL FORM OF HISTORICAL PRACTICE

Having gone through so many calamities during the Cultural Revolution, the sent-down youth saw no shortage of grotesqueries and disruptions in their everyday lives. Amid the continual parade of the absurd and the abnormal, it is likely that this generation hoped for a period of ideological stability. Instead, they were severely shaken by the whirlwind of political change that they confronted in the two decades spanning from 1975-1995, as Mao's socialist order gave way to Deng's market-driven economic policies.<sup>67</sup> A revolution in social values accompanied Deng's market reforms, and the sent-down youth generation, unable to ignore the social, political, and ideological contradictions of the reform era, began to express their crisis of faith in Communist Party leadership. They were astonished to witness the seemingly carefree way in which the public discarded the Party's rhetoric of idealism and unhesitatingly accepted its rhetoric of pragmatism. Without an official grand history defining a national identity, legitimating a collective ideology, and forecasting a collective destiny, these intellectuals felt acutely disoriented.

Mutually contradictory official versions of history, each of which had been heralded by the Party at some point in the recent past as the most "objective (*keguan* 客观)" and

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<sup>67</sup> For more on how the ideological shift that took place between the Mao and Deng regimes traumatized the Chinese youth who had been raised in the spiritual utopia of Maoism, see Huang Yibing, "From 'Orphans' to 'Bastards': The Legacy of the Cultural Revolution and Contemporary Chinese Allegories of the Individual" (PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2001), 138, 149.

“correct (*zhengque* 正确)” historical narrative, produced a moral and intellectual vacuum inside of a crowded mnemonic space. In the absence of a long-lasting master narrative, intellectuals participated in new literary movements bent on challenging both Mao’s didactic discourse and Deng’s progressive pragmatism. In the early-1990s, subversive historiographies that resisted Maoism-Marxism began to surface as the sent-down youth generation began to use literature to re-imagine history in new ways.<sup>68</sup> It was at this point that the “Narration of the Absurd,” or what some literary critics have broadly termed the “avant-garde literary movement,” took off in China, as the disenchanting educated youth employed irony, sarcasm, and inventive narrative techniques.<sup>69</sup>

Skepticism about the reliability and authenticity of memory is conveyed in Wang Shuo’s 1991 novel, *Dongwu xiongmeng* (动物凶猛; *Wild Beasts*).<sup>70</sup> A coming-of-age story, which is set in 1975, the last year of the Vietnam War and one year before the end of the Cultural Revolution, this novel is not a heavy-hearted account of a contentious period of Chinese history. Rather, it is a cheerful narrative concerning one teenager’s summer vacation in the midst of a politically turbulent decade. The first-person narrator in this novel, a fifteen-year-old boy who dreams of becoming an army hero, is much less focused on the country’s political turmoil than he is on the gang brawls, petty crimes, and sexual exploits that keep him and his friends occupied on a daily basis. At the beginning of the novel, the

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<sup>68</sup> Howard Choy, *Remapping the Past: Fictions of History in Deng’s China, 1979-1997* (Boston: Brill, 2008), 9.

<sup>69</sup> The post-Mao government’s state of confusion with regards to how the Maoist period officially should be represented is highlighted by Chinese avant-garde writers. Irony, these writers claim, is present everywhere in the Party’s current attitude towards its recent history. They point to the huge portrait of Mao Zedong in Tiananmen Square, which once symbolized the triumph of socialism over feudalism and capitalism, but now marks a more uneasy mythology of nationhood. See Peter Hitchcock, “Mao to the Market,” *Whither China? Intellectual Politics in Contemporary China*, Xudong Zhang, ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 269.

<sup>70</sup> Jiang Wen’s 姜文 1994 screen version of this novel, *In the Heat of the Sun* [*Yangguang canlande rizi* 阳光灿烂的日子], premiered in China in 1995.

narrator reflects back on his time as a bored, unsupervised youth during the Cultural Revolution from his current perspective as a thirty-one year-old man living in Beijing in the 1990s. He describes how during the reform era, his native city transformed so rapidly that now, just fifteen years after the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution, there is little left in Beijing that reminds him of the past. The adult off-screen narrator's witty commentary reveals how his generation's dissatisfaction with China's booming market economy has led to a kind of nostalgia for the Mao era.

As the narrator switches back and forth between reconstructing and fantasizing about his teenage antics during the Cultural Revolution, he confesses that many of his recollections seem to be suspended somewhere between substantiated history and pure fiction. After telling one third of a story about how he used to skip school in order to spend time with his friends, he questions the reliability of his own account of the past. He finishes describing a gang fight with gusto only to announce that his detailed description of a wounded boy's facial expressions must have been falsified, since, as he now recalls it, he was running after the innocent boy and therefore would not have been able to see his face. At this point in the story, Wang employs words such as “seemingly (*sihu* 似乎),” “perhaps (*yexu* 也许),” and “probably (*keneng* 可能),” that intentionally call the rest of his narrative into question. The remainder of the novel consists of multiple accounts of one episode, unproved rumors, and doubtful descriptions of the narrator's own life story.

The narrator maintains that the authenticity of many of his recollections have not been verified, yet this is of little significance since the people who were involved in these affairs have long since forgotten them. Two-thirds of the way through his narrative, he pauses to recount that his “memory is treacherous; the scene is real, and yet the time may be

incorrect,” because his “memory of the order of events is somewhat confused, and the motives of the acts are unclear.”<sup>71</sup> By making strong assertions about past events and then immediately questioning his own ability to make such assertions, Wang implies that history is not simply a retelling of the past, but rather a retelling of the past in a way that is memorable and relevant to the present. The past becomes a disorienting whirlwind of memories and negated experiences when it is tied to a present that is constantly defining and redefining itself.

In his work, Wang deconstructs both the structure and power of autobiographic discourse, questioning its reputation as a supposedly less mediated and more authentic portal to the past. *Dongwu xiongmeng* challenges some of the fundamental assumptions that political victims, perpetrators, and bystanders all share about their ability to remember important events and create cohesive historical narratives based on these events. Wang uses the contentious history of the Cultural Revolution as a staging area to question the entire nature of the historical project itself, both in terms of its manifestation in the form of official history and in terms of its assumption of the existence of authentic, “untainted” individual memories.

One of the very first educated youth writers to gain acclaim as a member of the absurdist literary movement was Ma Yuan 马原, a prolific Chinese writer who was born in 1953 in the northeastern city of Jinzhou, and who spent ten years in the countryside during the Rustification Movement. Upon graduating from the Department of Chinese Studies at Liaoning University in 1983, he volunteered to live in Lhasa and work for Tibetan Radio. It was during his time in Tibet that he published his first short novels. Due to his unusual

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<sup>71</sup> Wang, *Dongwu xiongmeng*, 463-464.

literary style and tremendous productivity, by the mid-1980s he had become one of the most controversial writers in China. Ma's novels are based on a complex interweaving of narratorial voices. The characters tell stories that have no obvious connection among them, thus forming several parallel narrated worlds, each anchored in its own narrative time and space. Since any character can pick up the narratorial voice at any time, there is no single authority to dominate the narrative text, and the author is occasionally reprimanded by the characters that he has supposedly created. For example, in the novella *The Lure of the Gandisi Mountains*, the character Yao Liang steps forward to blame the author for supposedly telling lies about him:

Mr. Ma Yuan has never been to No-Man's Land in western Tibet. I can provide telling evidence. None of the details in his novel are true. It is exactly because of this that he plays with the form of fiction so that the readers can hardly distinguish between truth and falsity.<sup>72</sup>

It is not uncommon for Ma's narrators to admit that they are only narrating a story, not telling the truth, and in more than one of Ma's novels the narrator laments that "this story is not easy to narrate," and that perhaps it is "better for this story to end here." Ma even goes so far as to flaunt his dishonesty as an author/narrator in order to deprive the reader of any possible sense of verisimilitude. He writes "like many storytellers, I have the fear that you may become serious about my story."<sup>73</sup> Thus, in Ma's writing the order of the narrative world is turned upside down. Nothing remains reliable in such a text. What is left is mutual falsification between the author, the narrators, and the characters. This device, Ma explains, has been deliberately used to "break down the continuity of readers' thoughts."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ma, *Gangdisi de youhuo*, 282.

<sup>73</sup> Ma, "Xugou," 67.

<sup>74</sup> Ma, *Gangdisi de youhuo*, 283.

True/false, the most important binary of realist fiction and a distinction that historians generally feel is a necessary one to make, is out of the question in Ma's fiction, as not only authentication but also falsification prove to be falsities. The narrator is obsessed with "telling the truth (真话 *zhenhua*)" but this desire to pursue "the true situation (真相 *zhenxiang*)" leads him into a state of utter confusion over the differences between falsehoods and truth claims. Ma questions whether facts are recoverable through the writing of memory or the narrating of history, and whether or not the nature of memory lends itself to "truth." He comes to a negative conclusion on both fronts, suggesting that history, no matter which way one looks at it, is simply a matter of neglecting some details of the past and exaggerating others. Ma, like other avant-garde writers of this generation, suggests that in the post-Mao era it is absurd to assume that individual memories of the Cultural Revolution can exist in a state that is uncontaminated by the politics of the present.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

Chinese writers' efforts to rewrite Cultural Revolution history in "fictional" forms point to new approaches in interpreting the past. The Literature of the Wounded and Nostalgic Literature movements highlight writers' attempts to view the past through the lens of individual memory and work within the genre of socialist realism to humanize the Chinese Communist Party's narrative of the Cultural Revolution. These writers tend to regard memory as an unmediated, authentic portal to the past, rather than something that is sculpted by life experiences, changing social norms, and shifts in political discourse. While these writers treat memory as a means to construct "history from below,"<sup>75</sup> the Narration of the Absurd literary movement significantly challenges this memory/history dichotomy. It rejects the kind of Rankean empiricism that dominated nineteenth-century Western—and strongly influenced twentieth-century Chinese—historiography, and argues instead that both history

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<sup>75</sup> Gail Hershatter, one of the first scholars of Chinese history who attempted to uncover the voices of those who have been written out of history, turned to theorists within Subaltern Studies for guidance in writing this so-called "history from below." Yet her political orientation as an American feminist led her to read female agency into her sources about nineteenth-century courtesans even in situations in which the written record bore no trace of such agency. Hershatter claimed that she attempted to deal with this issue by "counterposing the two readings of courtesans' lives available to me (those of male authors and my own)" and by "making as visible as I can the creaky and cobbled structure of representation that supports each of them." Despite her sympathy for the subaltern project and her controversial attempt to engage both feminist and poststructuralist theories, her work is rather conventional in terms of its narrative form. See Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 144.

and memory are engaged in an “unending dialogue between the past and the present.”<sup>76</sup> By treating fiction as a form of historical practice, Chinese avant-garde writers raise important questions about the nature of memory and the crucial role that it has played in the very political process of narrating Chinese history. Their work suggests that avant-garde literature might serve as a source of inspiration for those historians interested in moving toward non-linear, multi-perspectival, and altogether less structured ways of interpreting and describing the world.

As a result of the cultural and literary turn in the latter half of the twentieth century, there are far fewer historians working within the academy today who believe that simply by adhering to Rankean historical methodology—that is to say, by transparently, rigorously, and systematically handling evidence according to the standards set by modern research universities—they will be able to produce chronological, coherent, comprehensive, and therefore successful, historical narratives.<sup>77</sup> Many historians no longer view the past as a foreign land to be “discovered,” but rather as a building site upon which figurative thinking, theories, politics, and ethics are deployed in an attempt to “construct” knowledge.

In the wake of post-structuralism, historians not only have expressed aversion to overtly teleological representations of the past, but have also shown a greater sensitivity to the overarching problem of linearity within history. Yet, as a result of their commitment to the political project of restoring “people without history” to their rightful place in history,<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Edward Carr, *What Is History?* (London: Penguin Books, 1987 [1961]), 30.

<sup>77</sup> For an incisive critique of various postmodern theorists’ attempts to wake up the historical profession from its empirical somnambulation in the midst of the cultural turn, see Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>78</sup> Although I wholly embrace the basic tenet that historians should aspire to restore marginalized peoples who have been left out the archives to their proper place in “history,” I am unconvinced that this political project should be prioritized over the more radical project of narrating the past in a far more egalitarian, and far less

many social historians persist in rigidly endorsing causality as *the* logical way to envision and represent the past. While historians, on the whole, are now much more sympathetic to the idea that we all have epistemological choices open to us—that we have methodological preferences and make ontological pre-judgments, and that history is therefore unavoidably situated—it is still rare to find historians who have actually used this radical understanding of history to experiment with new forms of narrative.<sup>79</sup> Very few historians have attempted to engage in innovative, alternative forms of historical practice that challenge this widely accepted, yet deeply problematic, temporal, diachronic, and highly structured form of narrative.<sup>80</sup>

Chinese avant-garde literature embraces this challenge, and in so doing, poses many of the same questions that were raised by poststructuralists in the United States and Europe during the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>81</sup> Hayden White, Dominick LeCapra, and

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structured manner. For more on the term “people without history,” see Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

<sup>79</sup> I am committed to staying open to the different approaches to envisioning and representing the past that are discussed in this essay, as this openness will determine how I will both conduct, and eventually frame, my dissertation research on local constructions of Tibetan identity in the post-Mao period. My dissertation will explore how public memories and local narratives of the Cultural Revolution were constructed in the aftermath of this movement, and how these narratives served to strengthen local, regional, national, and sometimes transnational understandings of Tibetan ethnic identity. By conducting archival and oral history research, I hope to gather how different narratives regarding this turbulent period of history, including national and local re-tellings of particular traumatic events, led Tibetans to re-envision and reframe their understandings of ‘ethnicity.’ Due to the nature of my project, I feel obliged to view history as a way of *approaching* the past, rather than as a way of *finding out what happened* in the past.

<sup>80</sup> Dorothy Ko’s, *Cinderella’s Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (2005), is one of the exceptional works by a Chinese historian that *does* experiment with new, nonlinear narrative forms. Arguing that the study of footbinding has been subject to a male-dominated discourse and an anti-footbinding reform movement to such an extent that historians have seldom been able to access the views of the women themselves, Ko employs an inverted chronology in order to “clear the ground for alternative ways of seeing and knowing.” In the epilogue of her book, Ko admits that she is unable to conclude the history of footbinding with any sort of “neat narrative,” for her efforts are continually flummoxed by “the incongruities, repetitions, and omissions in the textual and material archives.” See Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters: a Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 5, 227.

<sup>81</sup> It was really only in the late 1960s that American historians began to focus less on whether historiography could be a science—and if so, how it could feasibly develop causal laws about historical change—and more on

other theorists associated with the cultural and linguistic turn have been credited with destabilizing the impersonal voice of authority, deconstructing the evidentiary value of documents, and questioning the demarcation line between history and literature. In “The Burden of History,” a passionate and polemical article published in 1966, White calls for historians to more fully focus on the connections between the pasts they study and the present from which they study them, and also to “plunder” the experimental developments in the arts and sciences for metaphors that might lead them to new ways of envisioning and describing the complexity of the past.<sup>82</sup> White argues that “in the interest of appearing scientific and objective,” history has “lost sight of its origins in the literary imagination” and in the process, has “repressed and denied to itself its own greatest source of strength and renewal.”<sup>83</sup> By turning to postmodern literature for inspiration, historians may become more fully aware of their productive role as *creators* of history and glimpse the enormous possibilities that are opened once the authority of realism is broken down.

The Narration of the Absurd highlights some of the most thorny and contentious issues haunting the field of history today, and serves as the historian’s call to action. Instead of relying on a single narratorial voice, which silences the plurality of voices located in—and, more often, out of—the historical record, avant-garde fiction opens up new possibilities

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the “autonomy of historical understanding” and the form in which this understanding was expressed. See Louis Mink, “The Autonomy of Historical Understanding” (1965) reprinted in *Historical Understanding*, eds. Brian Fay, Eugene Golob, and Richard Vann (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973/1987).

<sup>82</sup> According to White, nineteenth-century historians adopted a mode of representation that straddled a middle ground between positivist science and literary realism, but when creative writers began to experiment with multiple-perspective narratives and scientists started asking new questions about the nature of science, historians clung to antiquated literary and scientific theories. White argues that historians isolated themselves within intellectual communities by ignoring twentieth-century developments in science and art that emphasized the constructivist qualities of both enterprises. See Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 27-50. White’s article, “The Burden of History,” was originally published in *History and Theory* 5: 2 (1996): 111-134.

<sup>83</sup> White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 99.

for narrating contradictory interpretations of the past. Empowering historians to come up with new, less structured, and far more colorful approaches to narrating the past, Chinese avant-garde literature leaves behind a historiographical legacy that is both politically radical and methodologically challenging.

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