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Producing Cultural Memory in the PRC  
On the Role of Historiography, Literature and Film  
in the Context of Writing China's 20<sup>th</sup> century history

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## Introduction: Literature and History

„To look at the value of history from a literary point of view, this is something which is of extreme importance for me!” This is the last sentence of an interview which I had the chance to conduct with the well-known Chinese writer Feng Jikai this year in June. The interview was focused on the relationship between literature and memory, and Feng Jikai who is well known for his interest in issues of memory related to the Cultural Revolution used the opportunity to voice his basic assumptions on the role of the intellectual and the writer in the context of history and memory. For him, the intellectual has the special task of preserving the memory of the past in a society that otherwise does not show any particular interest in preserving or else transmitting the knowledge of what happened in the past. On the basis of his own experiences during the Cultural Revolution he defines literature as the only hope people who were attacked during the Cultural Revolution could have for later generations to understand what the so called enemies of the Cultural Revolution had gone through and had believed in while being under attack. “From my point of view, it is the intellectuals’ task to preserve the memory of the past and to take over the responsibility to turn their minds back in order to prevent mistakes of the past to happen again.” He says this because he believes that the majority of the Chinese people being of peasant origin is oriented towards the present. Peasants do not realize that they need to be rooted in the past to be able to live a decent life. They only think of their day to day routines and have no time for special thoughts about the past which the intellectuals in China articulate by using the wording “huaijiu” or “yearning for the past”. However, for Feng, it is not only the peasant majority of Chinese society that prevents memory from being a central issue; it is also a question of power play. “But we should not forget that there is still another reason which we have to have in mind. And this is the influence of the ruling elite. The ruling elite is not at all interested in people remembering the past and thinking about what happened in the past. They think we should be happy if they can supply us with a decent life today. Why remember the past? They simply don’t want us to remember.”

Feng Jikai’s interest in preserving the past has taken over his life. Except for writing literature related to issues of the Cultural Revolution he is a well known activist spending much of his time in an attempt to rescue traditional Chinese architecture from being torn down in the course of modernizing the cities. On the top of that, he was able to convince the Chinese government of the necessity to preserve Chinese rural folk art which is why he is busy organizing ten thousands of people all over the country in documenting a myriad of different

forms of folk art beginning with traditional Chinese story telling, folk dance and folk music and ending with paper cutting and traditional new year's drawings etc. Thus he combines an interest both for understanding the comparatively recent past and for preserving the roots of modern society in premodern times. While knowing that society needs progress and modernity, he is convinced that men cannot live without knowing about their past and therefore hopes for modern society to realize that it needs the past in order to be able to build the future.

His attitude towards the past is relatively direct and straight forward. Even though Feng admits that every generation must have its own approach to history he still believes that the difference of approach and interpretation is in the final analysis part of a process of getting closer and closer to understanding what history really was all about. "Every generation is victim of its own limitedness. This is the reason why the next generation has to demand from itself that it has to excel the latter. This is how progress in understanding history is achieved; at least that is how it should be achieved. Reading and rereading history is the precondition for progress in dealing with history."

If we take a look at the writers from the so called "new historicist" school, we see that they share Feng Jikai's interest in the past and his assessment of the importance to deal with historical problems. But their attitude towards history is less straight forward and more informed by post-modern notions of history. In an interview with my colleague Andrea Riemenschneider, Mo Yan, best-known for his novel "Red Sorghum" once put his attitude towards the relationship between literature and history into the following words: "In my novel "The Red Sorghum", I try to overcome official historiography. What we read in our official textbooks on the war against Japan is believed to be the only and absolute truth, but Taiwan also has its official textbooks, and I guess they will say something quite different. In this case, I prefer relying on what the people at the grassroots level say and select from what everybody tells me. This is the history I can hear with my own ears and see with my own eyes. I think that I was successful in my novel "the Red Sorghum" to present the simple people's point of view on history, and I try to get myself away from materialist historiography towards writing the history of a mentality, from official historiography towards a people's historiography, from a history of cultural representations towards oral history. Of course, I cannot say for sure which of these different ways of writing history will in the final analysis represent more of what history was originally all about. We simply cannot know about the truth of history any more. We can only guess what happened by selecting from all different sources, oral sources, pictures, tapes etc."

Mo Yan's story "The Red Sorghum" is a conscious effort at deconstructing official historiography and replacing it by a narrative which is based on local experience instead of the centralized perspective as well as on oral recollections instead of history books and archives (Riemenschneider 2001). The story he tells is not the story of a glorious revolution which with its victory overcomes the necessity of bloodshed and opens the gate for a bright and peaceful future. The story he tells is the story of unending, sense- and meaningless violence, the motor of which is not the political strategy of some party neither the theories of some leader. It is revenge that makes people go into one battle after the other, and it is the fight for power that gives their revenge a political connotation sometimes. That is why one victory leads to the next battle just as one defeat is the beginning of the next fight. The suffering people go through in this unending, ever repeating brutality is overwhelming and makes yet another round of suffering ever so plausible. Mo Yan tells us that what Fairbank calls the "century of revolution" (Fairbank 1986) is but a century of bloodshed. It is a century that has cost many people's lives and has not helped China to escape from poverty, war and suppression.

While literary critics from the PRC more often than not try to refrain from discussing Mo Yan's attitude towards history, there are some revealing remarks that show how important Mo Yan's attempt is to rewrite the history of the peasants in China and to gain a new understanding as to what China went through during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. "History has a subversive function for Mo Yan" one critic says, and "The price was too high" says another one both alluding to the fact that Mo Yan rewrites the story of a victorious peasant guerrilla war as a story of unending violence without aim and laws, of blind activism without strategy and tactics, a bloody war which made too many people die. While this aspect of the war against Japan was neglected by official historiography in the past and the victory was worth any kind of sacrifice, people now want to know more about what happened and who had to pay how much. How come that literature gives them the answer and not historiography?

### The Crisis of Historiography in the PRC

As I have shown in my earlier work on Chinese historiography, the credibility of the master narrative on 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese history was based on a hermetic system in which Mao-Zedong-Thought was both the theoretical framework and the ultimate contents of the history of China's unending revolution. History was the emanation of Mao-Zedong-Thought while at the same time Mao-Zedong-Thought was the product and thus the emanation of history. The

circle argument said that the victory of the revolution could only be won under the guidance of Mao-Zedong-Thought while Mao-Zedong-Thought could only emerge from the history of the revolution (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 1984). The argument was aimed at a small circle of people, historiography was an elite undertaking written – to borrow Balacz’s description of traditional Chinese historiography (Balacz 1964) – by bureaucrats for bureaucrats.

The first and in some sense most important blow of long lasting effect against the hermetic system of party historiography was the Cultural Revolution. The fact that long acclaimed leaders of the Chinese revolution were suddenly said to be traitors was not the only, and maybe not even the most devastating blow. More important is the fact that Red Guards were able to storm archives and read the files of party members with details on party history they had never heard about. The clear picture of what was conceived to be right and wrong, good and bad became blurred and the story about the revolution under the leadership of Mao Zedong Thought questionable once enthusiastic youngsters were confronted with the ambiguity of life as it was reflected in the files of their teachers and superiors and revealed in their confessions. The hermetic story on the Party’s history that had purposely been held rough and undetailed had fulfilled its task quite successfully as long as the system was hermetic enough to prevent any details to leak out. The Cultural Revolution destroyed this system as it allowed for hitherto secret information to leak out.

That is why, after the end of the Cultural Revolution the party not only had to take the lead in reorganizing society, but also in rewriting its own history. The 1981 resolution on “Some Questions Concerning the History of the Party since the Founding of the PRC” (Renmin Ribao 1981) left the pre 1949 history mostly untouched, but lacking the “guidance” of Mao Zedong Thought as a help in interpreting the post 49 period it did not have a theoretical framework at its disposal for the interpretation and evaluation of what had happened since 1949. Instead it tried to reconcile the party with its own history leaving it ashamed at its horrendous mistakes and eager to show that it could do better. The rewriting of party and PRC history that started in this context was the de-Maofication of party history. Much in accord with Max Weber’s theories on post-revolutionary leadership, legitimacy was shifted from the one party leader to the collective of party leaders and thus the party saved from its own mistakes by making its beloved former leader responsible for most of them (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 1984).

But official party historiography could not go far enough in filling the many voids that it had left open to imagination. Deng Xiaoping, as a matter of fact, reiterated the basic principle of writing party history by stating that it had to be short. And the party resolution passed in June

1981 has not encouraged official party historians to go into great detail when writing post-49 history. But if the historian does not paint the picture of the past with some detail, he invites his readers to fill the blank spots he leaves open with the kind of imagination they develop on the basis of their personal everyday experiences. The unofficial historiography that developed during the nineteen eighties was invented by journalists from the Red Guard generation who not only used their imagination to draw their picture of the past, but also resorted to what they had found in the files during the early days of the Cultural Revolution. Having gone through uncountable sessions in which traitors had to confess their sins they knew whom they had to ask to get information on the past that the official historians were neither able nor allowed to convey. They subverted the system of party historiography by recurring to oral history as a major means of collecting information on the past, and they spread the suspicion that all what readers of official party historiography had been told in the past was nothing but lies (Barmé 1991). As a result of unofficial historiography breaking the “taboos of party history” and taking up whatever people wanted to know about as their topics of research China’s 20<sup>th</sup> century’s history developed into a major field of discussion while at the same time universities closed their classes on “revolutionary history” as a result of lacking interest on the side of the students.

Another factor that pushed the debate on post-49 history into a central position was the rehabilitation campaign that started shortly after Mao’s death and the fall of the Gang of Four. During the process of investigation that accompanied the rehabilitations many incidents of recent Chinese history reaching back not only to the Cultural Revolution but also to the late fifties with its campaigns against rightists in and outside the party were discussed in public with the immediate relatives of victims from the Cultural Revolution serving as major witnesses (For an interesting selection of these writings see: Zhou Ming 1986 as well as the magazine *Yanhuang Chunqiu*, see Mazur 1999). The writing of the history of the Cultural Revolution has ever since been a major concern. But it is not a centralized process of history writing as we would expect it to be. Instead, friends, comrades and relatives of the victims write the victims’ perspective; the Red Guards, often victims and culprits at the same time, write the Red Guards’ perspective. Clients having lost their patrons in the party leadership write to mourn their death and reactivate their relationship or else to accuse those who were responsible on the other side of the political spectrum. Official party historiography somehow seems to refuse giving an official version of what happened during the years 1966-1976, and stays mostly silent. Party leaders stress the necessity to forget about the “old accounts” that have not yet been settled and try to direct people’s attention to the future. But the past,

especially the many campaigns since the founding of the PRC, is still haunting society as well as quite a number of leading cadres and their relatives, which is why, even though party politics demands to keep quiet about the Cultural Revolution they insist on writing about the Cultural Revolution and all the other humiliating experiences they had to go through even though belonging to the political elite of the PRC (Mazur 1999).

The accounts of the Cultural Revolution in their diversified perspective have also been instrumental in awakening the interest in a new way of writing history as a story. This interest came up in the early nineteen eighties and the fact that Chinese readers show their support for this new way of writing history by their buying decisions has contributed a lot to the growing impact of non official historiography as compared to the vanishing interest in official historiography.

In this context, the event itself is the most subverting factor. As long as official historiography was tied into a system of “shi” and “lun”, of historical facts serving the plausibilization of historical theories (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 1988, 1996, 2001b), the sheer quantity of facts conveyed in history books – and with it the much debated question of the length of a history book – was a crucial factor by itself. In order for the hermetic system of party historiography to survive, only a limited number of facts could be allowed to be included into the text, others had to be tabooed because they could not fulfil the task of plausibilizing Mao-Zedong-Thought, or else had to be excluded because they were too sensitive to the ever changing power structure inside the Communist Party. As soon as alternative channels of gathering and distributing information are established, the number of facts allowed to enter the writing of history cannot be limited any more. The old system of interpretation is destroyed because “facts” and “theories” do not go together any more, leaving readers with the feeling that earlier versions of the historical narrative cannot be trusted as their theoretical framework was not backed by the facts. In other words: The growing number of events included into the writing of history has destroyed the system of party historiography just as much as the shift of ideological orientation within the party leadership compelling party historiography to rewrite the role of Mao Zedong in the course of the Chinese revolution.

At this point the master narrative of the Chinese Revolution had already crumbled into bits and pieces. The hitherto inseparable connection between the theory of the Chinese Revolution and its “concrete practice” had been dissolved and the format of party historiography lost its plausibility. This is where new forms of history writing entered the field (Barmé 1991, Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 1999). Accompanying the hermetic system of “facts” and “theories” the so called “zhang jie” system used to be the dominant form of history writing in China

(Moloughney 2001). Originally imported from Japan at the end of the last century, the “zhang jie” system is a system dominated by historical theory and interpretation in which the argument is systematically propelled moving from the most abstract level of theory via the medium level of interpretation to the concrete level of the historical events selected to demonstrate the plausibility of the argument. The “zhang jie style” master narrative never was a master narrative in the sense most readers of Western historiography would expect it to be. The persuasiveness of the argument did not rely on the historian bestowing the chain of events related to a certain time period, a certain place and a discrete number of people involved with meaning by arranging them into the form of a story. The persuasiveness of the argument relied on the logical relationship between “facts” and “theories”. Unofficial historiography had already taken first steps to overcome the “zhang-jie”-format and had gained much applause from their readers for writing history into a story. But their stories were confined to single aspects of the grand narrative; they never intended to rewrite the “master narrative” as a whole.

Instead writers from the school of “new historicism” like Mo Yan have contributed to the rewriting of history by means of literature (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 1998, 2003). They invented both a new form and a new content. What is evolving in China today is the combination of history and story to replace the “zhang jie” format with its combination of history and theory. And the fact that this new way of writing history has become so prominent during the last years is due to the deconstruction of the master narrative including the theoretical framework that had so far formed the basis of historical interpretation. With no theoretical framework around, the only way history can be bestowed with meaning is by writing it into a story. And writing a story means giving the dynamic of the events highest priority as they and only they can carry the message the historian wants to convey.

Mo Yan writes a history of meaningless fighting into a story, and other writers grouped under the name of “new historicism” (xin lishi zhuyi) do the same. There is no theoretical framework in China available which could replace the system of “shi” and “lun” based on Mao Zedong Thought. So literature becomes the field where alternative interpretations can emerge and try out the boundaries of what is possible and acceptable. Yu Hua’s story “Life” is written in a much more realistic style than Mo Yan’s, and it does not go so far as to deconstruct “national” history by writing the “untypical” highly particular history of a certain region in Shandong as Mo Yan prefers to do. But it conveys the same message of meaninglessness, of despair and of failure. The only reason why his protagonist can convince himself of the necessity to go on living is that he survives every round of manslaughter that he



has to go through. Yu Hua picks all the events that official historiography marks as the highlights of 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese history for his story, but he gives them another meaning as he looks at them from the participants' perspective. And the participants going through civil and national wars are first and foremost confronted with suffering, they do not know while fighting is still going on whether it will lead to victory or defeat, and even if they are told later on by the historians that the suffering was worth the victory they can still not forget the kind of disaster they had to go through. This side of China's history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has so far been neglected, and the fact that historiography has so far been unable to integrate this perspective into its narrative is maybe the most important reason why there is no master narrative on 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese history any more.

### Cultural and Communicative Memory

Jan Assmann's theory on the production of cultural memory helps us to understand the process of history writing through literature, but at the same time, also compels us to adapt his theory that is based on the study of ancient high cultures to the environment of a young post-revolutionary nation state. Jan Assmann shows us that there are two basically different modes of dealing with the past. The very remote past is important for collectives to know in order to understand the origin of the collective be it a family, the population of a certain region or a nation. In order to give an explanation to the origin of certain memorizing collectives, history is turned into myth and the details of what really happened are no longer important. Much more important is the explanatory character of the myth, not its correspondence with reality. A collective reassures itself about its own origins by going through certain rituals or by referring to certain texts which need to be reread and reinterpreted in order not to be forgotten. This is how cultural memory comes into being and is kept alive as well as adaptive to the changes of time and circumstances.

On the other hand, the knowledge of the recent history cannot be canonized, its contents is still alive in the memory of people having gone through this period of historical development, and the memories of recently past events is much too diversified to find a common understanding or explanation that could be regarded as convincing and binding for a great number of people. Nevertheless, the past that is conserved in the memory about the past 100 years for which Jan Assmann picked the name of communicative memory is of major importance. It is kept alive in more informal ways including the writing and telling of history

by non-experts as opposed to the cultural memory which is organized by experts. If we take Jan Assmann's theory for granted, nothing unusual is happening in the PRC.

But if we take in account that since the emergence of the nation state, the question of origin can no longer be pushed back into the remote past, we do have reasons to look at the Chinese situation again. Liang Qichao observed during the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that China was lacking one very important ingredient: its ability to make the people understand that they belong to one nation and that they have to identify with this nation. In his famous article "On the new historiography" he argued in favour of copying the western style of history writing which to his mind was most instrumental in creating the kind of national identity China needed in order to cope with the West. From this time on, Chinese historiographers - be they Marxists or not - in one way or the other contributed to writing a kind of Chinese history that was part and parcel of the process of nation building. And as the process of nation building has been identical with the process of state building since the revolution of 1911, the question of origin cannot be separated from the memory about the recent past. The origin is not situated in the remote past, but is part and parcel of the recent past living in the memory of three generations with a small number of people still alive who witnessed the end of dynastic rule and the beginning of a republican order. At the same time, we have to cope with several beginnings during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Except for the revolution of 1911, we have to take the beginning of Guomindang rule in 1927 in account as well as the Communist take over in 1949. This is the problematique of the unending revolution, which forces the historian into several explanations on the origin of post-revolutionary states. And this is how historians are more or less compelled to mythologize a period of historical development which their readers have themselves encountered.

Official historiography has solved this problem by refraining from telling the story of China's 20<sup>th</sup> century history. Instead they focused on explaining the origin of the People's Republic by using history as the background against which to explain Mao Zedong Thought. No reader ever expected to be represented in this kind of history, thus everybody accepted the above mentioned hermetic system. But - and this is the other side of the story - as soon as this system loses its hermetic character it not only loses its persuasiveness regarding its explanations on the origin of Communist rule. It also loses the power to keep its reader from trying to find their own history in this master narrative of China's 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the most outstanding problems in this context is the representation of suffering in China's modern history. Historiography has so far been unable to write about the sufferings of the Chinese people. Literature as a medium of collective communication which is based on its ability to

make the reader find him or herself in the story fills the blank which history used to writing in the mode of cultural memory has not been able to fill. And as long as historiography has not learned to write history into a story readers will look for their history in the stories written by Chinese writers. This is the need that authors like Feng Jikai, Mo Yan and Yu Hua have been able to identify, and what they do in terms of Jan Assmann's theory is opening the recent history of China for communicative memory to develop its diversity by including the historical experiences of more than only one political force.

Writing the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century China as if it were cultural memory is the special task official historiography has to fulfil. And in contrast to what I talked about earlier on they do not aim at making people identify themselves with this form of cultural memory by having them participate in feasts and rituals underlying and repeating the contents of cultural memory. They write history as bureaucrats for bureaucrats, and they make sure that those who are members of this bureaucracy or else intend to become bureaucrats know what the content of cultural memory is about. This is the reason why they do not know how to include personal memories and individual events into their framework of history writing. They only have the ability to write history in a top down process aimed at explaining why the rule of the Communist Party of China was well legitimized.

### Revisiting Literature and History

If we look back at what Feng Jikai and Mo Yan had to say about this question we see that Feng Jikai's activities are aimed at both defining the identity for the present on the basis of the past and at interfering into the realm of communicative memory so as to make people know about their recent past and to prevent them from making mistakes in building their own future. In both cases, he contributes to defining norms and identities in a positive and constructive way, with the intellectual acting on behalf of the people, of society and of culture. It is through his writings that people recognize themselves and their part in history and therefore gain an interest in knowing what the past was all about. Feng Jikai's way of dealing with history is event oriented, leaving the explanation for what happened in the past more or less untouched.

In Mo Yan's case, the people from the grassroots level are the source of his understanding of history. Oral history includes participation of the participants, a bottom up approach of knowing the past. On the other hand, Mo Yan is looking for the reason why, he wants to understand why China had to go through the kind of history it went through, and especially

does he want to be able to understand why the Cultural Revolution could take place the way it took place. That is why his writings are aimed a de –mythologizing the past while at the same time establishing a new myth in the sense that “myth is a story, that people tell each other to find orientation for themselves and the world, it is a truth of higher ranking, which is not only true but more than that in posing normative demands and disposing of formative power”. (Assmann 1999, 76, own translation) Mo Yan does not give straight forward explanations, but he relies on the legends people tell him to create a myth which makes history understandable. He unearths what has already been forgotten or tabooed and he reformulates the memory of the past so that his story develops its strength in giving the people a new kind of identity. While his literature at first sight is but destructive, both in contents and in structure, his aim is to create an alternative founding myth as the answer to destroying the kind of myth that official party historiography created about the peasants and the Chinese revolution. Looking at both authors simultaneously, we see that literature not only fulfils the function of voicing the communicative memory that historiography leaves untouched. It even goes so far as to claim its right to contribute to creating the kind of cultural memory that young nation states tend to create as part of their nation building process.

#### Trauma in History and Detraumatization through Images

But 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese history is a history of extremes, plastered by what today many people call traumatic experiences. Ban Wang holds the view that these experiences cannot be put into words and are therefore beyond the capabilities of either historiography or literature. A traumatic experience is an experience of contingency and meaninglessness that cannot be integrated into personal life stories, not to speak of collectively accepted narratives. But people who have gone through this kind of experience still feel the need to communicate them; they want to share their experience especially after a certain period of time in which they usually prefer to stay silent about what they have gone through. In this situation, so Ban Wang, film serves as an adequate instrument to translate these experiences into images and thereby find a way to communicate them without having to explain them (Ban Wang 1999).

Ban Wang analyses several films to exemplify his theses and show how traumatic experiences are being communicated by images. He also draws our attention to the fact that even in times when the official master narrative still met with wide acceptance in mainland China, some films allowed for the participants’ perspective to be presented and even though their direct

aim was to stir up patriotic passion, behind the story of heroes and victories, traces of the traumatic history seep or break through (Ban Wang 1999, 36).

For Ban Wang, trauma as something inexplicable, gives rise to the symbolic, and even though the symbolic cannot fully explain the meaning of the traumatic event, it can at least make it comparable. By making it comparable the symbolic adds to the process of detraumatization which Ban Wang sees as a necessary precondition for getting rid of the compulsion to repeatedly suffer under or participate in traumatic events. While European theoreticians hesitate to force detraumatization on people and speculate on the possibility to live with the trauma in one's mind (Rüsen 2000, Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 1998, 2003), Ban Wang, Mo Yan and Yu Hua reflect on the repetitiveness of the trauma and on revenge as a form of detraumatization in which overcoming one trauma is the beginning of the next one.

Ban Wang shows us that we have to consider multiple ways of dealing with the past both with the help of words and the help of images. He also reminds us of the fact that we should not be too quick in deciphering pictures and interpreting texts. Maybe incessantly heralding the victory is but suppressing the grief over how much blood had to be shed to gain it. Images and texts activate their recipients in different ways and contribute differently to what Feng called in his interview "the basic capability of mankind: the capability to remember."

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