



The 1957-1958 Anti-Rightist Campaign in China: History and Memory (1978-2014)

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ABSTRACT

The end of the Mao Era was accompanied neither by a full and complete rehabilitation of the victims of the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957, nor by a true historiographical revolution. Thus, the “return” of history’s “forgotten ones” first occurred through literature and investigative journalism, which was the main relay for the memory of the victims in the 1980s, before testimony emerged in the following decade. Since then, however, the “historian’s territory” has expanded. This article places the questions about the relationship between history and memory within the specific context of the People’s Republic of China, where the Party in power claims the right to a monopoly over the interpretation of the past, in order to show how a plural memory is being constructed today, and how a history which “works” with this memory is being written.

The 1957-1958 Anti-Rightist Campaign in China: History and Memory (1978-2014)

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THE 1957-1958 ANTI-RIGHTIST CAMPAIGN IN CHINA: HISTORY AND MEMORY (1978-2014)

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Christine Vidal is an associate professor of Chinese history at the Université de Lille 3, and an associate member of the CECMC at the EHESS. Her main research interest lies in the intersection of the social, cultural and political history of modern and contemporary China. Most of her research so far has focused on Chinese intellectuals and professionals. After completing a doctoral dissertation on the Republican period and the early years of the PRC, she has mainly worked on the 1950s, as well as on the memory of that decade. Her current research draws on diaries and letters written during the Maoist period (and particularly during the 1950s and the early 1960s) to explore the ways in which the big political and economic changes of the period affected their authors' work and life, as well as the ways in which they personally understood and experienced these changes.

ABSTRACT

The end of the Mao Era was accompanied neither by a full and complete rehabilitation of the victims of the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957, nor by a true historiographical revolution. Thus, the “return” of history’s “forgotten ones” first occurred through literature and investigative journalism, which was the main relay for the memory of the victims in the 1980s, before testimony emerged in the following decade. Since then, however, the “historian’s territory” has expanded. This article places the questions about the relationship between history and memory within the specific context of the People’s Republic of China, where the Party in power claims the right to a monopoly over the interpretation of the past, in order to show how a plural memory is being constructed today, and how a history which “works” with this memory is being written.

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KEYWORDS

PRC, Anti-Rightist Campaign, Political Persecution, History, Memory, Personal Narratives, Historiography

AUTHOR’S RECENT PUBLICATIONS

- « Yu xin zhengquan jiemeng de zhishifenzi: Zhonghua renmin gongheguo chuqi de ji ge ceying, 1949-1952 » 与新政权结盟的知识分子：中华人民共和国初期的几个侧影 (The intellectuals Rallied to the New Regime: Facets of the Early Years of the PRC, 1949-1952), *Zhongguo dangdai shi yanjiu*, n°3, 2011, p. 72-90.
- « Shanghai entre guerre et révolution (1937-1949) » in Nicolas Idier (dir.), *Shanghai. Histoire, promenades, anthologie et dictionnaire*, Paris, Robert Laffont, coll. « Bouquins », 2010, p. 60-96.
- « Histoire et mémoire des Cent fleurs et de la répression antidroitière en Chine, 1978-2008 », *Revue Espaces Marx*, n°26, 2009, p. 74-88.
- « D’un régime à l’autre : les intellectuels ralliés au pouvoir communiste, 1948-1952 », *Études chinoises*, vol. XXVII, 2008, p. 42-86.

Questions related to history and memory, the problematic links between individual recollections and collective memory, the emergence of witnesses and the “wars of memory,” which have all been much debated over these last twenty or thirty years, are compounded, in the case of mainland China, with problems inherent to the nature of a power that claims the right of monopoly over the interpretation of the past. Since 1949, this monopoly has been expressed in terms of a historiography and a policy of memory which are exclusive and partisan and which draw upon an instrumental conception of history and memory that prevails even today, despite the developments that have ensued since 1978.

The historical treatment of the Anti-Rightist Campaign (*fanyou yundong*, 反右运动) also called the Anti-Rightist Struggle (*fanyou douzheng*, 反右斗争), which put a brutal end to the Hundred Flowers in 1957, is an example among others. This campaign led to the persecution of several hundreds of thousands of people from all social strata, including many intellectuals who, after much hesitation, had made statements, at the insistent demand of authorities, as part of the Party rectification campaign imposed by Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893-1976): this was a new kind of rectification since it included external criticism.¹ While the Central Committee had condemned the “excesses” of the repression at the end of the 1970s, there were few publications in China of historians’ work on this pivotal episode in the history of the People’s Republic, which led to the launch of the Great Leap Forward the following year, and with it, the beginning of the deadly utopia that would last until the late 1970s. In addition, any form of commemoration remained impossible, and remains so even today.

Yet, despite the reluctance of a Party which is anxious to retain control over the interpretation of the past, publications addressing this concealed episode of recent history have proliferated over the last twenty

years.² Now, other points of view are being expressed or at least attempts are being made to express them. The Party is clearly not ready to grant *carte-blanche* to every initiative to obtain a full and complete rehabilitation of the victims and a reestablishment of the historical truth, but it is increasingly difficult for it to control the diffusion and contents of information which forms the foundation for contemporary critical reflection and the affirmation of civic responsibility. Moreover, recent developments in historical research suggest that it may not be long before Chinese historians are finally able to shed light on this blind spot in the official historiography.

1. ULTRA-POLITICIZATION AND THE LOSS OF HISTORY UNDER MAO

Using the past for political purposes is not particular to China, as the whole history of historiography attests. However, in China, the instrumentalization of the past for political ends forms the bedrock of the only truly authorized history and memory: *i.e.*, the official history and memory adhering to the Party line. Drafting history and establishing the politics of memory are, in this respect, integral parts of propaganda, with which they share, among other characteristics, a biased, Manichean, shifting nature. This nature is expressed in the suppression of facts which do not concur with the Party line, the demonization of the “enemies of the people,” and constant revision in response to the needs of the moment.

It was in the 1940s that history truly began to be used as a political weapon to serve the Party, and principally its leader Mao Zedong, who succeeded in imposing his unchallenged authority at the Seventh Congress of May-June 1945, during which the famous “Resolution on Certain Historical Questions” (Guanyu ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi 关于若干历史问题的决议) was adopted. This fundamental text defines the “correct line”, in other words, the orthodox version of the history of the Party since its inception, and it firmly establishes rules to govern historical practices entirely subordinated to Party interests. It was also in 1945 that the North China University was founded, where the future guardians of official history would be educated—the propagandists who would also become the specialists of official history after 1949.

After the founding of the regime, history and memory became the exclusive property of the Party: written history and memory conveyed in textbooks, museums and during national commemorations were those of the victors, written and forged by the victors, but constantly “touched up” to reflect changes in the Party line and the needs of the moment. Any variation in interpreting the past was therefore excluded, as was any public expression of memory that competed with that which the authorities sought to construct as collective memory,

¹ Contrary to popular belief, the Anti-Rightist Campaign did not only affect the intellectuals: the repression reached every social category of the society, and was particularly harsh for cadres, employees and school teachers. Officially, 552,877 people were designated as “rightists” (*youpai fenzi* 右派分子). However, this number includes neither the people who suffered various sanctions without ever officially being called “rightist,” and especially the victims’ family members, nor the people who were repressed after being defined as “centre-rightists,” “anti-socialist elements” or “counterrevolutionaries.” In addition to this label, sanctions were numerous: imprisonment, internment in reform through labor detention camps (*laogai* 劳改), internment in farms or re-education through labor camps (*laojiao* 劳教), exile to the countryside, layoffs, temporary imprisonment in work units, work under surveillance, wage cuts etc. The estimates of the total number of victims range from around 1 million—the low hypothesis for which there is a consensus—to 3 millions, and even 5 millions, if one takes into account the people repressed during the Socialist Education Movement (1962-1965). On the estimated number of victims, see Cong, 1989, p. 61; Zhu, 1998, p. 502; Shen, 2008, p. 661-662; Dikötter, 2013, p. 291-292, and p. 237 and (for the high-end hypothesis) Luo, 2006a et 2006b; see also Thireau, 2010, p. 185-186. On the extension, starting from the summer of 1957, of re-education through labor, which was introduced in 1955 during the “Campaign to Wipe Out Hidden Counterrevolutionaries,” see Domenach, 1992, p. 142-145; Fu, 2005, p. 811-818; Smith, 2013, p. 203-206.

² This assessment is valid for the whole Maoist period (1949-1976). See Weigel-Schwiedrzik, 2006; Roux, 2009; Domenach and Xiao-Planès, 2012.

or “public memory” (although this last expression actually refers, as Jeffrey Andrew Barash put it, to the “significant events that members of a society have experienced and collectively remember.”)³

During the 1950s, higher education was reorganized and courses in political education soon superseded those in history. The historians who had trained in China or abroad before 1949 - to whom it was announced in January 1950 that history could be written without sources!⁴ - were gradually replaced. Party historians took on the responsibility of writing textbooks and other works celebrating the glory of the Party and the martyrs of the revolution, or joined institutes which were dedicated to researching Marxism-Leninism, publishing the works of Mao, or collecting and interpreting archival material. These institutes included the Propaganda Department, of course, but also the different research centers of the Central Committee, the Central Party School, and the National Defense University.



1. Parade organized during the Anti-Rightist Campaign

In the 1960s and 1970s, the instrumentalization of the past was taken to extremes, resulting in “a double tendency towards the politicization of history and the historicization of politics.”⁵ An important issue in the rivalry between individuals and factions, the past became a formidable political tool during the Cultural Revolution, a veritable cataclysm that plunged the country into violence and chaos for almost a decade. Until 1976, history would therefore remain one of the fields which offered the least transparent access to the truth. The interpretation of the past was a crucial aspect of the system and therefore had to serve only to legitimize the role of the Party, confirm the correctness of its line, and justify the purges and settling of scores.

2. THE LIMITS OF REHABILITATION AND OF THE REBIRTH OF HISTORY UNDER DENG XIAOPING

The end of the Maoist era was inevitably accompanied by a reinterpretation of history since the foundation of the regime, a reinterpretation which was essential to legitimizing the permanent change of direction effected in December 1978 during the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee. Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 (1904-1997) declared then that, “Resolving questions left over from the past, clarifying the achievement and errors of certain people and correcting a number of major unfair, incorrect and false cases, is essential for the liberation of thought as well as for stability and unity.”⁶ The aim was “to restore order from chaos and return things to normal” (*boluan fanzheng* 拨乱反正), but to do it while defining the limits of the revisions and thus of the debates which were possible. This would soon be confirmed by the terms of the “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China” (*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) adopted by the Central Committee on June 27th, 1981.⁷ As with the 1945 resolution, this “Resolution” constituted much more than a historical assessment, since it defined the past as would a law that cannot be contested, reframed, or even put into perspective without threat of sanction.

For many victims, however, this did signify a partial recognition of the injustices they had suffered, since the denunciation of past mistakes implied the redress of past political sanctions. Indeed, even though the legitimacy of the Anti-Rightist Campaign was reaffirmed and any idea of full rehabilitation was rejected, in September 1978, the Central Committee nonetheless opted for a more extensive review of their case in order to redress wrong verdicts, but only after it had first pronounced a general “pardon” in favor of the “rightists” as it had already done for a minority of them between 1959 and 1964.⁸ In the end, almost all of the officially recognized “rightists” benefited

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6 Deng, 1983, p. 137.

7 The document is available at: <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/64563/65374/4526448.html>

8 This leniency consisted in removing their “rightist” label for those considered to be reformed, that is to say in forgiving those declared re-educated. It concerned mainly Communist as well as non-Communist political and intellectual personalities such as the poet Ai Qing 艾青 (1910-1996), exiled in Xinjiang, who was “forgiven” in 1962, or the sociologist Fei Xiaotong 费孝通 (1910-2005), “forgiven” in 1959. The “forgiven rightists” nonetheless remained “rightists” and would indeed become the first targets of the Cultural Revolution. Officially, this lenient measure was suspended in 1965. However, some people had benefited from it until the eve of the Cultural Revolution. Such is the case of the journalist and writer Liu Binyan 刘宾雁 (1925-2005), the only “rightist” among the editorial board of the *China Youth Daily* (*Zhongguo qingnian bao* 中国青年报) whose “hat” had not been removed at the end of 1961 but was finally removed in March 1966. See his interview with Perry Link: Liu and Link, 2006, p. 1-26, esp. p.1-6.

3 Barash, 2007, p. 109.

4 Ma, 1999, p. 70.

5 Domenach, 2004, p. 84.

from this last measure: considered as wrongly accused during the Anti-Rightist Campaign, all of them had their cases reviewed.

This evolution towards an acknowledgement of the injustices inflicted and the wrongs committed was largely the result of the shift in the balance of power which took place over a period of months in favor of the leaders who were attacked during the Cultural Revolution, in particular Deng Xiaoping. The form and content of the circulars and documents on the “rightists question” bore witness to this, even if some ambiguity remained, and indeed it could not be completely removed since the problem was not to condemn the Anti-Rightist Campaign, but to find a compromise that would reconcile two contradictory affirmations and allow for the recognition of the errors and excesses committed in the attributions of the label of the “rightists” during the Anti-Rightist Campaign, without at the same time condemning the decision on which these errors were based, i.e. the need to counter-attack in the face of the attacks of the Rightists and the threats they were supposed to have presented to the regime. The reasons and the precedents invoked, like the terminology used, bore the mark of this ambiguity. The term *pingfan* (平反) does not so much designate a “rehabilitation” in due form as a “corrective reappraisal”, a meaning that is more or less the equivalent of *gaizheng* (改正).

These two terms are only used once in the document attached to the well-known Central Document n° 11 (5th April 1978) announcing a general “pardon” for the “rightists”, the measure consisting in “removing the rightist hats” (*zhaidiao youpai maozi* 摘掉右派帽子). The document states that “corrective reappraisals” (*pingfan*) should be carried out only in exceptional circumstances and that only the “rightist” cases resulting from obvious errors should be “corrected” (*gaizheng*). In other words, what was soon to become the rule was at first only an exceptional measure, to be considered case by case, according to the situation⁹. Furthermore, even if it is hardly surprising that the decision to “remove the hat” of all the rightists was presented as a measure maintaining the continuity of those proposed by Mao and adopted between 1959 and 1964, what is more surprising is the number of rightists said to have been pardoned between these two dates: out of the 450,000 “bourgeois rightists” (*zichan jieji youpai fenzi* 资产阶级右派分子) attacked during the Anti-Rightist Campaign, more than 300,000 (that is, more than 60%) were said to have had their label removed before the Cultural Revolution, while around 100,000 of them, primarily mid- and lower-level cadres, schoolteachers and students, would still be waiting for a similar measure, especially after the fall of the Gang of Four. Considering that these people had been re-educated over twenty-five years,

the document announced that circumstances were right to remove their rightist label.¹⁰ In the second circular concerning the general “pardon” granted to the rightists - the well-known Central Document n°55 dated 17th September 1978 - and in the appended document dated 25th August 1978, which provided instructions concerning its implementation, the term *pingfan* appeared only once, but the term *gaizheng* appeared fourteen times. In addition, the appended document, which remains even today the frame of reference, included a whole section devoted to the “*gaizheng question*” (改正问题).¹¹

Thus, even if the policy adopted towards the “rightists” was qualified neither as *pingfan*, nor even as *gaizheng*,¹² the idea of a wider reappraisal of their cases progressed, all the same, between April and September, thanks to a gradual shift in the balance of power. Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 (1915-1989) played an important part in the political battle which led to the abolishment of the “rightist” label, as well as those of the four other “black categories” to which that of “rightist” was added from 1957 onwards: landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries and bad elements, all of whom were considered to be class enemies until 1978.¹³ These decisions were all important, as they marked the end of the class struggle which had dominated the whole history of the People’s Republic after 1949.¹⁴

However, the idea of a rehabilitation in the full sense of the term, including public apologies accompanied by reparation measures for the wrongs inflicted, was not on the agenda, not only because this would have invalidated the legitimacy of the Anti-Rightist repression, but also because Deng Xiaoping had been a key figure in it.¹⁵ Consequently only some 550,000 “rightist” cases were “corrected” (*gaizheng* 改正), while dozens of others were refused, including, notably, Zhang Bojun 张伯钧 (1895-1969), Luo Longji 罗隆基 (1896-1965) and Chu Anping 罗隆基 (1909-1966), who would thus remain “rightists.” This refusal was based less on what the protesters said and wrote during the Hundred Flowers¹⁶ than on a need to justify the official interpretation of the repression which was first announced in 1978 and

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9 Note that the reference document is none other than the 17th August 1962 document which explains that there should be no automatic correction of the “rightist” cases. These documents are available on the CR-ROM devoted to the Anti-Rightist Campaign released in Hong Kong in 2010 (Song, 2010).

10 This document is available on the CR-ROM devoted to the Anti-Rightist Campaign released in Hong Kong in 2010 (Song, 2010).

11 *Ibid.*

12 These two terms appear neither in the title of the Circular, nor in that of the appended document. Both documents’ titles only mention the decision to “remove the Rightist hat completely” (*quanbu zhaidiao youpai maozi* 全部摘掉右派帽子).

13 For the role played by Hu Yaobang, see Dai, 1998a; Hu, 2013.

14 For more details on class labels (or class status), see Billeter, 1987. For more on the suppression of these labels, its implementation and its consequences, see the chapter “Révision, réhabilitation, restitution” in *Les ruses de la démocratie. Protester en Chine*, the path-breaking book by Isabelle Thireau and Hua Linshan on the Office of Letters and Visits 2010, p. 179-212.

15 On Deng’s involvement, which is now well documented, see Chung, 2011.

16 For an overview of the free airing of views and criticism expressed during the Hundred Flowers period, see MacFarquhar, 1960; Nieh, 1981.

repeated in the “Resolution” of 1981, in which the campaign was presented as “absolutely correct and necessary,” in spite of its “excesses.”¹⁷



2. Cartoon propaganda produced during the Anti-Rightist Campaign

If the “Resolution” did not condemn outright either the Cultural Revolution or the great crises that preceded it, this is because the objective lay elsewhere: to condemn that which had to be condemned in order to establish the legitimacy of the Party’s new direction without calling into question the fundamental nature of the regime and thus reaffirm the positive role played by Mao, who, on the whole, was only criticized for his actions after 1957 and more particularly during the Cultural Revolution. In other words, even if, indeed, the legitimacy of the new leadership depended on the denunciation of the Cultural Revolution, this denunciation remained partial and limited: in the same way, the “excesses” of the Anti-Rightist Struggle of 1957 did not invalidate its basic necessity. This is also what explains both the limited and the unfinished characteristics of the process of rehabilitation from 1978 onwards, despite the positive consequences resulting from it for millions of people. Just as in the Post-Stalinist Soviet Union,¹⁸ its function was primarily political since it was, above all, a means to legitimize the Party’s new leadership and consequently a means of political stability. In this

¹⁷ According to this view, the repression, which began on June 8th, 1957, was not decided upon before the beginning of the Hundred Flowers at the end of April, but rather during the campaign, around May 15th. This thesis, which is shared by most foreign researchers and by many Chinese scholars, is challenged in China and outside China by the proponents of the “hidden conspiracy” theory (*yinmou* 阴谋). Mao used this term and even coined the term “open conspiracy” (*yangmou* 阳谋), but did so just after mid-May, presumably to hide his erroneous assessment regarding the extent of social malaise and the nature of the criticisms that were expressed. Some historians have recently put forward some variants of these two main interpretations. According to Alain Roux, for example, Mao would already have identified those who opposed his “General Line” and consequently did not decide to launch the Hundred Flowers campaign to unmask them but to compel the cadres to attack them and to rectify their own possible rightist penchants. In his last book on the Communist political elite since 1949, Jean-Luc Domenach also opts for the second thesis, which he nonetheless amends. According to him, the Hundred Flowers was a “manoeuvre à double détente” devised by Mao in order to trap the opponents but also to make it easier for him to impose his own views in the course of the political hardening that the repression would necessarily lead to. I personally continue to think that the repression was not the initial aim of Mao and of his Hundred Flowers policy. See Roux, 2009, p. 599-600; Domenach, 2012, p. 159-163.

¹⁸ On the rehabilitation in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union and its limits, see Elie, 2007 and 2010.

way, the request for rehabilitation made by the victims themselves contributed to this legitimization, since, by asking for a revision of their cases, they recognized as legitimate the Party in control of the process. What was more, this rehabilitation was not accompanied by any measures of compensation. More fundamentally, it was limited by the single fact that it was completely controlled by the Party, which remained the only judge of its application, and this, in a certain sense, deprived it of any meaning.¹⁹

Therefore, there was no question of transforming the nature of the regime, nor of opening the field of contemporary history to academics or to researchers affiliated to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. In fact, while the universities were reopened and history restored to its place within higher education and research, alongside the other humanities and social sciences, the rebirth of the discipline applied only to classical, ancient, and modern history. Contemporary history remained the exclusive territory of the Party, and its historians were bound by the terms of the “Resolution” of 1981, which had the force of law. Thus, the few historical works dealing with the year 1957 would be written by the Party historians, who were the only ones authorized to explore this sensitive episode in recent history.

The most important of these works is undoubtedly the one devoted to the years 1956-1966 by Cong Jin 从进 (1935-), a professor at the National Defense University, entitled *The Stage of Winding Development* (*Quzhe fazhan de suiyue* 曲折发展的岁月). Published in 1989, this book is subtitled *China from 1949 to 1989* (1949-1989 nian de Zhongguo 1949-1989 年的中国), and like the other three volumes in the series, was written under the supervision of Liao Gailong 廖盖隆 (1918-2001), a member of the Party History Research Center of the Central Committee. Like the tightly controlled historiography produced in the 1980s, the book follows the official line, as described in the “Resolution,” of which it is a type of exegesis. Despite these limitations and the lack of space devoted to the victims, the author does cite his sources and tries, to some extent, to give an account of the content of the main criticisms put forward during the Hundred Flowers.

The first historical book devoted exclusively to the Hundred Flowers and to the anti-rightist repression did not come out until 1995. It appeared as *1957: The Puzzle of the Great Turning: A True Record of the Rectification and Anti-Rightist Movement* (1957: *Da zhuanwan zhi mi—Zhengfeng fanyou shilu* 1957: 大转弯之谜—整风反右实录), a revised version of the thesis that the author, Zhu Di 朱地, prepared at the Central Party School under the direction of Jin Chunming 金春明 (1932-), himself the author of two books on the Cultural Revolution. The author, who would later join the Party History Research Center of the Central Committee and

¹⁹ A general history of this rehabilitation, as well as that of the previous ones, still needs to be written. On the different waves of rehabilitation of the cadres that occurred from the 1950s onward, see Lee, 1990 and Teiwes, 1993; on the rehabilitation process engaged since 1978 and the demands for revision addressed to the Letters and Visits Offices, see Thireau and Hua, 2010, p. 179-212.

then become the editor of the influential review *Hundred Year Tide* (Bainianchao 百年潮), offered a detailed study, more factual than analytical, but remained faithful to the official line, since he placed responsibility for the repression on a small minority of dissenters who supposedly led Mao to “counter-attack” and then to go down the wrong track.²⁰ The Party historians thus repeated and endorsed the official thesis from which the official history was forged, resulting in a disembodied account of history, focusing on the decisions taken by Mao and the Central Committee.



3. “Our Party’s policy of remoulding the Rightist is a success. Party committees at all levels have already removed the hat of the last Rightists”, *Guangming Daily*, 17 November 1978

However, the release of archives and historical materials, which would gain momentum during 1990s, cannot be ignored. Nor can the debates that accompanied the return to power of Deng Xiaoping, beginning with the famous 1978 “truth criterion debate”, which would open the door to subsequent debates, despite the limits set by Deng in March 1979.²¹ These debates on “modern superstition,” the abuse of the cult of personality, censorship, the need to review the significant events of history, and “breaking down the forbidden areas in Party history” (*dapo dangshi jinqu* 打破党史禁区)²² did not compensate for the lack of progress in the treatment of contemporary history, but they opened the way for the extraordinary new flowering of intellectual life, which in turn was responsible for the re-emergence of some important forgotten historical figures.²³

20 Zhu, 1995. A new revised version of the book was published in 2005.

21 This ideological debate sought to discredit the Maoists who upheld “whatever policy decisions Mao had made” and committed themselves to following “whatever instructions Mao had given” (the “Two Whatevers”) by showing that the decisions and instructions of the Great Helmsman had to be judged according to “practice,” the only “criterion of truth.” Led by Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 (1915-1989), the debate ended in May 1978 with the publication in the press of an article whose title then became the *credo* of the Anti-Maoists: “Practice is the only criterion for testing truth.” The floodgates of “de-Maoisation” and the “liberation of thought” were opened, but Deng Xiaoping did not delay in setting boundaries by restating the four cardinal principles: the Socialist path, the proletariat dictatorship, the leadership of the Communist Party, Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought.

22 The title of an article written by Li Honglin 李洪林 (1925-), then director of the Bureau of Theory of the Propaganda Department, published in 1979 in the first issue of *Lishi yanjiu* 历史研究 (Historical Studies).

23 For more on these debates, see Chen, 2002, p. 15-125.

3. THE POLITICS OF MEMORY IN POST-MAO CHINA: BUILDING OFFICIAL MEMORY BY “BUILDING FORGETFULNESS” (*jian wang* 建忘)

The “return” of history’s “forgotten ones” - in this case the well-known or anonymous victims of the anti-rightist repression who were also the first victims of the Cultural Revolution - first occurred through the intervention of literature and investigative journalism, which were the main relays for the memory of the victims before testimony took over in the mid-1990s. However, this “return” operated outside of the official framework, in other words outside the policy of memory as laid down by the Party/State, a policy which aimed to build a memory of historical events or figures oriented in such a way that it could be used to strengthen the Party’s legitimacy and serve the “reform and opening-up policy” (*gaige kaifang zhengce* 改革开放政策) initiated in 1978, such as the memory of the great patriotic mobilizations of the first half of the century or the figure of Sun Yat-sen 孙中山 (1866-1925), “Father of the Nation” (*guofu* 国父) and an ardent advocate of modernization.²⁴

It is also to this end that the project of gathering testimonies was revived in 1979. It had been introduced twenty years earlier by Zhou Enlai 周恩来 (1898-1976), but was interrupted in 1962. Placed under the patronage of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, this publishing project produced dozens of separate editions of *Selection from Literary and Historical Materials* (*Wenshi ziliao xuanji* 文史资料选辑). It was effectively aimed at collecting the testimony of individuals who had participated in the key events of the first half of the twentieth century before joining the regime in 1949 - in other words, the testimonies of the “defeated” - in order to legitimize the regime, albeit *a posteriori*.²⁵ By contrast, testimonies about the events of the 1950s remained rare in the 1980s, and involved mainly those of leaders and “authorized” individuals, who avoided any detailed discussion of the taboo episodes of recent history such as the 1957-1958 Anti-Rightist Campaign.

Ultimately, the concealment of these taboo episodes is simply the counterpart of the “surplus” of memory that the authorities tried to generate about anything susceptible of serving the present. This does not mean that the Chinese have no memory of this past. On the contrary, it is still part of the present for the victims, and those relatives with whom they have sometimes only recently been reunited after being separated for twenty years. Obviously, silence can be part of a collective or individual strategy to forget in order to rebuild oneself, but, above all, it is the result of the will of the authorities to refuse to do justice to the victims by constructing the

24 On the revival of Sun Yat-sen studies initiated by the Party and the government to promote the Four Modernizations, see Bergère, 1992, p. 97-102.

25 The project would subsequently be extended, although marginally, to the post-1949 period.

narratives of what they suffered: the official memory excludes any memory of the suffering undergone since 1949. Far from being encouraged, the expression of this memory is hindered or even prohibited. The courageous stance taken by the writer Ba Jin 巴金 (1904-2005) as early as 1978-1979 to promote the “right to memory” changed nothing.

In response to the criticism that some writers were subjected to, here is what he wrote in August 1979: “It is only three years since the fall of the Gang of Four, and already some are protesting against those who expose the crimes that were committed. What is this, then, if it is not building forgetfulness (*jian wang* 建忘)! Yet, while the filth left behind us continues to stink and pollute the atmosphere, we leave it there and no one cares, as people prefer to shout: ‘Look to the future!’ But can we prevent all those who still suffer in the flesh to tend to their wounds?”²⁶

“Look to the future” (*xiang qian kan* 向前看) without turning back towards the past: such was the new slogan at the beginning of the reform era - although this slogan was soon hijacked and replaced with a homophonic pun, “look to the wallet [money]” (*xiang qian kan* 向钱看), which expressed the more prosaic reality of the second half of the Deng Xiaoping era. The authorities, effectively exploiting patriotism and prospects for development, intended to put the Chinese to work, and not to unleash a free and open re-examination of the past and matters that could destabilize their power. This was such a concern, that any form of commemoration of the Hundred Flowers and the anti-rightist repression would remain impossible right through the 1980s, and into the 1990s and 2000s. In 1987, for example, the organizers of a conference scheduled for the 30th anniversary were forced to cancel their plans.²⁷

4. THE PIONEERING ROLE OF WRITERS AND JOURNALISTS

The end of the revolutionary cycle and the class struggle were accompanied neither by a full and complete rehabilitation of the victims, nor by a true historiographical revolution. Thus, it was through fiction and investigative journalism that history began to “restock” in the 1980s, as would happen in the Soviet Union in the early years of *glasnost*.²⁸

The collective memory expressed through the genres known as “scar literature” (*shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学) and “prison literature” (*daqiang wenxue* 大墙文学) was first that of the suffering endured during the

Cultural Revolution. However, it was also about the suffering experienced by the “rightists” from 1957 onwards: students, schoolteachers, employees, cadres, journalists, writers etc. Through these literary genres, which marked the return of a kind of subjective writing (*zhuti xiezu* 主体写作) after an unchallenged and total domination of propaganda literature,²⁹ the perspectives of the victims of the regime were expressed, and the writers who took up their pens had often been attacked themselves in 1957.

In *The Legend of Tianyunshan* (*Tianyunshan chuanqi* 天云山传奇) published in 1979, Lu Yanzhou 鲁彦周 (1928-2006) tells the tragic story of a young “rightist.” The heroine of the novel is responsible for reviewing the case of a man who happens to be the very man she left in 1957. She realizes that his case has been entirely made up by the man she married after their separation.³⁰ The same year, Cong Weixi 从维熙 (1933-) published *The Red Magnolia beneath the Prison Wall* (*Da qiang xia de hong yulan* 大墙下的红玉兰). Considered to be the founding work of “prison literature”, the novella, which opens with the arrival of a new prisoner in a camp and ends with his execution, shows the infallible loyalty of this prisoner to the Party, which has nevertheless condemned him.³¹ In the same vein, *Mimosa* (*Lühuashu* 绿化树) by Zhang Xianliang 张贤亮 (1936-2014), published in 1984, relates the journey of a “rightist” intellectual who tries to “reform” himself, and in order to do this, goes through a process of continuous self-reflection in the hope of eradicating any ideas that might hinder his conversion.³² In his short story *Searching for the “Hat”* (*Zhao “maozi”* 找“帽子”), Jiang Zilong 蒋子龙 (1941-) describes the absurd battle of a man who fails to get his case reviewed because he is unable to track down his “rightist” identification number.³³

For these writers, and many others, what mattered was to describe the trauma and suffering that so many endured at the same time and under similar conditions, by limiting themselves to the expression of individual suffering and relating the partly autobiographical stories of these broken lives. Indeed, these writers were attempting to reveal the violence of the times, or even the absurdity of the human condition. Their writings, however, did not question the system that had brought about such violence and suffering, as some critics such as Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波 (1955-) pointed out as early as the mid-1980s.³⁴ The first fictional works set in the prison world were just as polemical. Besides the treatment - that some judged inappropriate - of the question of love

29 Jin, 2004.

30 Lu, 1979. The novel was adapted on screen by Xie Jin 谢晋 (1923-2008) the following year.

31 Cong, 1979.

32 Zhang, 1984.

33 Jiang, 1982.

34 In a series of articles published in 1986-1988, Liu Xiaobo vigorously attacked this literary movement, denouncing the blind conformity of its followers, whose writings were, according to him, nothing more than the reflection of the openings and the closures of the official discourse (Liu, 2011).

26 Ba, 1987, p. 151. In his essays, first published in the supplement of *Dagongbao* (The Impartial) in Hong Kong and then in mainland China between 1980 and 1985, the writer denounced, in particular, the Cultural Revolution, and promoted maintaining the memory of the events. He also proposed, without success, the creation of a “Museum of the Cultural Revolution” (*wenhua dageming bowuguan* 文化大革命博物馆) so that no one would forget. On the history and memory of the Cultural Revolution, see Weigelin-Schwiebrzik, 2006; Bonnin, 2007.

27 The project, led by astrophysicist Fang Lizhi (1936-2012) and Liu Binyan, probably started in 1986 in a context of relative ideological relaxation, but was interrupted at the end of the year, after the student movement and its aftermath, when Hu Yaobang, the Party General Secretary, was forced to resign.

28 Werth, 1989.

and sexuality in the works of Zhang Xianliang, criticism focused on the watered-down description that these authors provided of the conditions of detention, and to a lesser degree, on the positive meaning they attributed to “re-education”. As Perry Link points out, censorship, self-censorship, denial, patriotism, loyalty to the Party (doubtless reactivated by the rehabilitation process) and the political context, were all factors which contributed to these unrealistic or even romantic representations of the world of the camps for re-education through labor, as well as life in prison labor camps.³⁵

Starting in the middle of the decade, “scar literature” was not only superseded by “literature of self-reflection” (*fansi wenxue* 反思文学) but also by journalistic literature (*jishi wenxue* 纪实文学). Historical journalism (*lishi jishi* 历史纪实) thus took on the role played, up to that time, by the novel, and the authors - journalists and writers - were no longer necessarily former “rightists”. An important step forward was made, as these narratives, which were quite the opposite of the disembodied history written by the “official” historians, enabled the main protesters of the Hundred Flowers Campaign era to be rediscovered, as well as their ideas and the paths they took before 1949, thereby lifting the veil on whole sections of a concealed past.

A journalist at the *Guangming ribao* 光明日报 (*Brightness Daily*), Dai Qing 戴晴 (1941-) became interested in the “historical blank spots” (*lishi kongbai* 历史空白) after meeting with the essayist Zhu Zheng 朱正 (1982-).³⁶ In 1988-1989 she published two important biographies: one of the critical intellectual Wang Shiwei 王实味 (1906-1947), a Communist who was executed in March 1947, shortly before the evacuation of Yan'an, and the other of Chu Anping, a democratic intellectual, the founder and editor of the most influential journal of the late 1940s, *Guancha* 观察 (*The Observer*), who joined the regime in 1949, but was convicted in 1957 for having denounced “the Party Empire” (“*dang tianxia*” 党天下) and died in 1966 in circumstances which have never been clarified.

Through this study on Chu Anping,³⁷ the first ever published, Dai Qing rehabilitated not only the journalist and his ideas, but the ideas of a whole generation of intellectuals who had evolved separately from the Guomindang and the Communist Party before joining the new regime. These ideas had remained largely unknown until then because they were censored after 1949. At the same time, Dai Qing cast doubt on the concept of “rightist” and dismantled the logic of past and future repressions. Finally, by means of the analogies she drew between past and present, she highlighted the timeliness of the ideas supported by these intellectuals before and after 1949 and established a relationship between this intellectual

generation and the one to which she herself belonged, giving meaning and strength to a fight for democracy that she inscribed in a continuous and ongoing history.

Dai Qing, who is not an historian, was aware of the limits of her work, but she sought less to write a genuine historical biography than to reveal a hidden part of the past and to use that past not to legitimize the present, but to bring about change.³⁸ This biography, which violated the limits within which the Party would have wished to contain a reassessment of the past, opened up a pathway and announced the growing interest, which would increase throughout the following decade, for the intellectuals associated with the “Third Force,” their ideas and their fate after 1949.

In the short term, the repression of the democratic movement in June 1989 cut short the considerations and debates that had been opened since the start of the decade.³⁹ Despite the Chinese translation of two important Western books on the subject,⁴⁰ the year 1957 became taboo again, up until 1992-1993, when Deng Xiaoping re-launched the reforms. Books then appeared that announced the success of a commercial literature offering revelations and scandals. *In the Whirlwind of History: One Hundred Big rightists of China* (*Zai lishi de xuanwo zhong: Zhongguo baiming da youpai* 在历史的漩涡中：中国百名大右派) by Yao Shan'er 姚杉尔, for example, came out in 1993, while Ye Yonglie 叶永烈 (1940-), a professional writer and member of the Shanghai Writers' Association, published in quick succession *The Heavy Year 1957* (*Chenzhong of 1957* 沉重的1957) and *The Whole Story of the Anti-Rightist Movement* (*Fanyoupai shimo* 反右派始末).⁴¹ These narratives certainly devoted more space to the criticism expressed in 1957 and to the fate of the “rightists” than did the official history, but they tended to mix up recorded events and unverifiable facts, and they were subject to the defects of the genre: a teleological reading of history, poverty of analysis, thinness of sources, a profusion of unreferenced quotations and dialogues.⁴²

At that time, other writers had completed unofficial works that were bolder and far better documented, but these were not published until 1998, the year that marked the beginning of a period of relative liberalization and transformation in publishing.⁴³ This was the case for

38 She would later say that she had expected a reaction from historians, but they preferred to keep their criticisms to themselves for her protection, and also because she had begun the work which they should have done but had been unable or unwilling to undertake. See Barné, 1991, p. 144-145; Unger, 1993.

39 These reflections and debates thus continued within the circles of exiled dissidents, where some were furthering the work that Dai Qing had begun. Ding Shu 丁抒, for example, published *Open Conspiracy* in Hong Kong in 1991, which was reprinted several times between 1993 and 2006 (Ding, 1991).

40 The translation of the reference book by Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of The Cultural Revolution. 1, Contradictions Among The People, 1956-1957* (1974) was published in March and December of 1989 by two different publishers. The translation of Volume 14 of *The Cambridge History of China* (1987) appeared with three publishers between 1990 and 1992. In the mid-1990s, one could find it in every good bookstore in Beijing.

41 Yao, 1993; Ye, 1992; Ye, 1993.

42 Zhang Yihe 章诒和 (1942-), the daughter of Zhang Bojun, would not fail to criticize these authors and their “literature.” See e.g. Zhang, 1995.

43 After the XVth Party Congress in September of 1997, during which it was

35 See Link, 2000, p. 145-147. For an analysis of this “Prison literature,” see Williams and Wu, 2004, p. 154-188; for Zhang Xianliang and his writings, see Williams and Wu, 2006.

36 Barné, 1991, p. 147-150.

37 Dai, 1989. The text, which was to have been presented at the failed conference of 1987, appeared in January 1989 in China and Hong Kong. In June, it reappeared in a book entitled *Liang Shuming. Wang Shiwei. Chu Anping*, prefaced by Zhu Zheng, and was translated into English in 2000 by the publisher M.E. Sharpe.

the professional writer Hu Ping 胡平, the author of *Allegorical Words—1957: The Bitter Sacrificial Altar* (*Chanji—Yijiuwuqi kunan de jitan* 禅机—1957: 苦难的祭坛)⁴⁴, and especially of Zhu Zheng, a trained journalist, essayist and historian, whose work was completed in 1993 but did not appear until 1998, and not before he was forced to make some modifications to his manuscript, as suggested by “some teachers and experts in the history of the Party.”⁴⁵

His study, entitled *The Summer of 1957: From Hundred Schools of Thought Contending to Two Schools Contending* (1957 nian de xiaji: cong baijia zhengming dao liangjia zhengming 1957年的夏季: 从百家争鸣到两家争鸣), is the first truly historical overall treatment of the subject. The author, who rejects the idea of a “conspiracy,” gives an account of this historic turning point by drawing on almost all of the sources available at the time, including testimonies, and succeeds in showing the complex reality of the Hundred Flowers, by emphasizing, for example, the differences between the voluntary actors of the campaign and the reluctant ones. He also shows that many people only repeated the proposals that had already been made by certain leaders, denounced the violence of political campaigns whose excesses the authorities had already implicitly condemned, and emphasized the consequences of an early abandonment of the New Democracy, which was to last at least ten years. Finally, he succeeds in capturing the magnitude of the repression and its consequences. In 1999, he completed this remarkable study with an account of his own experience of being a “rightist,” starting with the first attacks of which he was a target in 1955 and continuing on to the years he spent in a labor camp and in prison between 1957 and 1973.⁴⁶

5. THE EMERGENCE OF WITNESSES, FROM THE MID-1990S ONWARDS

The publication of this testimonial came right at a time when witnesses resurfaced through autobiographies and memoirs, published in increasing numbers from the middle of the decade.⁴⁷ This development coincided with the relative liberalization of the regime and the beginning of a shift in publishing. It was also a response to the growing interest of the Chinese for the history of their country, as evidenced by the success of books about the past and historically oriented periodicals such as *Spring and Autumn in China* (*Yan-Huang Chunqiu*

炎黄春秋), *Old Photos* (*Lao zhaopian* 老照片)⁴⁸, *Hundred Year Tide* (*Bainianchao* 百年潮) and *Oral History* (*Koushu lishi* 口述历史), which appeared in 1991, 1996, 1997 and 2003.

The right to testify, which had long been the prerogative of the leaders and of a few “authorized” personalities, became more broadly attainable than before: some personalities and intellectuals, both well-known and obscure, their relatives, some officials of the Party, as well as an increasing number of anonymous witnesses, began to publish their memoirs and stories. On the whole, these accounts were freer, more accurate, and more diverse than the few that had been published in the 1980s. Other kinds of memories thus gradually surfaced. These individual memories acted as counterpoints to the official history, and came to fill what had been the silence of the authorities on the most traumatic episodes since 1949, starting with the anti-rightist repression.⁴⁹

As the men and women whose lives took a sudden change for the worse in 1957 or 1958 started to tell of the hardships they had had to endure, new developments in “prison literature” appeared with the publication of testimonies about the camps and exile in the far distant western regions or in the “Great North Wilderness” (*Beidahuang* 北大荒), Chinese Siberia, where many “rightists” were sent to be “re-educated through labor”. Cong Weixi was the first to bear witness to his twenty-year detention in the camps. After a first volume published in 1989, his full testimony appeared in 1998 under the title *The Heading into Chaos Trilogy* (*Zou xiang hudun san bu qu* 走向混沌三部曲).⁵⁰ In the same year, Dai Huang 戴煌 (1928-), a journalist with China New Agency at the time of his conviction as a “rightist”, published his testimony,⁵¹ while that of his colleague at *Dagongbao*, Wu Yongliang 吴永良 (1937-), was published in 2002.⁵² Less well-known former inmates also began to tell of their trial in the camps. He Fengming 和风鸣 (1932-) was notably the first to reveal the amplitude of the famine which struck the camp at Jiabiangou during the Great Leap Forward.⁵³

Their relatives and friends also told of their experiences, for example Xin Fengxia 新风霞 (1917-1998), the wife of the filmmaker Wu Zuguang 吴祖光 (1917-2003) or Jiang Zulin 蒋祖林 (1930-) and Chen Ming 陈明 (1916-), the son and husband of Ding Ling 丁玲 (1909-1986).⁵⁴ One could cite a good many other examples, even if all of these accounts are not of the same quality as those just mentioned. In 2004, Zhang Yihe, for example, published her memories of her father, Zhang Bojun, and his colleagues in *The Past is*

48 On the aims, the success and the difficulties of this journal, see Ding, 2007.

49 See e.g. Ge, 1994; Lu, 1996; Xiao et Li, 1998; Xiao et Fu, 1998; Xu, 1998; Zhu, 1999; Du, 2004; Hu, 2006; Yu and Lei, 2006.

50 Cong, 1989 and 1998; see Wu and Livescu, 2010, p. 17-85.

51 Dai, 1998b.

52 Wu, 2002.

53 He, 2001. Needless to say, many of these testimonies will never be published. For some examples of unpublished manuscripts, see Qian, 2007, p. 501-502.

54 Xin, 2002; Jiang, 2004; Chen, 2010.

announced that the reform of state enterprises would enter a new phase, the State began to offload some sectors and encourage the formation of joint stock companies, leading to the start of a “commodification” (*shangpinhua* 商品化) of the Chinese economy.

44 Hu, 1998.

45 Zhu, 1998, p. 573. The book was published in Taiwan in 2001 and in Hong Kong in 2004. A new revised edition appeared in Taiwan 2013.

46 Zhu, 1999.

47 Of the sixty or more testimonies addressing the year 1957 and published in the 1990s that we have listed, half were published in 1998 and 1999.

Not Like Smoke (Wangshi bing bu ru yan 往事并不如烟), which was banned from circulation a few months after its release, not so much because of its content - for the work contains no particular revelations - as because of its success with the public.⁵⁵

Several collections of autobiographies appeared from various publishers, as well as collections of texts, memoirs and testimonies. Notably, a three-volume anthology appeared in 1998 entitled *The Anti-Rightist Campaign in Memory* (Jiyi zhong de fanyoupai yundong 记忆中的反右派运动) which collected texts from 1957 and testimonies (already published elsewhere or never published before) from students, academics, journalists, and writers who had been attacked during the anti-rightist repression.⁵⁶ The same year, the first collection of Chu Anping's texts appeared, while testimonials of those who had known him in the 1940s and 1950s were published by the professional writer Xie Yong 谢泳 (1961-), who had also dedicated numerous articles to him, together with other democratic intellectuals.⁵⁷

The sudden surge of testimony was accompanied not only by the publication of complete works, but also by that of correspondence and diaries, providing elements that were lacking in other types of writing and that were "contemporary" to the facts - unlike autobiographies and memoirs written after the fact in a context where the official discourse always plays a central role in the implicit limits that it establishes between what can be expressed and what cannot. Note the publication in 1998 of a part of writer Fu Lei's family correspondence 傅雷 (1908-1966), as well as that of the diary of Guo Xiaochuan 郭小川 (1919-1976), Vice-Secretary of the Party branch of the Writers' Association in 1957, and more recently the diary of the journalist Xu Zhucheng (1907-1991).⁵⁸

In addition, from the beginning of the 2000s, certain writers, some of whom had already discovered the treatment and fate reserved for the "rightists" during the Cultural Revolution, began to publish stories which differed, in the space they devoted to issues of life and death in the labor camps, and in their approach, from those published twenty years earlier. In 1965, while working on a production brigade in Gansu Province, the young Yang Xianhui 杨显惠 (1946-) heard for the first time of the labor camps near Jiabiangou (夹边沟), located on the edge of the Gobi desert, where nearly 2,500 out of 3,000 "rightists" held between 1957-1958 and 1961 had died of hunger, cold, or mistreatment. In 1997, he decided to research the matter and managed to find former prisoners whose testimony would be the basis of the narratives that he started publishing in 2001, and which would be collected in a work entitled *Farewell Jiabiangou* (Gaobie Jiabiangou

告别夹边沟) in 2003.⁵⁹ As the independent critic Yu Jie 余杰 (1973-) noted when commenting on what he calls the "the Chinese Gulag Archipelago that emerged from the deep water," these narratives bypassed censorship because they were regarded as fiction. This procedure - adopted by other writers and journalist in the 2000s⁶⁰ - allowed Yang Xianhui not only to reveal the fate reserved for the "rightists" at Jiabiangou, but also to carry out the work of a historian on a largely concealed subject, by providing a reading which eventually led to a historiographical revision.⁶¹

In many respects, the work of the independent documentary filmmaker Wang Bing 王兵 (1969-) mirrors that of Yang Xianhui. In fact, it is the accounts published by the latter at the beginning of the 2000s that inspired Wang Bing's project on Jiabiangou and its camps, a fictional film, also based on the testimonies of the former inmates that he met from 2005 onward. The film focuses on the Mingshui camp during the last three months of the year 1960: only 500 of the 1,500 surviving inmates from the Jiabiangou camp, who were transferred there in October, survived the dreadful famine that had struck the entire country. Filmed clandestinely, produced and shown outside the official media, *The Ditch* was finally released in 2010 after many years in the making, during which the director met He Fengming about whom he decided to make a documentary, *Fengming: Chronical of a Chinese Woman* (He Fengming, 2007). Wang Bing chose to reduce the editing to a minimum, for above all he wanted to give the old lady the opportunity to talk about herself, to tell her story in the simplest and most direct way possible, and to let the film audience *listen* to her.⁶² Through these two films - a historical reconstitution tending towards documentary and a documentary where the *individual word* is primordial - Wang Bing proposes two complementary ways of representing the reality of life in the camps and of giving a full account of the persecutions of the "rightists", especially the ordinary "rightists" and not only the "Big rightists" (*da youpai* 大右派).⁶³

⁵⁵ Zhang, 2004.

⁵⁶ Niu and Deng, 1998; see also: Ji, 2000.

⁵⁷ Chu, 1998; Xie and Chen, 1998. With this author as with others, there is a tendency toward the sacralization of these intellectuals.

⁵⁸ Fu, 1998; Guo, 2000; Xu, 2013. Contrary to what I wrote in 2008, the publication of these private writings has increased in recent years.

⁵⁹ Yang, 2003. The book, which consists of nineteen texts, was republished in 2008 under the title *Jiabiangou Chronicles* (*Jiabiangou jishi* 夹边沟记事).

⁶⁰ You, 2001; Gao, 2004; Xing, 2004.

⁶¹ See the analysis of Veg, 2014.

⁶² In an interview given on France Culture on the 18th of April 2014, Wang Bing said that listening to people is very important, and that it requires patience. Then he added that, in his opinion, people in China today no longer take time to listen to each other, and what is more, they do not spontaneously trust each other, since their history has taught them to hide the truth. This fact explains, in his opinion, the scepticism and the questions with which his film was received. The interview is accessible at: <http://www.franceculture.fr/emission-hors-champs-wang-bing-2014-04-30>

⁶³ For an analysis of these two films, see Veg, 2012; on documentary films and history writing in China, see Pernin, 2011.

6. “REFUSAL TO FORGET” (*jujue yiwang* 拒绝遗忘)

In the wake of this progressive emergence of witnesses, new projects arose that were aimed at building another memory so that “history does not repeat itself one day.” It was to be a more critical memory which would take into account all those forgotten parts of history because, as Qian Liqun 钱理群 (1939-) wrote: “In our vision of History, there are only facts and not men (*zhi you lishi shijian er wu ren* 只有历史事件而无人), great men (*lishi weiren* 历史伟人) (major characters) (*da renwu* 大人物), and not ordinary people (*putong ren* 普通人) (minor characters) (*xiao renwu* 小人物), the political [mobilization] of the masses and not the universe of individual intelligence (*ge ti de xinling shijie* 个体的心灵世界).”⁶⁴

Qian Liqun, a professor at Beijing University where he taught the history of modern Chinese literature until he retired in 2002, has reflected on memory and forgetting for the past ten years or so, and on the factors which have governed the collective amnesia - the “compelled forgetting” (*qiangpo yiwang* 强迫遗忘) - in his country, as well as the dangers which, in his opinion, lie in the temptation to consider the twentieth century a parenthesis, without drawing up an objective assessment.⁶⁵ More concretely, his reflections have led him to start researching the year 1957, basing his research on the texts and the documents of the time as well as published and unpublished accounts that he has begun collecting, along with others.⁶⁶ The project began in the wake of the 100th anniversary commemoration of the founding of Beijing University, when he realized that “the episode of the anti-rightist repression of 1957 had disappeared from the history and memory of the university, as if nothing had happened, without leaving any trace”.⁶⁷ However, whereas many observers are only interested in “Big rightists,” Qian Liqun has focused on the students and the ideas that they defended during the Hundred Flowers and, more broadly, on the individuals who supported and transmitted critical thought at the turning point of the 1950s and the 1960s.⁶⁸

Other projects were planned in the early 2000s to preserve the memory of those who had been persecuted from 1957 onwards, but the difficulties were such that most of them were conducted outside China. One of the most significant of these projects was perhaps the one initiated by Harry Wu (1937-) in 2002 and carried out

in the United States by the China Information Center and its website “Observe China,” which had published a bimonthly magazine since 2003, and, above all, began archiving documents, testimonials, books and published articles - from mainland China and outside China - on the anti-rightist repression and on the Cultural Revolution. Ten years later, the website disappeared, and some of its resources were moved to that of the Laogai Research Foundation, founded in Washington in 1991 by Harry Wu.⁶⁹ In 2008, another project was born in Hong Kong where, in April, the 57 Association HK (香港五七学社) was created to carry out the “collection, collation and study of all the data or literature concerning the Anti-Rightist Campaign,” “in order to preserve memory and data for posterity to study and use as a mirror.”⁷⁰



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4. *Nandu Zhoukan* (Southern Metropolis Weekly) cover (2010, n° 45) “A Rightist Fifty years in a Labor Camp”

More broadly, voices have been raised to denounce the silences and the distortions of the official history and the history that is taught to young Chinese. Yuan Weishi 袁伟时 (1931-), for example, a professor in the department of Philosophy at the University of Canton, published various articles on the subject in the 2000s. In “Modernization and the Issue of History Textbooks” published in June 2002 in the journal *Eastern Culture* (*Dongfang wenhua* 东方文化), he analyzes the historical untruths distilled in textbooks, using several examples, such as the Boxer Uprising. The abridged version of this article, republished in January 2006 in a supplement to *China Youth Daily* (*Zhongguo qingnian bao* 中国青年报), the newspaper of the Communist Youth League, would lead to the temporary closure of the journal. Like the censorship of books after publication, this case demonstrated two things: the importance of

69 In the 2000s, the Foundation published a collection of testimonies of ex-inmates, of which some of former “rightists” such as the one by Chen Fengxiao 陈奉孝 (1936-), a student at Beijing University qualified as a “counterrevolutionary rightist” in 1957 who had spent fifteen years in detention (Chen, 2005).

70 See the “Declaration” of the Association (13th April 2008), available at: <http://www.57hk.org/about.asp>

64 Qian, 1999, p. 294.

65 In 1997, in the preface to the writings of his father Qian Tianhe 钱天鹤 (1893-1972), an agronomist who left mainland China in 1948, Qian Liqun discussed the consequences of the choices made by each member of his family. He also wrote on the “compelled forgetting” that this choice had imposed on those like himself who had decided to stay on the mainland, where they had grown up in the certainty that they were on the side of the “good people,” leading them to reject and ignore entire segments of the history of their country, and particularly the history of the modernization initiated by some “precursors” like Qian Tianhe (Qian, 1997).

66 Interview with Qian Liqun, Beijing, September 1999.

67 Qian, 2007, p. 476-477.

68 *Ibid.*

context in the ongoing developments, and the fact that censorship sought less to eliminate critical ideas than it did previously, but aimed, rather, to obstruct their dissemination to a wider audience.

At the same time, some citizens campaigned for a revision of the verdict about the anti-rightist repression, public apologies to the victims and a complete and full rehabilitation, including reparations for all the damages suffered by the “rightists” and their families. These defenders of the victims’ rights were primarily former “rightists” whose cases had been reopened and “corrected” since 1978 (especially retired teachers), but also “rightists” whose cases had not been entirely “reviewed”. Thus, the victims of the 1957 repression no longer hesitated to confront the authorities with their own contradictions and to point out the absurdity of the reasoning upon which the positive assessment of the 1957-1958 Anti-rightist Campaign was based: how could they still justify the “correct” and “necessary” character of the repression when they themselves had admitted that more than 99% of “rightists” had been wrongly accused?

In 2005, for instance, a demand for the re-evaluation of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, as well as compensation for the violation of numerous constitutional rights, signed by more than 250 people, was addressed to the highest instances of the Party and government. In 2007, as the 50th anniversary of the launching of the Anti-rightist Campaign approached, appeals for a full reappraisal of the campaign, calls for a public debate, and petitions in favor of victims’ rights increased, but the authorities in no way satisfied these demands.⁷¹ On the contrary, the authorities took a tougher stance on the subject. While all forms of commemoration were once again prohibited,⁷² in March 2007, the Central Committee published an internal document entitled “Suggestions concerning the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign question” (*Guanyu yijiuwunian fanyou yundong de ruogan wenti* 关于一九五七年反右运动问题的若干意见). In addition to a reminder of the instructions to be followed in processing and managing claims, public activities, statements, debates and publications related to the Anti-Rightist Campaign, it was indicated that there was to be neither a re-evaluation of the campaign nor a revision of the decisions adopted afterwards, and that the document of reference remained the well-known 1978 Central Document n° 55.⁷³ The creation, in Hong Kong, of the above-mentioned 57 Association HK is without doubt a result of this resounding refusal.

Following the numerous demands for reviews addressed to the authorities from the end of the 1970s onwards, former “rightists” mobilized in the 2000s to try to

assert their rights by basing their claims on legal texts, beginning with the 1954 Constitution that was in force at the time of the events, especially Article 17 (the right to free speech), Article 95 (cultural rights) and Article 97 (the right to compensation in the case of violation of these constitutional rights). As Eva Pills rightly stresses, the complaints about violation of these rights, which were supposed to protect the citizens at the time, have very little chance of succeeding, inasmuch as the judicial institution considers it has no authority to judge such cases.⁷⁴ However, the fact of referring to these rights to legitimize a demand or a claim bears witness to an important change which has gained momentum in recent years and is characterized by the emergence of the “rights defense movement” (*weiquan yundong* 维权运动). In all cases, this reference to “rights” derives from a logic that is a complete antithesis to that governing the rehabilitation process in China, where decisions and methods are the exclusive domain of the Party. In the long term, it could thus contribute to bringing discredit to the procedure, which Liu Xiaobo has long denounced as a means of control and thus a “trap.”⁷⁵ Similarly it could contribute to the discredit of the Party which controls it and which has used it to enforce its own legitimacy and re-kindle loyalty towards itself. Such was the case for many intellectuals who were qualified as “rightists” in 1957-1958, and who were all the more inclined to accept the procedure because it allowed them to close a painful episode in their lives. However, for the time being, one must recognize that rehabilitation - as it has been and continues to be put into practice in China since the end of the 1950s - is not criticized because of the principles on which it is founded, but because of the incompleteness of its implementation, whereas this incompleteness itself - this limit - constitutes one of its fundamental characteristics.

7. THE FIRST SIGNS OF THE REBIRTH OF CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

Another development is worth mentioning, as it could lead to major shifts in China’s post-1949 historiography. Indeed, since the mid-2000s, the field of academic research has gradually opened to the post-1949 period and, logically enough, this period is increasingly better represented in history courses. In fact, not so long ago, academics and researchers could not carry out real research on the Mao Years (1949-1976), and the teaching of contemporary history at university only barely existed in the form of courses on political education.⁷⁶ This development was followed by the transfer of some Party historians to the universities and the Chinese Academy

71 More than forty petitions circulated, of which about ten were sent to the Communist Party Central Committee, to the National People’s Congress, and to the State Council.

72 The main Chinese-language symposium organized to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Anti-Rightist repression was held in Los Angeles on the 29th and 30th of June 2007 and brought together some forty witnesses and Chinese researchers, half of whom lived in mainland China.

73 Namely the 17th September 1978 Circular and its 25th August 1978 above-mentioned attached document. The March 2007 document is available at: <http://www.57hk.org/Note.asp>

74 Pills, 2007, p. 109-111.

75 Barné, 1991, p. 179.

76 In the mid-1990s, the History Department of Beijing University offered few courses on China after 1949. The one on the Cultural Revolution, for instance, amounted to a course on the “Mass Line”!

of Social Sciences, leading progressively to a better balance between these institutions and those which still have the monopoly over the writing of contemporary Chinese history. Certainly, the rules have not yet fundamentally changed, but the demarcations have begun to shift: academics and researchers have more freedom in the choice of the periods and themes they can address, they make use of richer documentation than in the past - either directly, or through the publication of document collections and archives - and consequently supervise more and more student research dedicated to the history of China since 1949.⁷⁷

After the publication of quality research on the republican period, the opening of research onto the contemporary period has inspired new studies which are more precise, better documented, and more rigorous in establishing the facts. This is evident in biographies, which are less conventional than in the past, and through which knowledge has increased over the last decade. A good example is the biography which Zuo Yuhe 左玉河 (1964-), a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, wrote in 1998 about Zhang Dongsun 张东荪 (1886-1973), a major intellectual figure who joined the regime in 1949 and was attacked as early as 1952.⁷⁸ However, the most noteworthy recent change is undoubtedly the surge of new research on the first years of the People's Republic. In this respect, Shen Zhihua 沈志华 (1950-) has established himself as one of the top experts in the history of Sino-Soviet relations and the Cold War. Yang Kuisong 杨奎松 (1953-), who began his career at the Central Party School, has, for his part, undertaken new research on the early years of the regime. Likewise, Feng Xiaocai 冯筱才 (1970-), who dedicated his Ph.D. to Zhejiang Province merchants in the 1910s and 1920s, has begun new research on Chinese entrepreneurs during the 1950s and 1960s. Note that the historian Gao Hua 高华 (1954-2011), who passed away recently, played a pioneering role in this historiographical renewal, as well as in the reflection and discussion surrounding it.

These developments, which should gain momentum in the years to come, are accompanied by critical reflection on historiography.⁷⁹ Implicitly challenging the monopoly that the Party claims on the subject, these historians, trained from the late 1970s onwards, aim to produce a body of historical knowledge that conveys neither falsifications nor the dream-machine of the past and claim their adherence to the writing of scientific and objective history, free from ideological shackles. They reaffirm that their work can only be carried out by respecting rigorous deontology, and they stress

the importance of critical distance, the complexity of the facts that they study, and the necessity of relying on various sources, including testimonies, but without reducing history to memory alone, because it must be kept in mind that history is not memory.⁸⁰

The Social Sciences Academy and its Institute of Contemporary China Studies, the East China Normal University, and Nanjing University (with which these historians are affiliated) unquestionably represent some of the most active institutions in this emerging historiographical field, alongside research institutes affiliated with the Central Committee and the Central Party School, with which collaboration has increased. Moreover, international cooperation and exchange programs with Taiwan, Australia, The United States, and more recently, Europe have been reinforced, while the Chinese University of Hong Kong continues to play a leading role in promoting and diffusing the research undertaken on contemporary history in continental China, as shown by the publication in ten volumes of the *History of the People's Republic of China, 1949-1981* (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo shi, 1949-1981* 中华人民共和国史, 1949-1981 中华人民共和国史, 1949-1981)⁸¹ or the release in 2010 of a remarkable database on the Anti-Rightist Campaign, edited under the supervision of Song Yongyi 宋永毅 (1949-) as a part of a larger editing project of materials and documents on the History of the People's Republic.⁸²

By successive strokes, this research and study is filling the silences and gaps in the historiography of China in the 1950s, and is gradually contributing to a better understanding of this period, not only inside, but also outside China, where the focus has shifted from political sciences to economic, social and cultural history, leading to a profound renewal, as has been the case in the field of Soviet Studies, and especially in the historiography of the Stalinist period, for more than twenty years now. And there is a strong certainty that Chinese historians will continue to encourage this renewal.

The writing of the history of the People's Republic of China, in China, is still in its infancy, but progress has been considerable, if one compares the present situation with that of the recent past. While propaganda continues to play an important role and the authorities continue to exercise control over the interpretation of the past, other voices can be heard and other memories are emerging: an authentic history is in the process of

77 There are now countless Master Theses on the 1950s, a significant number of which focus on the Anti-Rightist repression. Such is the case of the study by Gu Yanmei 谷彦梅 on the "Rightist" schoolteachers in Jiangsu Province, prepared at Nanjing University under the supervision of Dong Guoqiang 董国强 (1962-) and defended in 2010. There are fewer such Ph.D. Theses. The CNKI base only mentions two, prepared and defended at the Central Party School in 2006 and 2009: the first one is a study of the legal community between 1949 and 1957; the second one is a case study research on the Hundred Flowers and the repression campaign that followed in the city of Xinxiang, Henan Province.

78 Zuo, 1998.

79 See e.g. Shen, 2012 and 2013; Yang, 2006 and 2013; Feng, 2011a and 2011b; Gao, 2004, 2010 and 2014.

80 For further readings on these issues, see the articles published by Gao Hua in the 2000s: Gao, 2010 and 2014; see also the innumerable articles available at: <http://www.21ccom.net/>

81 Seven of the ten volumes announced by the publisher appeared in 2008 and 2009, among which Shen Zhihua's study on the Hundred Flowers and the Anti-Rightist Campaign (Shen, 2008).

82 Song, 2010. The CD-ROM is the second part of the collection *Zhongguo dangdai zhengzhi yundong shukajiu* 中国当代政治运动书库 (Databases on the History of the Political Campaigns in Contemporary China). Two others—one on the Cultural Revolution, the other on the Great Leap Forward—appeared in 2009 and 2013.

being born. National and international circumstances certainly continue to weigh considerably on current developments, and concessions made during periods of liberalization are always liable to be challenged. One thing is certain: historians now have sufficient documentation, archives, and testimony to produce quality research on the first phase of the regime that culminated in the anti-rightist repression of 1957, provided that the authorities allow them to. Some recent work shows that - at the very least - the way forward is not being blocked, and one can only hope that those who have begun to shed new light on this period can continue to do so, and that witnesses can contribute to it.

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