When the River of History Disappears:  
The Past in China’s Patriotic Education Campaign

by

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments______________________________________________2

Preface________________________________________________________________3

Introduction: Perfunctory Patriotism_______________________________7

Ch. 1: Water can Either Carry or Overturn a Boat____________________27

Ch. 2: Chinese Culture’s Bitter Journeys________________________48

Ch. 3: The Heavenly Kingdom, a “Useable” Past__________________73

Ch. 4: Paving the Road to Rejuvenation__________________________94

Ch. 5: Only by Upholding Confidence in History…___________125

Conclusion: Undercurrents of Consciousness___________________145

Bibliography________________________________________________156
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Preface

I came into this world
Bringing only paper, rope, a shadow,
To proclaim before the judgement
The voice that has been judged:

Let me tell you, world,
I—do—not—believe!
If a thousand challengers lie beneath your feet,
Count me as number one thousand and one.¹

—Bei Dao, “The Answer”

Wandering the Hundred Buddhas Garden on July 19th 2013, Professor Zhu Zhenghui told me, “Mountains and rivers don’t change, and neither does history.” For him, the evidence rested in the faces of the garden’s Tang Dynasty Buddhist sculptures. These had been rescued by caretaker Xu Sihai from the chaos of the Cultural Revolution.

Although the Cultural Revolution is only obliquely discussed in history textbooks, and has no public museums dedicated to it, its shadows nevertheless continue to ring in the present. They manifest themselves in the tattered canvas of memory, defiantly springing forth in seemingly quiet places like Mr. Xu’s garden. As an outsider, I rely on individuals such as Professor Zhu to unfurl memory’s coarse cloth. Through the fog of my own limited experience, their stories guide my sketches of an indistinct yet audible past.

I first began listening to China five years ago—an interest complicated by my complete lack of Chinese language skills. It was precisely this ignorance of the world’s most populous country that led me to defer my enrollment to Wesleyan and

live with a Shanghainese host family for a year. During that time, I learned Mandarin, taught English to the children of migrant workers, and traded stories with anyone willing to tolerate my cluttered Chinese grammar.

Despite my linguistic and cultural inexperience, these exchanges attuned me to the tremendous, often disruptive changes that characterize Chinese modernity. Apartment complexes towered over smelly alleyway markets. Fake Rolex watches glinted past blind peddlers on the street. From the rubble of demolished residences emerged entire subway stations in a matter of months. As the haze of my language barrier began to dissipate, I began to notice that amid the discord, almost every convenience store window trumpeted the 2010 World Expo slogan, “The City Allows for a More Beautiful Life” (*chengshi, rang shenghuo geng meihao* 城市，让生活更美好).

The most curious thing to me, however, was not the unfathomable speed of China’s economic development. Rather, I was struck by the inescapable fact that just as I perceived this peculiar world, it gaped back at me—a gangly, pale, blonde-haired outsider. On trains, I was the strange Westerner who hardly fit in his bed. In parks, I was the odd fellow who caused old Shanghainese to drop their bags and reach to touch my oversized nose. In my English classroom, I was not a teacher, but a foreign teacher (*waiguo laoshi* 外国老师). This status as “the foreigner” colored my every interaction with China, and will presumably continue to do so.

While studying in Beijing in 2012, my Chinese friends and I repeatedly debated contentious issues such as the Diaoyu Island conflict and America’s negative image as “global hegemon.” In this setting, my status as a foreigner became most
apparent. What I viewed as a legitimate territorial dispute, the Chinese students interpreted as blatant Japanese aggression. While I understood the Dalai Lama to be a peace-seeking religious leader, they painted him as a feudal slaveholder with an implacable desire to wrench Tibet from China’s grasp. We arrived at only one consensus: we had exceedingly different understandings of historical “facts.”

Hoping to further explore this critical tension, I began to study Chinese history education. Over the summer of 2013, I returned to Shanghai to research the Communist Party’s (CCP) patriotic education campaign—a massive, multimedia effort to encourage national pride through patriotic portrayals of Chinese history. During this time, I interviewed history professors, high school history teachers, students, and friends. Importantly, I learned that my conversations in Beijing were merely representative of how strangers discussed this topic with foreigners, and not necessarily how Chinese debated issues of history and politics amongst themselves.

While I am undeniably an outsider looking in, this particular subjective position allows me an opportunity to interpret Chinese history education and national identity through a unique lens. The Chinese themselves often say, “pangguanzhe qing”—the onlooker sees things clearest. I do not claim to have the “clearest” view. Regardless, I sincerely believe that each subjective slice of any whole, objective reality has worthwhile value. Though the defiant protagonist of Bei Dao’s “The Answer,” brings little to the world, he nevertheless arrives to proclaim his disbelief: to submit his dissent, no matter how minuscule, to preconceived judgments.

Similar to “The Answer,” the famous Chinese documentary River Elegy (1988) raises a challenge to authority. Symbolizing China’s history of imperial
dominance through the image of the ambitious yet muddied Yellow River, the
narrator stridently declares:

“To Chinese, no floodwater anywhere is as frightening as the Yellow
River’s great floods. As early as the Book of Songs, Chinese would
heavily sigh: “To wait for the River to clear, how many lives must pass
[si he zhi qing, ren shou ji he 俟河之清，人寿几何]?” Throughout its
entire civilized history, the Yellow River has been China’s hardship.²

Like the silt-laden Yellow River, the shadows of Chinese history continue to roar
through the present. As our paper lantern boat casts its flicker upon murky currents,
we must do our best to see darkly through water, and fathom tremendous depths.

² Su Xiaokang, Wang Luxiang and Xia Jun, River Elegy (Heshang), China Central Television, 1988,
Introduction

Perfunctory Patriotism

When the great river of history disappears from the earth’s surface, it frequently turns into an undercurrent of consciousness; after the dark clouds of ideology disperse, they gradually transform into dense fog within the heart-mind. — Feng Jicai, *One Hundred People’s Ten Years*

Out of all the metaphors that the prolific author and Tianjin cultural preservationist Feng Jicai could have used to encapsulate Chinese history, a river is perhaps the most fitting. Long, turbulent, and relatively continuous, Chinese history has flowed from the brush of generations of historians under imperial employment since Qin Shi Huang declared himself China’s first emperor in 221 B.C.E. Moreover, Feng’s river metaphor also captures Chinese history in another aspect. Just as Li Bing’s Dujiangyan weir has irrigated Sichuanese farmland for over two-thousand years, and Sui Yangdi’s Grand Canal has facilitated trade and transportation across China since its completion in 609 C.E., Chinese history has been consistently reconstructed and redirected to serve imperial needs. Over many dynastic cycles, Chinese have developed a unique appreciation for history’s rapidly shifting currents. Some have even dared to question the authorities that seek to guide history’s course—a tradition that continues today.

In January 2006, Professor Yuan Weishi of Sun Yat-sen University addressed the variable nature of Chinese historiography in an article entitled “Modernization and History Textbooks” in *Freezing Point*, a supplemental section of the *China Youth*

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Daily. Yuan pointed out factual distortions in how Chinese history textbooks portray the Second Opium War, and labeled what he perceived as jingoistic historical narratives with the term “wolf’s milk” (lang nai 狼奶). Invoking the presence of traumatic undercurrents latent in Chinese historical consciousness today, he declared:

After experiencing the three great disasters of the Anti-rightist Campaign, Great Leap Forward, and Cultural Revolution, people bitterly discovered that one of the root causes of these disasters was: “We grew up drinking wolf’s milk.” Over twenty years have passed, and what startles me while occasionally flipping through our high school history textbooks is: our youth continue to drink wolf’s milk! By criticizing history textbooks, Yuan Weishi also implicated the CCP—the official compiler—in the continued production of wolf’s milk. Furthermore, by asserting that wolf’s milk continues to flow just as it did during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, during which tens of millions of Chinese were starved and beaten, he cast the Party as a violent corrupter of historical truth.

Following the publication of Yuan’s article, Freezing Point was immediately closed. Nevertheless, it did not remain closed for long; editor-in-chief Li Datong wrote an impassioned open letter on a popular blogging site that cited persistent CCP pressure to censor the paper’s historical portrayals. Li also criticized the Central Propaganda Department for directing other newspapers to ignore this controversy before notifying Freezing Point itself of its closure. At the end of his letter, Li echoed Professor Yuan’s concerns by contrasting the CCP’s censorship with Freezing Point’s commitment to historical truth:

When one does not have the truth, one is afraid of debates; when one does not have the truth, one is afraid of openness. Although certain

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people in the Central Propaganda Department used their power to lock up all media and websites, we believe that you will read this letter! You have the power of knowing the truth! 

Li’s fervent appeal to support the truth did not go unheeded. After an outpouring of online support for Yuan and Li, including responses from young bloggers who bitterly recounted their own experiences drinking “wolf’s milk,” the Central Propaganda Department agreed to allow Freezing Point to reopen under different editors. Despite Yuan and Li’s inability to publish further, the section’s reopening represented a substantial retraction by an authority accustomed to exercising firm control over official media. Though this controversy quickly faded from public scrutiny, both Chinese government officials and intellectuals were sharply reminded of the volatile fulcrum on which Chinese history twists and turns.

**China’s patriotic education campaign**

*Aiguo* 爱国, literally meaning “to love the country,” is the Chinese word for “patriotic,” and aligns closely with Western conceptions of nationalism. In fact, political scientist Zhao Suisheng argues that Chinese “patriotism” is a form of state-led nationalism that “portrays the Communist state as the embodiment of the nation’s will, seeking for its goals the loyalty and support granted the nation itself.”

According to Zhao, after the Tiananmen Square Massacre and the fall of the Soviet Union, the CCP realized that Marxist-Leninist ideology and Mao Zedong Thought

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had disappeared as effective “spiritual pillars” (精神支柱 jingshen zhizhu), and therefore were no longer effective mechanisms of state legitimation.  

At that time, CCP leader Deng Xiaoping lamented, “We didn’t tell them enough about the need for hard struggle, about what China was like in the old days and what kind of a country it was to become. That was a serious error on our part.”

In order to remedy this mistake, Deng Xiaoping and other CCP leaders elected to replace Marxist-Leninist education with an ideology that positioned the CCP as the ultimate guardian of the Chinese nation. Today, this new ideology is implemented through a “patriotic education campaign,” which includes historical narratives that blame the “West” (including Japan) for China’s development woes, as well as praise the CCP’s role in establishing Chinese sovereignty and economic ascendancy.

China’s patriotic education campaign started with two documents issued in August 1991: the “Notice about Conducting Education of Patriotism and Revolutionary Tradition by Extensively Exploiting Cultural Relics,” and the “General Outline on Strengthening Education on Chinese Modern and Contemporary History and National Conditions.” On March 9, 1991, General Secretary Jiang Zemin wrote:

> We should conduct education on Chinese modern and contemporary history and national conditions to elementary school students (even to the children in kindergarten), middle school students and to the university students. The education should go from the easy to the difficult, and should be persistent.

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8 Ibid., 289.
After calling for comprehensive patriotic education at all levels of schooling, Jiang emphasized the content of history teaching: namely, a thorough focus on the “Hundred Years of National Humiliation” (bainian guochi 百年国耻). Starting with the First Opium War, these years included repeated submission to foreign powers. Patriotic narratives claim that through the CCP’s strong leadership, China emerged from these “Hundred Years” to embrace a bright modern destiny.

Jiang’s emphasis on the CCP’s leading role in overcoming national humiliation was reiterated in “A Program for China’s Education Reform and Development,” a document issued in January 1993 that singled out patriotism as a “guiding principle” for Chinese education reform. In addition, the Central Propaganda Department, the State Education Commission, and the Ministry of Culture issued a joint document entitled “Circular on Carrying out Patriotic Education in Primary and Secondary Schools throughout the Country by Film and Television” in November 1993. According to official media, by May 1994, “more than 95 percent of primary and middle school students in Beijing were organized to watch patriotic films recommended by the State Education Commission.”

Finally, in August 1994 the CCP disseminated a document entitled “Guidelines for Patriotic Education,” to educational institutions ranging from kindergartens to universities. This document, along with the “Outline for Conducting for Patriotic Education” (which appeared in the People’s Daily on September 6, 1994), stipulated the abolishment of Marxist political science college entrance examinations for science students. In addition, it required universities to offer

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electives in Chinese history, arts, literature, and traditional culture. In essence, Marx had been turned on his head: students were no longer required to understand Marxist theories, and China was no longer portrayed as a leader of international proletarian struggle. Instead of asking students to reconcile Mao with Marx, the new curriculum portrayed the CCP as a salvation figure determined to reestablish national dignity through gradual state-guided expansion of the Chinese economy.

The enormous scope of patriotic education is no small feat; every Chinese citizen under the age of 23 has grown up with patriotic films, textbooks, and homework assignments in every step of their formal education. Though it is unclear whether this content truly creates blind nationalism, it has nevertheless significantly influenced national historical discourse.

**The search for a “useable” past**

Although the CCP’s patriotic education campaign is unique in its massive scope, its creation of patriotic history textbooks is hardly unparalleled. In 2002, Russian President Vladimir Putin stressed that history education should “emphasize great achievement of the nation and not its mistakes,” as well as “inculcate a feeling of pride for one’s country.” That same year, the Russian Ministry of Education and Science held a competition to produce new patriotic textbooks to distribute to secondary schools—an effort that ultimately led to the production of A.V. Filippov’s *The Contemporary History of Russia, 1945-2006*. Historian David Brandenberger

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12 Ibid., 219.
14 David Brandenberger, “A New Short Course?: A.V. Filippov and the Russian State's Search for a "Usable Past",” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 10, no. 4 (Fall 2009), 829.
describes such textbook competitions as a “search for a ‘useable’ past”—a quest to salvage something from Soviet history to restore Russian national pride today.

While different from the CCP’s portrayal of Mao, Filippov’s glorification of Stalin highlights how officially sponsored narratives selectively represent the past:

[Stalin’s] most cruel means were justified by their ends…their goal was the mobilization of the administrative apparatus in order to ensure its effectiveness both in the process of industrialization and, after the war, the restoration of the economy.¹⁵

Filippov’s unilateral simplification of Stalin’s broadly contested legacy supports the Russian state’s search for a “useable past.” Similar to Filippov’s support of Russian hegemonic authority, Chinese patriotic textbooks include narratives that describe the Party as the hero of yesterday and savior of tomorrow. In this sense, the CCP too is engaged in a quest to rescue “useable” meaning from a difficult past.

Despite 20 years having passed since the beginning of China’s patriotic education campaign, it still operates along the same basic guidelines today. Its objectives are defined in Point 7 of the 1994 “Outline for Conducting Patriotic Education.” According to the Outline, patriotic education must teach the indomitable Chinese spirit, rich Chinese tradition, modern historical achievements, revolutionary heroes, and resistance to foreign oppression.¹⁶ The Outline also stresses the necessity of teaching guoqing 国情—the “national conditions” that determine China’s global position, as well as demand the dedication of a Chinese people imbued with a sense

¹⁵ Ibid., 826.
of national responsibility. It attempts to unite Chinese behind one definition of “Chineseness,” and frames the Party as a crucial preserver of Chinese strength and national sovereignty.

Beyond defining the goals of patriotic education, the Outline also calls for the establishment of “patriotic education bases” where students may learn about the struggles and sacrifices of China’s past. Point 20 classifies museums, revolutionary memorials, cultural protection sites, and historical remains as important sites of patriotic education. In response to this directive, the CCP Ministry of Civil Affairs announced 100 national “demonstration bases” for patriotic education. According to political scientist Wang Zheng, forty of these sites function as memorials for conflicts with foreign powers, twenty-four commemorate the Chinese Civil War, twenty-one cover the achievements of Chinese civilization, and fifteen memorialize Chinese heroes (including CCP leaders, model workers, and patriots).

Following this initial national demonstration, local governments began constructing their own patriotic education bases. Wang calculates:

A dozen provinces put more than 10 million Chinese yuan into the development of the patriotic education bases annually...Beijing, Hebei, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, and Anhui...have established more than 434 provincial-level bases and 1,938 county-level patriotic education bases...The number of memory sites for the whole of China could be over ten thousand.

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17 While the best literal translation of guoqing is “national conditions,” the character qing 情 itself has two meanings, denoting both “circumstance” and “feeling.” Thus, much like aiguo (loving the nation) the word guoqing connotes an emotional, even erotic affection for the nation. In this sense, the word guoqing straddles the border between objective and subjective, just as “patriotic” history education endows purportedly “objective” facts with emotional significance.
18 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 107.
Across China, an astounding number of patriotic “memory sites” serve as physical manifestations of official narratives, and play a central role in the Chinese student experience. Additionally, access to these sites has been made increasingly affordable: a February 2004 document entitled “Proposals of the CCP Central Committee and the State Council on Further Strengthening and Improving Ideological and Moral Education of Minors” declared that patriotic education bases provide free tickets to all primary and secondary school student groups, as well as offer half-price tickets for individual student visits. This policy provides patriotic education to all Chinese regardless of socioeconomic status, and allows schools to schedule required visits.

A student tour group visits the National Museum in Beijing during summer vacation

School visits to patriotic education bases aim to ensure that Chinese students physically experience official portrayals of history. Due to the mandatory nature of this process, all students visit several such sites over the course of a year. Even if a student did have the option to not participate in such visits, however, patriotic

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narratives are equally ubiquitous outside of formal educational institutions.

Referencing the CCP slogan “Make Entertainment a Medium of Education,” Wang Zheng describes the all-encompassing public promotion of patriotic education:

The CCP set the entire propaganda machine in motion for this campaign. State-run newspapers, magazines, radio, and television had special columns or programs on the theme of patriotic education. Artists were summoned to propagate historical myths and trauma through literature, theater, and films...The campaign, therefore, does not merely focus on the educational system but actually permeates all Chinese pop culture and media.  

The popular valorization of certain figures and groups in Chinese history is perhaps the patriotic education campaign’s most defining feature. Children do not merely encounter patriotic myths in history textbooks: both they and their parents consume official narratives through television series about the CCP’s heroic resistance to Japan, or through films about Chairman Mao’s leadership during the Civil War.

Poster for Huang Jianxin and Han Sanping’s *The Founding of a Republic* (2009), a CCP-sponsored movie recounting the Party’s leading role in establishing the PRC in 1949.

In the poster for the CCP-sponsored film *The Founding of a Republic* (2009), the meaning of “making entertainment a medium of education” is made clear. Above the

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22 Ibid., 108.
revolutionary-red Chinese title—which translates closer to “The Great Undertaking of Founding the Nation”—the figures of Mao and other larger-than-life leaders are imposed over a myriad of soldiers. As these leaders ponder their Great Undertaking, the masses below follow their orders, paving China’s path forward.

By funding patriotic films and television series, the CCP blurs the lines between what is Party-sponsored and what is privately driven, and disseminates patriotic education far beyond the confines of school buildings. In this sense, the Party portrays a “useable” past meant to popularize and legitimate its present-day leadership of China. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether such “useable” histories ultimately prove useful to the hegemonic authority that constructs them.

Historian Edward Friedman argues that patriotic narratives support a xenophobic strain of Chinese nationalism. Borrowing Yuan Weishi’s use of the “wolf milk” metaphor, Friedman highlights how patriotic accounts portray Japanese as vicious murderers and Chinese as lamblike victims during the War against Japan.23 He believes these consciously constructed narratives of historical victimization began to appear in 1978 to deflect attention from the disturbing truth that many Chinese during the Cultural Revolution were wolves as well, beating teachers and killing neighbors.24 Friedman asserts that today’s patriotic education may exacerbate this dangerous habit of self-victimization, and incentivize the CCP to make reckless yet popular decisions on the global stage. He believes that the search for a “useable” past engenders historical amnesia, which consequently endangers the present.

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24 Ibid., 401.
Correct, but not accurate

In spite of Friedman’s fears, it far from obvious that patriotic education has led to a resurgence of Chinese nationalism. My own interviews conducted between June and August 2013 revealed that although all Chinese consume patriotic education, most harbor complex feelings about how the CCP portrays history and requires students to learn it.

When I visited the patriotic site of the First National Congress of the CCP in Shanghai with a couple of Chinese friends, I encountered few other visitors aside from high school students and state-owned enterprise employees who were visiting as part of school or work requirements. At one point, I stopped to observe a wax reconstruction of the first CCP meeting. Though Mao, a little-known Hunanese representative at the time, played a negligible role in this meeting organized by CCP
co-founder Chen Duxiu, the wax reconstruction placed him in a dominant position, illuminating his standing figure as it enlightened the seated members. Although this was not the first time I had encountered the historical myth of Mao as a prophet of Chinese modernity, the glaring reconfiguration of early CCP history nonetheless shocked me. Noticing one of my Chinese friends chuckling to himself, I asked whether he believed the wax scene was an accurate portrayal of the First National Congress. He paused, then carefully responded, “It’s correct, but it’s not accurate.”

Due to the sensitivity of this subject, many of the conversations that frame this thesis must remain anonymous. In quoting my interlocutors, I try to be as faithful as possible to their words, keeping in mind that if they are openly cited, they could face political repercussions. These conversations, however, are crucial to understanding how Chinese react to the patriotic education they are required to consume.

In the words of Russian history education experts Ekaterina Levintova and Jim Butterfield, “Students don’t just consume information from texts; they varyingly internalize, interpret, critically analyze, and even ignore what they learn.”25 In a China in which the state strives to “Make Entertainment a Medium of Education,” Levintova and Butterfield’s reminder is particularly relevant. All Chinese consume official narratives, and are thus to some degree placed in the position of “student.” The question of what sort of students they resemble—obedient, critical, quiet, or rebellious—remains open for discussion.

During my interviews with Chinese professors, high school teachers, and students, one phrase that consistently surfaced when discussing popular perceptions

of patriotic education was *fuyan seze* 敷衍塞责, which roughly translates to
“performing a task in a perfunctory manner.” Examples of “perfunctory patriotism”
take many forms: empty patriotic education bases, people sitting on museum stairs
texting friends instead of engaging with exhibits, the Shanghainese man at the
National Anthem Museum who joked, “Coming here is a great way to study for the
*gaokao*: they’ll never dock points if you repeat what’s covered here!” As one student
told me while visiting the Site of the First National Congress, “Ninety percent of the
people who visit here feel apathy above all else. It’s usually an assignment to come
here; people don’t do so spontaneously.” This attitude of “perfunctory patriotism”
was typical among Shanghainese students: although they seemed to understand the
value of studying history to “learn from the mistakes of the past,” they also
recognized the biased nature of most official narratives. Perhaps patriotic education
amounts to “wolf’s milk,” but during my research in Shanghai, young students in
particular seemed to be well aware of what they were drinking.

As my interviews continued, I began to sense the subtleties of the relationship
between Chinese people and patriotic education. Patriotism was certainly *learned*
in pursuit of incentives such as university admissions, state jobs, or CCP membership,
but it was learned in order to *perform*: to go through the measures necessary to reap
the material benefits that such knowledge could produce. In Guangzhou, a political
science professor confided that above all, he believed patriotic education produced
apathy:

> Over time, people build up an immunity [*mianyi li* 免疫力] to this sort
> of empty [*kongxu de* 空虚的] education. By the time students arrive at
> school, they are already jaded and ignore what is being pushed at
> them…As a teacher, I care about truth and history, and I don’t believe
the required content that I teach, but because I need to teach it, it’s extremely difficult to get students to pay attention to anything I say.26 …Almost everyone at every level merely perfunctorily performs their duties. The students perform \([fuyan 敷衍]\), the teachers perform, and the government officials who assign these materials also perform.

As active performers of patriotism, Chinese use their built-up “immunity” to superficially accept CCP narratives as “correct” while still retaining their own critical thoughts. This performance is necessary: Chinese cannot directly question the Party unless they are willing to risk harming their own interests. In order to enroll in universities and climb China’s socioeconomic ladder, they must perform successfully.

One of the primary ways students learn to perform is through reading high school history textbooks, which teach material to be covered on the \(gaokao\)—China’s college entrance examination. Over the summer, I collected several history textbooks, and encountered a diverse array of official portrayals of modern Chinese history. This thesis includes close readings of three textbooks, and treats them as manifestations of the way the CCP wishes to validate itself through historical reconstruction.

The first textbook I analyzed was the Renmin Jiaoyu Press’ Full-time Common High School Education Textbook (Required): Chinese Modern History (RJP), published in 2002. The oldest textbook included in this thesis, RJP was published directly following the Hainan Island Incident of April 2001, when a U.S. spy plane collided with a Chinese fighter jet over Chinese airspace. This caused an international dispute that angered the Chinese people, and soured public perceptions of U.S. foreign policy. Whether this incident affected the narratives within RJP is unclear, but of all three textbooks, RJP contains the strongest anti-Western language.

26 Emphasis mine.
In addition, it also expresses the most support for CCP policies during the disasters of China’s Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution.

Unlike RJP, the Renmin Press’ 2004 *Common High School Curriculum Standard Experimental Education Textbook: History, Required* (RMP) contains less anti-Western language, and frames the CCP as the leader of China’s socioeconomic development throughout the 20th century. In order to support this narrative, however, RMP necessarily refrains from discussing the Great Leap Forward in its entirety. This omission reveals how difficult it is for the CCP to negotiate traumatic periods of China’s post-1949 history today. In order to present cohesive narratives of socioeconomic progress, RMP necessarily excludes most politically sensitive, self-contradictory historical events.

The final textbook, published in 2010 by Shanghai’s Huadong Shifan Daxue Press, is entitled *High School History: High School Third Year, Experimental Edition* (HSFD). Unlike RJP and RMP, HSFD covers both national and world history, highlighting China’s increasingly important role in global affairs. HSFD is the only textbook that details the madness that gripped China during the Great Leap Forward. It also comes closest to broaching the sensitive topic of China’s Great Famine. Commissioned by the Shanghai Municipal Government and compiled by professors from Shanghai universities, HSFD also includes end-of-lesson questions designed to stimulate critical thinking among students, most of whom will enter a hyper-competitive, rapidly globalizing Shanghainese job market.

Though HSFD primarily focuses on the CCP’s role in leading economic development, and includes relatively moderate language, it should not be mistaken
for being any less “patriotic.” As the needs of the Party change, the “correct”
definition of patriotism shifts in accordance. Because HSFD was distributed after the
CCP decentralized textbook compilation to urban and provincial printing presses in
the early 2000s, the textbook specifically addresses Shanghai students. Using local
Shanghai anecdotes to enrich broader national history, this textbook promotes a
hidden curriculum that encourages students to contribute to both Shanghai and
China’s rapid global ascendancy. Though HSFD’s narratives differ from the more
traditional patriotic narratives of RJP (2002), they too represent efforts to encourage
the economic development that has buttressed the CCP’s political control since
Reform and Opening.

On a final note concerning textual interpretation and the ideal of “accuracy.”
There is an Italian proverb that says, “Traduttore, traditore,” which literally means,
“Translator, traitor.” Every act of translation is an act of betrayal. Though a faithful
translator strives to render original meaning perfectly between languages, exactitude
is impossible. For instance, the word *jingshen* 精神, may be translated as “spirit,
consciousness, essence, or vitality.” When I render Feng Jicai’s phrase “jingshen de
anliu 精神的暗流” as “an undercurrent of consciousness,” I omit countless other
potential interpretations. Nonetheless, this act of betrayal has presented analytical
opportunities. Through conscientious deliberation over how to render Chinese words
in understandable English, I have discovered concepts that are difficult to convey
across linguistic boundaries. Many of these concepts lie at the center of this thesis.

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27 Edward Vickers and Biao Yang, "Shanghai's History Curriculum Reforms and Shifting Textbook
**Between zhengtong and daotong**

When I asked one Guangzhou professor why historians such as Yuan Weishi feel the need to transgress accepted boundaries of perfunctory patriotism, he responded by alluding to the tension between *zhengtong* 正统 and *daotong* 道统, two concepts that date back to the famous Song Dynasty Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi. Summarizing Zhu Xi’s characterization of these two terms, East Asian studies expert William Theodore de Bary writes:

> In both of these cases, *tong* has the primary meaning of “control,” “bring together,” “coordinate.” With Zhu Xi, it is effective repossession or reconstitution of the Way that is conveyed by *daotong*, just as *zhengtong* meant effective repossession or reconstitution of the empire, often after a period of disunity. For Zhu Xi, *zhengtong* constituted a recognition of a dynasty’s political legitimacy without necessarily conferring on it the moral legitimacy of *daotong*.

While *zhengtong* represents a firm grasp on the mechanisms of political power necessary to unite an empire, *daotong* is the scholarly transmission of the “Way”: an interconnecting thread of Heavenly truth dispersed among intellectuals across generations. Just as the ruler must unite the country with political power, it is the Chinese intellectual’s responsibility to seek the truth, and to transmit it to both rulers and the rest of society in hopes of creating an enduring, harmonious sociopolitical equilibrium. In this sense, *zhengtong* and *daotong* are not polar opposites, but are complementary forces that exist in constant tension with one another.

Several teachers I interviewed believe that while today’s CCP has a firm grasp on political power, it has betrayed the Confucian ideal of benevolent governance. In

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particular, they believe that patriotic education aims to convince Chinese to follow a new “Way” defined by the CCP. Intellectuals such as Yuan Weishi dispute this hegemonically defined Way by hewing to what they conceive to be transcendent historical truth. They search their consciences, using daotong to illuminate the proper path to harmonious society.

Similar to the Guangzhou professor, philosopher Xu Jilin recognizes that Chinese intellectuals have often attempted to regulate hegemonic power by asserting the primacy of the true Way. Nevertheless, he also believes that this loyalty to transcendent truth may be corrupted by the desire for political power. In this case, the idea of transcendent truth is employed to constrain the unbiased pursuit of objective knowledge (xuetong 学统). Xu rejects the supremacy of Zhu Xi’s traditional daotong, and calls for the strengthening of a Chinese “humanistic spirit” (renwen jingshen 人文精神) that will allow intellectuals to simultaneously serve as checks on state power and supporters of rational discourse:

This dao will not hope to use ideological means to unite academics and politics: it is merely the metaphysical foundation for the entire society’s cultural integration, providing a system of meaning and rules of communication. The relationship between this new “daotong,” xuetong, and zhengtong is equal, positive, and interactive. The humanistic spirit will provide an ultimate source of legitimacy for the system-world, and the latter, through forms of systemization and organization, will protect the implementation of humanistic ideals within reality.30

In advocating a modest daotong—a “humanistic spirit” tasked with providing the ideological underpinnings of society—Xu encourages intellectuals such as Yuan Weishi and Li Datong to refrain from getting involved in the politics of history

textbooks. Defying Xu’s appeal to a unified humanistic spirit, however, the CCP and dissenting Chinese intellectuals engage in mutual provocation, each attempting to bury the other’s narratives.

In spite of the CCP’s dominant political position in the struggle over historical truth, intellectuals nevertheless play a crucial role in keeping Party separate from nation, and “correct” separate from accurate. Amid shadows of the past, China carefully gropes its way across history’s obscured river, seeking some sort of foothold formed by the slippery contours of political control and historical truth. While the path forward seems uncertain, the end of Bei Dao’s “The Answer” resolutely claims:

A new conjunction and glistening stars
Adorn the unobstructed sky now:
They are the pictographs from five thousand years.
They are the watchful eyes of future generations.31

Though this poem was written in 1976, government officials and intellectuals continue to struggle over China’s destiny, which hangs in the uncomfortable balance of past and present. If Chinese history is a river disappeared, then it is the watchful stars that remain, faintly illuminating the dark undercurrents of the past.

Chapter 1

Water can Either Carry or Overturn a Boat

We must become acutely,
disturbingly aware of the language we are using,
and that is using us.32


It is written in Tang Dynasty records that when Emperor Tang Taizong asked his minister Wei Zheng for advice on how to govern the population, Wei Zheng tactfully responded, “Water can either carry or overturn a boat [shui ke zai zhou, yi ke fu zhou 水可载舟，亦可覆舟].” Though this answer may seem cryptic today, in the context of an ancient tradition that emphasized conveying political advice through metaphor, its message was clear: the people are capable of lifting a virtuous emperor to great heights, but also have the power to punish an unworthy emperor by inciting violent rebellion. Ever since its initial appearance, this phrase has remained etched into the minds of Chinese rulers and ruled alike.

Despite the fact that Wei Zheng’s advice continues to exist as a popular idiom in the Chinese vernacular, the demands placed on China’s political system have changed significantly since the seventh century. China’s government no longer possesses the “Mandate of Heaven”: as an authority driving capitalistic development while attempting to govern an increasingly globally-connected population, it must at least nominally uphold modernity’s basic values, which include universal equality and fair treatment under the rule of law. While acknowledging these universal modern values, however, the CCP must also fulfill its role as the leader of the

Chinese nation. For this, it employs a specific language of nationalism that highlights the cultural uniqueness of China’s past, the shameful “Hundred Years of National Humiliation” of the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as the hope of a bright future under the innovative leadership of the CCP.

The language of Chinese nationalism plays an essential role in the patriotic education campaign, and establishes both a sense of Chinese cultural superiority and a feeling of shared national purpose among Chinese today. In this sense, as Chinese use the language of nationalism both at home and in school, it in turn uses them. Nevertheless, this is not merely a relationship of unilateral manipulation: in shaping and transmitting a specific language of the nation, the hegemonic institution of the Chinese state opens itself to redefinition from below. If the water in Wei Zheng’s metaphor symbolizes the Chinese people, then it is the language of nationalism that sets the water into motion, and ultimately determines the fate of the CCP’s boat.

**Grafting the imagined past onto the present**

Though the abstract idea of the “nation” eludes tidy conceptualization, all national communities to a certain degree recognize some kind of shared historical experience and culture. These qualities help make the nation a cohesive entity with a common past, present, and future. For the purposes of discussing Chinese nationalism and its linguistic underpinnings, Southeast Asian historian Benedict Anderson’s definition is particularly apt:

[The nation] is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion…It is imagined as a
community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.\textsuperscript{33}

This definition captures a central feature of Chinese nationalism—namely, that despite the tremendous regional, socioeconomic, and linguistic differences among Han Chinese, all nevertheless recognize their shared possession of a long, storied history, as well as common membership in an imagined community with a singular destiny. The collective possession of national membership, however, does not indicate that the Chinese nation itself preceded Chinese nationalism. The Chinese nation was not an organic entity; it was a concept that emerged during China’s 19\textsuperscript{th}-century confrontation with the forces of Western imperialism and modernization.

In the well-known book \textit{Nations and Nationalism}, Ernest Gellner lays out a general theoretical framework for understanding national identity formation. Gellner proposes that the process of industrial development leads to a mobile division of labor, which results in “sustained, frequent and precise communication between strangers involving a sharing of explicit meaning.”\textsuperscript{34} When diverse populations are funneled into industrial society in this way, people are forced to produce and reproduce outside of their original localities. Gellner labels this process “exo-socialization.”

According to Gellner, the imperative of exo-socialization spurred by industrialization creates the socioeconomic foundation necessary for national identity formation. Despite the cohesive logic of Gellner’s thesis for Western European countries, however, his theory is an imperfect fit for the Chinese nation. While


European nations relied on states to establish standard national languages and school systems, China’s character writing system has connected Chinese from different regions for thousands of years.\textsuperscript{35} Furthermore, traditional culture has been transmitted across generations of scholar-officials required to read and memorize Confucian classics (\textit{sishu wujing 四书五经}). Although most Chinese throughout history have lived as illiterate peasants, they nonetheless assumed the Confucian values encouraged by the traditional imperial hierarchy, and dutifully passed those values on to their descendants. Thus, though the economic imperative of “exo-socialization” and state-implemented education systems may have laid the foundation for national identity formation in Europe, it cannot explain the origins of the Chinese nation, which formed within a predominantly agrarian economy.

China’s written language and Confucian values imparted a sense of cultural community well before the modern concept of the “nation” as a political community came into existence. Though the Chinese nation is fully self-conscious today, the cultural fabric of China’s past remains woven into its core. The primacy of this cultural identity is articulated by political scientist Wang Zheng, who argues that historical memory is the most important channel of Chinese cultural transmission between generations:

Because it functions at a preconscious or subconscious level, collective memory is very often our ‘collective unconscious.’ As a people’s national ‘deep culture,’ historical memory is not objective knowledge and very often cannot be explicitly learned.”\textsuperscript{36}

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\item \textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 37-8.
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Although the “deep culture” embedded within historical memory is not explicitly transmitted to younger Chinese in a tangible fashion, it is nevertheless actively cultivated through what Wang Zheng calls a “Chosenness-Myths-Trauma” (CMT) complex. Whenever family, local, and national community structures transfer language or historical narratives that fall under one of the three CMT categories to their children, they participate in the modern reproduction of Chinese historical memory and culture.

Wang sees “chosenness” as something immanent in the Chinese lexicon itself. He runs through a series of names that Chinese use to refer to “China,” including zhongguo 中国 (the middle kingdom), tianxia 天下 (all under heaven), zhonghua 中华 (central flourishing), tianchao 天朝 (the heavenly dynasty), and shenzhou 神州 (the divine land).\(^37\) Names for the Chinese people themselves include long de chuanren 龙的传人 (descendants of the dragon), as well hua 华 (the cultured in-group), which is firmly distinguished from yi 异 (the barbarian outsider).\(^38\)

Even this cursory consideration of names for “China” and “Chinese” shows the extent to which “chosenness” is embedded in Chinese language and culture. These terms not only elevate the special nature of Chinese identity, but also add a mystical element, allowing the language to retain ancient myths (such as Chinese having descended from a dragon) that graft a unique, sacred past on a less certain present. In addition, Wang Zheng lists short phrases such as wenming guguo 文明古国 (civilized ancient country), canlan wenming 灿烂文明 (brilliant civilization), and

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 41.
\(^{38}\) Ibid., 42.
“Loving the nation” versus “loving the Party”

Although the patriotic education campaign employs the language of “chosenness” in its portrayals of myths and trauma, it has failed to fully convince Chinese to recognize the CCP as a “chosen” leader. Summer interviews in Shanghai revealed that most Chinese maintain a firm distinction between “loving the nation” (aiguo 爱国) and “loving the Party” (aidang 爱党). This explicit linguistic distinction puts Zhao Suisheng’s contention that Chinese patriotism is constructed by the state into question. Zhao Suisheng claims:

The Chinese state created the most vividly articulated and full-bodied image of the Chinese nation that had ever existed. It affirmed the idea of the supreme sovereignty of the state, strongly promoted the official language, and fostered the notion of a centralized nation-state against both ethnic separatism and localism…Aiguo zhuyi (patriotism, or, literally in Chinese, loving the state) became the unifying Chinese term in Chinese nationalist discourse to express loyalty to the state and a desire to serve it.⁴⁰

Although Zhao Suisheng is correct that the Party promoted the supreme sovereignty of the state and created an official language of nationalism, it is less clear whether this ideology became truly unifying. The apathetic people who sit on museum stairs and

³⁹ Ibid., 43.
⁴⁰ Zhao Suisheng, A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism (California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 78.
the student who differentiates between “accurate” and “correct” do not wholeheartedly follow the party’s conception of loving the nation. This is because they interpret the state’s attempt to equate itself with the nation as disingenuous, and experience “feelings of disgust” (fanggan 反感) in response.

According to Zhao Suisheng, the Party is pragmatic; it behaves in a way that follows no absolute set of values or principles. Because the CCP is pragmatic, he believes it maintains the flexibility to bend the language of nationalism however it wishes in order to generate support for its image as benevolent leader of the Chinese nation-state. In reality, however, this pragmatic use of language sometimes generates precisely the feelings of disgust that the CCP wishes to suppress. For instance, a 2013 patriotic propaganda piece that claimed, “How is China strong? The reason is the CCP,” was greeted with considerable derision on popular Chinese blogging sites. Bloggers such as “Gooseprints on Snowy Ground” even turned the language of this poster against the CCP, using wordplay to evoke the connotation of violent force contained in the Chinese character for “strength” (qiang 强):

The official media most loves forcing words to reason fallaciously [qiangci duoli 强词夺理]; the government most loves raping the popular will [qiangjian minyi 强奸民意]; unscrupulous businessmen most love forcing demolitions [qiangchai 强拆], because if there were no forced demolitions, there would be no “New China”…Clearly, “strength” is present-day China’s strongest sound.

By cynically embracing the language of CCP propaganda, then using those words to caustically lambast the Party’s behavior, “Gooseprints on Snowy Ground” not only  

41 Ibid., 209.  
rejects the poster’s verbal message, but also mocks its imagery: a benevolent teacher standing under a tree with red book in hand, kindly describing the “Chinese Dream” (zhongguo meng 中国梦) to curious little children. Although few Chinese react so vehemently and publicly to the CCP’s propaganda, the discourse surrounding this image nevertheless shows that even when the Party pragmatically portrays itself as a benevolent Confucian teacher, its efforts do not necessarily engender patriotic pride.

This CCP propaganda piece was posted in subway stations and national newspapers during the summer of 2013. The intended translation is “How is China strong? The reason is the CCP.” However, bloggers pointed out that by using another meaning of the word qiang 强, the central message reads, “How does China forcefully seize? The reason is the CCP.”
As long as Chinese continue to steadily differentiate “loving the nation” from “loving the Party,” then regardless of how many “party-loving” images the CCP puts forth, its attempts to generate patriotic pride in the Party’s leadership will only result in further feelings of apathy or disgust. While the CCP may have created its own language of nationalism, its words are not so easily associated with the cultural identity that is central to modern “Chineseness.” In other words, the CCP cannot simply employ the language of nationalism within patriotic messages and expect it to create popular support for Party leadership. If the state’s pragmatism betrays or does injustice to the central tenets of Chinese culture, then it generates anger and mistrust.

In contrast to Zhao Suisheng, Peter Gries gives considerable agency in the construction of Chinese national identity to common people. Central to Gries’ argument is the notion of “face.” Gries argues, “‘Saving’ or ‘maintaining’ face involves efforts to preserve what social psychologists call ‘ingroup positivity’ or ‘collective self-esteem.’ To the extent that we identify ourselves as ‘Chinese’ or ‘Americans,’ we seek to maintain the face or honor of our nations.” According to Gries, members of national communities transfer their collective face to the national subject, and task their governments with protecting national face on the global stage. As the Party strives to link the notion of “loss of face” to China’s “Hundred Years of National Humiliation,” it must simultaneously maintain face by confronting Japanese attempts to reclaim the Diaoyu Islands, or standing up to American “containment policies” in the Pacific. In this sense, Gries believes that the Party must respond to popular pressure to protect China’s international image, and argues that as the

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Chinese government adopts increasingly cooperative positions on international affairs, it will lose its control over Chinese nationalist discourse.\textsuperscript{44}

Though Gries admirably explains the effect that “angry youth” (fenqing 愤青) protesters have on Chinese foreign policy, he does not account for how this patriotic pride is cemented in this small but vocal community of aggressive, sometimes violent nationalists. While any surge of popular nationalism in the 1990s and early 2000s should matter to scholars of Chinese nationalism, and foreign policy experts should devote considerable attention to the cultural notion of face, Gries fails to account for how “angry youth” are made to care about China’s traumatic past to begin with. He does not explain what makes a group of overworked high school students read popular nationalistic books instead of devoting their time to other subjects, snoozing in history class, and apathetically sitting on museum stairs.

In an attempt to answer the question of how Chinese national identity has evolved to its current form, Prasenjit Duara paints the modern nation as a subject supported by an imagined historical unity collectively imposed on the past. He claims:

This reified history derives from the linear, teleological model of Enlightenment History…I allow the nation-state to see itself as a unique form of community which finds its place in the oppositions between tradition and modernity, hierarchy and equality, empire and nation. Within this schema, the nation appears as the newly realized, sovereign subject of History embodying a moral and political force that has overcome dynasties, aristocracies, and ruling priests and mandarins, who are seen to represent merely themselves historically. In contrast to them, the nation is a collective historical subject poised to realize its destiny in a modern future.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 121.
\textsuperscript{45} Prasenjit Duara, \textit{Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning the Narratives of Modern China} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 4.
Duara describes the nation as an entity forged through struggles between powerful interest groups in an imagined teleological History. As History progresses, the nation gradually comes to be recognized as a collective subject that endures trials and tribulations, and proceeds along a “chosen” path that ultimately leads to its modern destiny.

According to Duara, “An incipient nationality is formed when the perception of the boundaries of community are transformed, namely, when soft boundaries are transformed into hard ones. This happens when a group succeeds in imposing a historical narrative of descent and/or dissent on both heterogeneous and related cultural practices.” Describing this complex process of boundary formation, Duara coins the word “discent,” which indicates the national recognition of shared cultural descent, as well as the collective dissent voiced against illegitimate “others” over time. He maintains that national communities employ narratives of discent in order to elevate certain cultural practices—like language, religion, or common historical experience—as well as raise the self-consciousness of the collective in relation to foreign “others.”

Despite the irksome neologism he deploys, Duara introduces a significant point about the formation of national and cultural identity: when a nation’s soft boundaries harden, cultural elements are mobilized not only to emphasize shared membership in the national community, but also to exclude outsiders from partaking in the community’s benefits. Furthermore, Duara recognizes that Chinese national identity does not necessarily derive from China’s CCP-driven modernization. Unlike Gellner and Anderson, who “regard national identity as a distinctly modern mode of

46 Ibid., 66.
consciousness,” he notes, “groups in both modern and agrarian societies identify simultaneously with several communities, all of which are imagined.”

By deconstructing Western claims that posit nationalism as an essentially modern phenomenon, Duara recognizes the traditional cultural foundation that enabled Chinese national identity to emerge in an agrarian economy. In this sense, he also rejects the modern, Party-centric discourse of Zhao and Gries, and encourages further analysis of historical narratives of “discent” constructed outside the ideological confines of the CCP.

Although Duara critically questions Western premises that equate national identity with modernity, he nevertheless makes his argument in terms that reify a dichotomy between “East” and “West.” In Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the 20th Century, Rebecca Karl criticizes Duara for representing the “West” as a single entity, and asserts that his concept of “discent” brushes away the nation as “ideological (narrative) dross.” Karl believes that China’s national narratives derive from complex interpretations of global dynamics. Dismissing the notion of a monolithic “West” that served as a foil for Chinese national identity, she calls for a more comprehensive interpretation of geopolitical and geographical realities:

The conceptualizations of globality (geopolitics + geography) and its relationship to China in the late Qing period cannot be encoded merely as acts of recognition, acquiescence, or even of resistance to the space of geopolitics translated as geography (‘the West’). That is, if we concede that ‘the West’ was neither recognizable as such for most of the nineteenth century—it was an imaginary ‘stage’ that was being produced but did not exist as such—and that ‘China’ was not an

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47 Ibid., 54.
already constituted national concept at the time (without denying that the Qing dynasty was obviously a polity and recognized as one), then inquiring into the formation of such overarching categories of historical conceptualization as ‘the West’ and ‘China’—among others—must form a central part of the historian’s task. 49

To render these words more succinctly, Karl does not believe that Chinese national narratives formed in reaction to a nonexistent “West.” Conversely, she proposes that Chinese nationalists acknowledged an unevenly distributed modernity that also threatened less developed “Western” nations. Karl describes Chinese representations of these historical conditions as having existed in neither Western teleological nor homogenizing terms, and argues that intellectuals constructed Chinese national identity with the rest of the modernizing world in mind.

Both Duara and Karl offer valuable insights to present-day efforts to examine the language of Chinese nationalism. While Duara’s concept of “discent” highlights the cultural basis of national narratives and explains how national boundaries are formed, Karl’s critique reminds us that nationalism is not shaped in reaction to a single “other,” but is an intricate negotiation of identities upon a global stage. Unlike the 20th century, however, China’s current national discourse is overseen by a powerful hegemonic authority. When the CCP constructs self-laudatory historical narratives atop the nationalism of the past, it results in the “perfunctory patriotism” exhibited by Chinese today.

Due to the patriotic education campaign’s wide-ranging efforts to equate the CCP with the Chinese nation, the fabric of Chinese nationalism has added many layers that are often difficult to separate. Recognizing the intricacy of Chinese nationalist discourse, political scientist Orion Lewis notes, “The emergence of new

49 Ibid., 10.
nationalist ideas in China today is the product of the complex interaction of state-led patriotic orthodoxy with broader structural shifts—namely globalization and the spread of horizontal communications—which have fundamentally altered the process of nation-building for the CCP.” In other words, patriotic narratives exist amid larger global and technological developments. These changes provide discursive space that shifts the boundaries of the language of nationalism today.

Lewis, like Gries, acknowledges that the Party is not an almighty arbiter of national sentiment. Though the Party builds and propagates patriotic narratives, its hegemonic control of national discourse is constrained by the ubiquity of advanced telecommunications in a globalizing economy. Despite the existence of government censors, Chinese increasingly use these horizontal communications to engage with each other and the rest of the world. By comparing various interpretations of history and current events online, Chinese expand national discourse outside the politically determined borders of patriotic narratives. In this sense, they access a national identity that lies below the surface of “perfunctory patriotism,” and continue to distinguish “loving the nation” from “loving the Party.”

A five thousand-year-old civilization’s dream

Zhang Yimou, the renowned Chinese filmmaker who was named artistic director of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Opening Ceremonies, readily acknowledges the cultural identity that underlies Chinese nationalism today. Describing the Olympian task placed before him, Zhang once declared, “This is a job

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one hundred times more demanding than directing a blockbuster movie, because I am responsible for celebrating the realization of a century-old dream and showcasing a 5,000-year-old civilization. ^51 Whether 5,000 years of continuous, cohesive civilization may be said to exist or not—a claim that scholars both inside and outside of China vigorously debate—this quote exemplifies the overwhelming sense of pride and connection that many Chinese feel for their cultural heritage.

The century-old dream that Zhang Yimou here refers to is the hope of “national rejuvenation” following a shameful era of “national humiliation” in which China’s traditional global authority was subjugated to Western and Japanese powers. When given the job of directing the opening ceremonies, Zhang Yimou felt the need to project China’s true cultural essence to the rest of the world: to show that the “ancient dragon” had risen again, and that its brilliant, civilized descendants were stronger than ever. The 2008 Opening Ceremonies represented a chance to showcase China’s history of cultural superiority and to provide proof that China had found its “chosen” path toward national rejuvenation.

To begin the ceremony, Zhang employed 2,008 traditional fou drummers in order to represent China as a nation of “ritual and etiquette.” The muscular performers beat their drums and shouted in perfect unison, presenting an image of strength, discipline, and above all joyful pride. Later in the ceremony, Zhang recounted the famous Ming Dynasty Admiral Zheng He’s “voyages of peace and friendship,” idealizing traditional Chinese culture as harmonious and benign. ^52 This portrayal, however, serves as a perfect example of how Chinese historical memory

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52 Ibid., 46.
carefully selects its own content. While Admiral Zheng He (1371-1433) excelled in discovering new regions to which the Ming court’s influence could be extended, he also frequently committed acts of violence against local populations. According to several records, he even invaded places like Sumatra, Java, and Ayutthaya in Thailand.53

A non-Chinese director may have decided to exclude Zheng He’s voyages from the Olympic Opening Ceremonies, which are supposed to emphasize international cooperation and peace. Zhang Yimou, however, felt that Zheng He’s nautical accomplishments served as a powerful example of China’s once-dominant global position. By incorporating Zheng He’s voyages into the performance, Zhang sent a clear message: the Opening Ceremonies symbolized a glorious Chinese civilization’s awakening, and China was once again an impressive, formidable presence on the global stage.

Zhang’s portrayal of China’s national rejuvenation is merely one of many threads in Wang Zheng’s “chosenness-myth-trauma” framework of historical memory. Another concept that augments the analytical utility of Wang Zheng’s CMT theme is found in Stephan Feuchtwang’s work on historical transmission. His study of German, Jewish, and Chinese processes of sharing memoires of trauma emphasizes the social aspect of individual reconstructions of history, as well as the public recollection and commemoration of historical events. Though Zhang Yimou individually decided what to include in the Opening Ceremonies (despite the likelihood of input from CCP officials), his personal conception of Chinese history is derived from channels of historical memory that include his family, his peers, his

53 Ibid., 46.
education, and the Chinese media. According to Feuchtwang, the transmission of historical memory bonds individuals to past experiences, and also perpetuates certain ways in which people share memories of traumatic events, whether directly experienced or not. For instance, Feuchtwang believes that the quiet way in which Chinese parents and grandparents encourage their children to eat more—often to the point of unhealthy overeating—functions as a channel of transmission of the Great Famine that took place during China’s Great Leap Forward:

The younger generation turn their backs on the generation that had lived through the famine despite their being constantly reminded as children to eat up because they should consider themselves lucky to have what is in their bowls. It is in the pursuit of material well-being and the negation of their parent generation’s hardship (acknowledging it without wanting to have anything more to do with it) that the famine is most commonly transmitted.

By stressing the importance of valuing food, the older generation silently transmits their hardships to the younger generation. In turn, the younger generation internalizes the suffering of the past without directly addressing it, and chases money in an attempt to shake off the famine’s lingering insecurities.

The term “transmission” implies the special importance that cultures place on passing down knowledge from old to young. Remembering is merely the first step of this process: it helps older people establish what they wish to transmit, and how they wish to share their experiences. The dynamic created by the intergenerational transmission of historical memory shapes both transmitters and receivers, and affects how information is recalled and exchanged in the future. Though the surface content and channels of transmission change over time, the unique sense of cultural

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55 Ibid., 15.
“choseness” at the heart of Chinese identity endures as historical memory is passed down to each new generation.

**The cultural transmission of “tianxia”**

Despite the CCP’s hegemonic control over the content and circulation of the patriotic education campaign, Wang Zheng and Feuchtwang’s work shows that something deeper than officially constructed patriotism is being transmitted in China today. Nevertheless, while Feuchtwang provides the concept of “transmission,” he has difficulty defining historical memory itself. Although the concept of historical memory is a useful analytical tool for understanding the formation of Chinese national identity, it does not fully encapsulate the Chinese “essence” that Zhang Yimou exhibited in the 2008 Olympic Opening Ceremonies. The specific language Chinese use to define themselves and their culture is integral to understanding how separation between national community members and “others” arises in the first place. This language also highlights how the boundaries of national identity manifest themselves in a diverse, rapidly globalizing Chinese society. In order to understand what sort of historical memory is being transmitted, it is necessary to explore how language cements Chinese culture into the heart of the nation.

Guo Yingjie’s concept of “cultural nationalism” provides critical insights to how Chinese discuss and interpret patriotic narratives through a lens of cultural identity. Unlike Zhao and Gries, who respectively argue that Chinese nationalism is either constructed by the CCP or triggered in response to its actions, Guo believes that Chinese nationalism is centered around a community that maintains a shared
belief in Confucian orthodoxy. In particular, the language of Confucian tradition emphasizes benevolent government, harmonious social relations, and unity:

What cultural nationalism is fundamentally against is the ideology of the Party, not the state, not even state nationalism as a whole. Its dispute with state nationalism centres primarily on what constitutes authentic experience and authentic community, and the focal point of contention is the Party-state’s configurations of the nation and its monopoly on the right to name the nation. Even though it gives precedence to the spontaneous love of culture and nation over the allegiance to the state, it has little reason to resist a state formation that protects national culture, sustains a national identity in accordance to the nation’s cultural traditions, and maintains national unity and autonomy.\(^{56}\)

This description of cultural nationalism crucially indicates why the CCP, despite its best efforts, has failed to position itself as the embodiment of the Chinese nation. Although the CCP has facilitated Chinese economic development since 1978, maintained Chinese sovereignty, and increased China’s global influence, it has failed to validate itself as authentically, culturally Chinese. In fact, the CCP has always pursued policies based on Western theories, including Marxist revolution, Stalinist big-push industrialization, and state-monitored capitalism.

Though the state may be given credit for its accomplishments, there is little belief that it is committed to anything other than self-preservation, which is firmly distinguished from cultural preservation. Much of the discourse of Chinese cultural nationalism suggests that China has spent the last 150 years forsaking its natural path for ill-suited attempts at Westernization, and that the resultant revolutions have caused internal cultural degeneration. Furthermore, cultural nationalism contains a persistent “search for roots” (**xüngen** 寻根), which asserts the existence of an

authentic Chinese community, national essence, and experience. The antipathy for
dogmatic Western models and the search for authentic “Chineseness” create friction
between cultural nationalist intellectuals and Party officials.

Despite its calls for moral regeneration and national rejuvenation, the Party is
seen as an organization that only upholds the parts of Chinese culture that are
instrumentally beneficial to the maintenance of power. While not all Chinese are
cultural nationalists, it is cultural nationalist intellectuals who contest the
government’s definitions of “Chineseness,” and who thereby acquire the ability to
shape and transmit China’s cultural essence. The traditional notion of tianxia 天下，
which literally translates to “all under heaven”, operates at the core of Chinese
cultural transmission.

Drawing upon Wang Zheng’s definition, this thesis elaborates the concept of
tianxia to include a sense of community that once derived its identity from neither
ethnic nor geopolitical boundaries. Instead, this communal identity emphasized a
sense of high culture and moral superiority centered on Confucian principles. While
the nucleus of this cultural identity rested firmly within the Han Chinese community,
it was essentially boundless; unlike ethnically and geographically delineated national
boundaries, the traditional concept of tianxia included all non-Han people who
accepted Confucian principles and acknowledged the superiority of Han Chinese
civilization.

Traditionally, tianxia was once understood as grounded in morality and
harmony, and deemphasized the roles of military and economic power in maintaining

57 Ibid., 7.
58 Wang, Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign
Relations, 72-73.
social order. In this sense, the orthodox formulation of *tianxia* contradicted the function of the modern state, which primarily maintains social order through its monopoly on the legitimate use of violent force.⁵⁹ Although this traditional sense of cultural unity was fundamental to Chinese history, philosophy, and politics over thousands of years, it did not survive China’s “Century of National Humiliation” fully intact. China’s turbulent process of modernization—which included a great deal of cultural criticism and even renunciation of Chinese tradition altogether—significantly altered the fabric of Chinese identity over the course of 150 years.

*Tianxia* is now confined to Han Chinese and the minority nationalities (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) that reside within China, and it is no longer so self-assuredly upheld as superior to all alternative philosophies. Nevertheless, this bruised yet consistent ideal of cultural communion has been steadily transmitted from generation to generation, providing sturdy roots from which Chinese draw cultural consciousness. Appealing to *daotong*—the transcendent thread of the Way—to criticize the state’s pruning of Chinese culture to fit fluctuating political needs, cultural nationalist intellectuals seek to return China to its natural essence. By wrapping *tianxia* in the language of nationalism, they engage in cultural transmission that extends to the wider Chinese community, as well as perpetuate a sense of “Chineseness” that stretches far outside the margins of the CCP’s patriotic education campaign. Challenging the hegemonic power of the state, these intellectuals uphold a culturally rooted idealism and endeavor to recover China’s true national destiny.

Chapter 2

Chinese Culture’s Bitter Journeys

I truly hate
Hate that I wasn’t born a century earlier
So that I could, meeting you face to face, stand before
   Dark-shaded gloomy castles
   Dawn-lit sprinkled wilderness
Either I pick up your fallen white glove
Or you receive my tossed down sword
Or you and I each mount a war horse
Depart far, far from the sky-blocking battle flags
   Depart from the cloudlike battlefront
   And decide the fate of the city

—Xiao Hua, “I Hope You’re Reborn a Soldier: Send to Lord Elgin”

In the first of thirty-seven vignettes in *A Bitter Journey Through Culture*, author Yu Qiuyu features Xiao Hua’s “I Hope You’re Reborn a Soldier: Send to Lord Elgin.” In his poem the 20th-century Chinese youth retrospectively addresses Lord Elgin, the British High Commissioner who ordered the burning and looting of the Old Summer Palace in 1860. While most Chinese are exceedingly familiar with the destruction of the Old Summer Palace, Yu notes that the looting of Chinese cultural treasures continued well beyond the end of the Second Opium War. He recounts a litany of ancient artifacts that early 20th-century Western academics bought for next-to-nothing from an ignorant Daoist priest in charge of the now famous Mogao Caves. After successfully fooling the priest, these academics shipped the artifacts abroad and later claimed credit for “saving” important cultural heirlooms from China’s chaos.61 Mourning the loss of these historical treasures, Yu echoes the helpless Xiao Hua, who wrote to Lord Elgin a century after the Old Summer Palace’s destruction. Together

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61 Ibid., 5-6.
these writers lament the estrangement of a resplendent culture from its rightful inheritors. In doing so, they join a chorus of intellectuals that have sought after the defining characteristics of “Chineseness” since modern China’s inception.

**Chinese essence versus Western means**

Upon losing the First Opium War in 1840, China was forced to make heavy concessions to Western nations, which opened China to dramatically increased trade with foreigners. As Western goods and technologies flowed into the Chinese market, many Chinese intellectuals realized the extraordinary benefits of military-industrial innovations such as steam power and arms factories. The Qing government, however, felt little need to fully embrace Western-style modernization. Qing officials, who were also Confucian literati, believed in an inseparable connection between traditional Confucian teachings and a virtuous government. In their minds, these were the true keys to establishing social harmony.

At this time, many Western countries had already begun to experiment with liberalism and industrialization—forces which significantly weakened traditional social hierarchies. Confucian officials, however, believed in the principle of maintaining properly fixed social relations to promote social order. Passage 12:19 of the *Analects* states, “The virtue of the gentleman is the wind; the virtue of the little people is the grass. The wind on the grass will surely bend it.”

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but were also tasked with maintaining sociopolitical hierarchies through which virtue could be transmitted downward to the pliable, grass-like masses.

Following repeated military defeats at the hands of Western powers, Qing proponents of economic and military reform cautiously began the “Self-Strengthening Movement.” This movement constituted an attempt to improve China’s military capabilities without changing its Confucian social structures, and lasted from the end of the Second Opium War in 1860 until the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894. During this period, Qing statesmen such as Zhang Zhidong and Li Hongzhang encouraged modernization under the slogan “Chinese learning for essence, Western learning for use” (zhongxue weiti, xixue weiyong 中学为体，西学为用).63 Positing Western technology as a mere means to the end of establishing harmonious Confucian order, this slogan was a linguistic manifestation of China’s sense of cultural preeminence at the time. While Western knowledge could create “useful” military-industrial technology, China’s Confucian “essence” was inherently superior to any philosophy that Western barbarians could offer.

Due to their preexisting belief in China’s cultural superiority, proponents of the Self-Strengthening Movement attempted to adopt industrial technologies without teaching the liberal ideals that provided the foundation for 19th-century capitalism. Li Hongzhang, for example, founded the Tianjin Military Academy, which instructed students in science, mathematics, foreign languages, history, and Chinese classics.64 Nevertheless, Li’s curriculum omitted Western theories of democratic government

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and capitalism. In this sense, the Qing government’s tolerance for philosophical ideas outside Confucianism was limited. It placed hierarchical restraints on Chinese modernization that prevented significant military-industrial expansion. As a result, most Chinese continued to know little about Western technology’s “usefulness.”

The disastrous First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) ultimately spelled the end of the Self-Strengthening Movement and its use-essence dichotomy. While China had been slowly initiating a culturally conservative form of industrialization, Japan’s Meiji Restoration reforms had yielded rapid industrial growth and enhanced military capabilities. Over several months, Japan’s Imperial Forces inflicted heavy blows on the Qing military, and moreover, damaged China’s sense of cultural superiority.

In April 1895, the Qing government signed the humiliating Treaty of Shimonoseki, which ceded Taiwan and the Liaodong Peninsula to Japan, opened several ports to Japanese trade, granted Japan most-favored-nation status, and stipulated the payment of two hundred million taels.65 The once mighty Qing Empire—which had long dismissed Japan as culturally inferior—had been decisively defeated by its former student. Adding insult to injury, this defeat came at the hands of an Asian power, making China lose face among its neighbors.

Following this disaster, Chinese intellectuals began to critique their own cultural foundation. They wondered whether there was something distinctly Chinese that supplied the underlying reasons for their humiliating defeat. This loss of cultural confidence served as the precursor to a unique period of rejection of Confucian cultural ideals, transmitting feelings of self-doubt and anxiety to future generations of

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Chinese intellectuals. *Tianxia* was severely shaken and would never recover its universal pretensions.

**China’s existential worriers**

The most prominent reformer that emerged from the splintered woodwork of cultural humiliation was Liang Qichao, a proponent of constitutional monarchy from Guangdong Province. After witnessing China’s loss to Japan at 22 years of age, Liang grew increasingly worried about the future of the Chinese people. Though the Qing government had attempted to modernize while conserving traditional Confucian ideals, its modest reforms had done nothing to protect China from military failure and cultural shame. Having studied under Kang Youwei—a well-known proponent of Western-style political and economic reforms—Liang was well versed in Western social theory, which at the time was coping with the rise of social Darwinism. Upon reading social Darwinist theories, Liang began to recognize that Western thinking was forcefully influenced by the idea of conquest:

I read Western newspapers and they report on…the disorder in the Chinese polity…This has been going on for the past few decades. Since September or October of last year, they have even more openly and brazenly publicized how wild and uncivilized the Chinese are, how ignorant and dishonest, how empty Chinese Confucianism is. The meaning is clear: they will eliminate China at once.\(^{66}\)

Anticipating China’s annihilation, Liang believed that it was no longer merely the standing of the Qing government that was at stake in global perceptions of China. The Chinese people were engulfed in a survival-of-the-fittest struggle among other races, and if they wanted to avoid extinction, they had to evolve. This existential worry was

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only deepened when the Dowager Empress Cixi imprisoned the young Guangxu Emperor for advocating Westernized social and political changes in his “Hundred Days’ Reform”—a movement in which both Liang and Kang played leading roles, and for which they were subsequently exiled.

Although Liang continued to advocate for political reforms after fleeing to Japan, his disillusionment led him to believe that such changes needed to be preceded by a fundamental transformation in the character of the Chinese people. Liang exhorted Chinese to awaken themselves and to become active citizens of a proud nation, subsequently sparking a nationalist discourse that would command the attention of intellectuals for generations to come.

In particular, Liang focused on what he perceived to be a lack of self-respect (zizun 自尊) among ordinary Chinese. In his essay titled “On Self-Respect,” he claimed that China was afflicted with a deficit of personal dignity, and argued that China’s lack of self-respect was “the absolute crux of being a slave.” Liang called upon Chinese to adapt a Western-style national character, which he distinguished as fortified by a “vigorous sense of independence and mutual assistance.” Asserting that Confucian teachings instilled a “slavish nature” (奴性 nuxing) in Chinese, he implored people to reject subservience to the conservative Qing government in favor of a modern Chinese nation. By openly calling for such a drastic shift away from the Confucian ideal of “filial piety,” Liang created a form of cultural iconoclasm that would inspire intellectuals to challenge both culturally accepted and politically supported definitions of “Chineseness” for generations to come.

In order to rid ordinary Chinese of their slavish nature, Liang believed that Chinese needed to fuse their conceptions of both guo 国, which translates to “kingdom” or “country,” and min 民, which means “people.” Elaborating on the necessity of transforming these separate notions into one entity, he wrote:

The Chinese people do not even know there is such a thing as a national people [guomin]. After several thousand years, there have been the two words guo jia [state, family] but I have never heard the two words guo min [state, people] ever uttered…Guojia is when one family [jia] owns the state [guo] as private property…Guomin connotes when the state [guo] belongs to the people [min] as public property…This [guomin] is then called a national people.

For Liang, developing the concept of guomin (which today is used colloquially to denote “citizens”) meant convincing people to invest their time and energy in the public sphere. Without Western ideology and a collective devotion to the nation, he believed that Chinese would remain “stupid and vulgar (yulou), cowardly and weak (qieruo), lacking in organization (huansan), and muddled (hunzhuo).”

In calling for the formation of a “new citizen,” Liang implored Chinese to reflect on their racial weaknesses, change their patterns of social existence, and contribute to the resurrection of a strong, flourishing nation. His resounding message of self-criticism and cultural reform was solemnly received among fellow existential worriers, many of whom zealously assumed the task of dismantling traditional Chinese culture and reconstructing it to meet the demands of modernity.

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68 Interestingly, the traditional character for guo that was used up until the CCP simplified the character system in the 1950s and 1960s was “國,” which is comprised of a huo 火 radical inside a wei 王 enclosure. In classical Chinese, huo literally translates to “some person(s).” The simplified guo contains yu 玉—the radical for jade. Perhaps this symbolic switch from vaguely defined people to jade—an object to be treasured and protected—reflects the success that nationalists eventually achieved in convincing Chinese to cherish the nation as something strong, rich, and beautiful.
69 Karl, Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the 20th Century, 69.
70 Foster, Ah Q Archaeology, 43.
Perhaps the most influential voice that continued to spread the message of cultural transformation was that of Zou Rong, a young Chinese radical who studied in Japan after the Sino-Japanese War and grew dismayed with the weakness exhibited by the Qing government. Unlike Liang, however, Zou Rong advocated for the complete overthrow of the Qing government on racial grounds. According to Zou, a Manchu Qing government had no right to govern the Han Chinese race. In 1903, Zou Rong published a short book entitled *The Revolutionary Army*, in which he called upon Han Chinese to overthrow their Manchu oppressors. Drawing on social Darwinism, Zou inveighed against the enslavement of the Han Chinese race:

> Internally we are the slaves of the Manchus and suffering from their tyranny, externally we are being harassed by the Powers, and we are doubly enslaved. The reason why our sacred Han race, descendants of the Yellow Emperor, should support revolutionary independence, arises precisely from the question of whether our race will go under and be exterminated.\(^71\)

In emphasizing the sanctity of the Han race and summoning the image of a continuous bloodline descending from the legendary Yellow Emperor, Zou called upon Han Chinese to actively remember their own unique cultural and racial heritage. Imbuing his work with this sacred conceptualization of Han racial identity, Zou Rong not only advocated for racial liberation from all foreign oppressors, but also encouraged a public embrace of Han Chinese exceptionalism. In stirring language, Zou enjoined:

> You possess government, run it yourselves; you have laws, guard them yourselves; you have industries, administer them yourselves; you possess armed forces, order them yourselves; you possess lands, watch over them ourselves; you have inexhaustible resources, exploit them

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\(^71\) Zou Rong, *The Revolutionary Army*, in *The Search for Modern China*, by Jonathan Spence, 226.
yourselves. You are qualified in every way for revolutionary independence.\textsuperscript{72}

Using Zou’s words as a racial rallying cry, nationalists such as Sun Yat-sen began to generate support from Han Chinese both domestically and abroad. Sun distributed thousands of copies of \textit{The Revolutionary Army} to his own followers in San Francisco and Singapore, and collected considerable financial support for his Tongmeng Hui—a revolutionary group with the mission of establishing Chinese democracy.\textsuperscript{73}

Spurred by the ideal of national self-determination, Sun Yat-sen’s domestic supporters succeeded in overthrowing the Qing government in the Xinhai Revolution of 1911 and founded the Republic of China in 1912. Success, however, proved fleeting; the newly elected national government was monopolized with little difficulty by Qing general Yuan Shikai. Devastated, China’s existential worriers again bemoaned the stubborn “slavishness” that pervaded Chinese culture, and proceeded to initiate the most severe wave of cultural iconoclasm that modern China had ever seen.

\textbf{Between two “others”}

Having witnessed the destruction of the chance for representative government in Republican China, disillusioned Chinese intellectuals began to bitterly denounce Confucian culture through the furious iconoclasm of the New Culture Movement. Primarily based in Beijing and Shanghai, both of which were developed focal points of intellectual and economic exchange, the New Culture Movement called for the development of a new China devoted to the ideals of science and democracy.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 226.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 227.
Disgusted with an ineffective government that could not run itself, let alone control China’s warlords, New Culture intellectuals had lost faith that traditional Chinese culture transmitted any sort of essential truth. Instead of encouraging a return to Confucian fundamentals, the New Culture intellectuals invested their energy in making China regain its cultural superiority by fighting against the traditional psychology they believed to be impeding progress. By explicitly rejecting traditional Chinese culture as not only backwards, but also poisonous, New Culture intellectuals expanded China’s atmosphere of existential worry. This dense fog remains embedded within the collective consciousness of Chinese intellectuals today.

The most beloved figure of the New Culture Movement is Lu Xun, an acerbic writer who criticized what he perceived to be a slavish culture of paternalism that was impervious to scientific logic. Writing vernacular literature, Lu Xun created characters that embodied negative aspects of Chinese society in order to highlight the deep flaws of traditional culture. As Paul Foster observes, Lu Xun functioned as an “Occidentalist” in the sense that he created both a positive Western “Other” to be emulated and a negative Chinese “Other” to be overcome.\(^7^4\) By attacking traditional “Others,” Lu Xun helped create space for the construction of a new national character based on self-criticism, doubt, and a desire to overcome self-inflicted humiliation.

One of Lu Xun’s best-known short stories is *The True Story of Ah Q*, which was published as a serial between December 1921 and February 1922. The main character of this story, Ah Q, is a representation of the dark national character that Lu Xun attributed to traditional China. An uneducated Chinese commoner, Ah Q is physically beaten by others throughout the story, yet he always manages to convince

\(^7^4\) Foster, *Ah Q Archaeology*, 12-13.
himself that he has achieved a *moral* triumph in the process. For example, when Ah Q is beaten and robbed by fellow gamblers after winning a game, the narrator recounts:

> Presently he changed defeat into victory. Raising his right hand he slapped his own face hard, twice, so that it tingled with pain. After this slapping his heart felt lighter, for it seemed as if the one who had given the slap was himself, the one slapped some other self, and soon it was just as if he had beaten someone else—in spite of the fact that his face was still tingling. He lay down satisfied that he had gained the victory.\(^\text{75}\)

Lu Xun continues to detail Ah Q’s habit of snatching false victory from physical humiliation as the account progresses. After he is beaten by Mr. Zhao, a wealthy landlord of the village, Ah Q considers it an honor to be tangentially associated with such a powerful figure, which elevates his own sense of self-importance.\(^\text{76}\)

> Finally, when a revolutionary army comes through the village, Ah Q convinces himself and others that he too is a rebel, but he ultimately sleeps through the fighting. After the Qing government quashes the rebellion, the townspeople cruelly decide to blame the looting of the town on Ah Q, who, when asked to sign his confession, reveals that he does not even know how to sign his own name. The story ends when Ah Q is executed while trying to recall lines from a Chinese opera with which to please an apathetic crowd.\(^\text{77}\)

> Above all, the character of Ah Q is a metaphor for a Chinese nation enveloped in a shroud of ignorance. According to Lu Xun, this ignorance caused China to endure terrible humiliation at the hands of both abusive Western power and Confucian culture itself. In particular, the illogical nature of Ah Q beating himself


\(^\text{76}\) Ibid., 112.

\(^\text{77}\) Ibid., 141-53.
and calling it victory reflected the tendency of Confucian literati to consider themselves mentally and culturally superior to their oppressors, despite the irrevocable reality that they were the ones losing face by being publicly abused. Through the pitiful character of Ah Q, Lu Xun relayed a message of national emergency: while ignorant Chinese people were wasting their time memorizing Confucian classics or attempting to remember lines from traditional operas, they remained oblivious to the firing squads before them.

New Culture intellectuals crucially influenced early Chinese nationalism by pleading with citizens to awaken to the threat of racial and cultural extinction. While European nationalism was created through the forces of mercantilism and liberalism, and American nationalism was born out of a self-confident manifest destiny, Chinese nationalism was forged by intellectuals who turned against their own culture in order to rescue the nation (jiuguo 救国). Since its inception, the Chinese nation has needed saving.

A stone monument at the Whampoa Military Academy outside of Guangzhou that reads “Peacefully Struggle to Save China.”
Hurriedly brought to precarious life by existential worriers such as Liang Qichao, Zou Rong, and Lu Xun, the Chinese nation has always been troubled by a profound sense of crisis. This constant concern with “saving” the nation remains enshrined in public monuments such as the gigantic stone block outside the Whampoa Military Academy (pictured above). Though China’s existential worriers transformed the concept of “China” itself from a Confucian kingdom to a modern nation, it has remained a “chosen” subject with an ultimate cultural destiny, and it continues to need saving. By creating an environment of radical cultural criticism, these intellectuals invented a language of national salvation that both CCP officials and other existential worriers have sought to use for their own projects ever since.

The backward will be defeated

After the dust of WWII and the Chinese Civil War settled in 1949, the CCP was tasked with reinvigorating the Chinese economy while also pursuing heavy industrial socialist development. To convince ordinary Chinese of the urgency of these tasks, Mao Zedong drew upon the language of national salvation to encourage people that they had both the power and the necessity to overcome the humiliating past by quantum leaping toward a brighter future. A particularly useful slogan in persuading people of the necessity of heavy industrial development was “luohou jiuyao aida 落后就要挨打,” a phrase borrowed from Stalin’s 1931 “Speech to
Industrial Managers” that translates to “the backwards will be defeated.” Once the heart of Maoist propaganda, this phrase continues to be used today as rationale for pursuing breakneck economic development.

This existential imperative to conquer backwardness was most popularly employed by the CCP during the Great Leap Forward of 1958-1961—a period in which the state implemented policies of heavy industrialization and collectivization. This movement caused massive economic disruption that resulted in the Great Famine, which many estimate to have caused over 30 million Chinese to starve to death. By promoting the phrase “the backwards will be defeated,” the CCP aimed to convince Chinese that their sacrifices were necessary—that while progress was painful, its temporary price was far better than enduring perpetual national humiliation. In encouraging Chinese to embrace this harsh but necessary cultural transformation (and by reporting impossibly high economic production figures in state media), the CCP heightened people’s sense that the Chinese nation was in fact destined for great achievements.

One of the ways that the Party decided to build its myth of successful development was through propaganda that portrayed the masses as faithful, tireless supporters of heavy industrialization and collectivization. Radio reports, posters, and public performances told tales of China’s rapidly global ascendancy and the unmatched industriousness of the Chinese people. In particular, some of the most prominent state-sponsored theatrical performances were centered on one Chinese

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proverb: *woxin changdan* 卧薪尝胆, which means “lying on brushwood and tasting gall.”

The idiom “lying on brushwood and tasting gall” originated in the ancient Chinese fable of King Goujian of Yue, who when defeated in battle by the neighboring king of Wu, offered himself as a servant to his rival in order to have his life spared. Becoming a prisoner-slave in the Wu kingdom, Goujian cleaned his master’s stables, drove his chariot, and once even tasted the Wu king’s urine and excrement to gain a prognostic reading of the king’s illness. Every night, Goujian would sleep on a coarse pile of brushwood, and every morning, he would wake up to lick a bitter-tasting gall bladder that he hung from the ceiling of his slave quarters.

By submitting himself to personal degradation, Goujian was able to plot his return to power and to avenge the loss of his kingdom. Having earned the king of Wu’s respect, Goujian finally returned to his kingdom after three years with the maps and military information he needed to destroy the Wu king. After winning the subsequent war between Wu and Yue, Goujian refused his former master’s surrender, and ultimately forced the Wu king to kill himself. He then proceeded to ruthlessly murder Wu officials and scholars, thereby completing his revenge and ensuring that no one would rise against him in the future.

The Chinese Minister of Culture during the Great Leap Forward, Mao Dun, believed that performances centered on the Goujian fable could be of instructive value to the masses, who were being asked to endure bitter conditions in order to fuel China’s industrial development. In particular, he thought the *woxin changdan* theme

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would encourage favorable attitudes towards the CCP among a national populace that had previously endured humiliation, yet now desired to pave its own path to socialist utopia. As historian Paul Cohen notes, the theme of submitting to humiliation in order to achieve greater ends lies at the center of the Goujian fable:

Goujian became the very picture of the submissive, ingratiating lesser lord. The core idea here, nicely encapsulated in the proverb *renru fuzhong* (literally, ‘to endure humiliation in order to carry out an important task’), is that there is a higher order of courage that will cause an exceptional individual to acquiesce in the most degrading forms of humiliation or indignity, if, by so doing, the possibility of attaining some greater end will be enhanced.81

Desiring more performances that emphasized the importance of enduring temporary suffering to achieve greater goals (especially during a difficult period of famine), Mao Dun called upon playwright Fan Junhong to create an opera based on the Goujian fable. Working in tandem to determine the necessary themes of the show beforehand, Mao and Fan agreed to emphasize Goujian’s unmatched commitment to the goal of making the Yue kingdom strong.82 This ambition mirrored the personal sacrifice the CCP demanded of Chinese during the Great Leap Forward.

In their initial script, Mao and Fan stressed Goujian’s determination to submit to any form of degradation in order to achieve his goal and to avenge the Yue kingdom. In this sense, they sought to plant the imperative of confronting cultural “backwardness”—no matter how painful—within China’s national psychology.83 By asserting that “lying on brushwood and tasting gall” was necessary for national salvation, Mao and Fan’s play acted as one of the many media through which the themes of enduring suffering and avenging humiliation was introduced into national

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81 Ibid., 33.
82 Ibid., 142.
83 Ibid., 144.
discourse. Remaining “backward” and being defeated again was not an option—salvation required progress, and progress required sacrifice. After the horrors of the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine had passed, this theme of necessary sacrifice became a centerpiece of CCP narratives, which continued to present the Party as the one true savior capable of confronting China’s existential worries.

**Dear leaders, what do you say?**

Viewed in retrospect from an outsider’s perspective, Fan Junhong’s play seems to overlook the irony that the Great Leap Forward itself could have been seen as the epitome of suffering and humiliation to be overcome and avenged. Nevertheless, Chinese who lived during the Great Leap Forward had little power to publicly turn the Party’s own message against it. Today, however, many intellectuals harness a more open political environment and new technologies such as social media to criticize the CCP’s policies.

In present-day China, biting criticism of the Party can be found on many Internet blogs, which are primarily written by young Chinese. Over the last decade, these blogs have spawned their own “Internet language” (*wangyu* 网语) that uses puns to circumvent official censors. For instance, one blogger named “@ Old Charcoal Seller of Chang’an (*chang’an maitanweng* 长安卖炭翁)” compared the CCP to Lu Xun’s Ah Q:

Ah Q wore a hat to conceal the [ringworm] scars on his head, and would let loose his temper on whoever dared remove his hat—an act that would further inflame his scars. People are like this, and so is an organization. For example, the Great Leap Forward, Anti-Rightist Movement, Cultural Revolution, “June Firth”…these scars are all
being concealed from the people—pretty much the same as Ah Q’s method.\textsuperscript{84}

Although any direct mention of the Tiananmen Square Massacre of “June Fourth” (\textit{liu si 六四}) is blocked from online blogs, this writer creatively translates the sensitive incident as “June Firth” (\textit{liu shi 六是}) in order to avoid Internet censors. Associating the CCP with Ah Q, “Charcoal Seller” portrays the Party itself as a “backwards” organization incapable of addressing its problems. By making this unfavorable comparison, the blogger indirectly encourages other writers to join him in revealing the Party’s “scars” in order to force it to confront its ugly past.

Bloggers such as “Charcoal Seller” transmit the idea of China’s cultural uniqueness, but they do so in a way that calls on Chinese to differentiate the CCP from a greater Chinese civilization. One prominent representative of these cultural nationalists is Han Han, a public figure who holds the distinct titles of author, racecar driver, and blogger. In a speech given at Xiamen University in 2010, Han Han questioned the government’s attempts to promote China as a “grand cultural nation” \textit{(wenhua daguo 文化大国)}:\textsuperscript{85} From the outset of his speech, Han Han criticized the CCP for distorting Chinese culture for its own purposes:

Dear leaders, dear teachers, dear students, how are you doing? Do you know why China cannot become a grand cultural nation? It is because most of the time when we speak, we say "Dear leaders" first and those leaders are uncultured. Not only that...they are also afraid of culture, they censor culture and they control culture. So how can such a nation become a grand cultural nation? Dear leaders, what do you say?\textsuperscript{85}


By criticizing the Party’s efforts to monopolize culture, Han Han positions himself as a defender of the authentic nation—an inheritor of a transcendent truth who opposes the CCP’s shallow politicization of Chinese heritage. As a self-proclaimed protector of culture, Han Han draws boundaries that preclude CCP officials from being recognized as cultured individuals. This portrayal of officials as “lacking culture” (meiyou wenhua 没有文化) mirrors how Chinese historically spoke of foreign “barbarians” in traditional China. This allusion is by no means accidental: Han Han seeks to define the CCP as a parasitic force that stifles China’s true cultural potential.

Continuing, Han Han says, “I know that our leaders like to export our culture because this is a sign of a strong nation. But I feel that our present culture is not exportable. In this creative environment, all writers and workers are constantly censoring themselves. How can any decent work be produced in this environment?”

Here, Han Han accuses the government of seeking to profit off of selling Chinese culture abroad. In spite of the Party’s desire to export culture, however, Han Han believes that its message rings hollow due to its well-established reputation for domestic censorship. Like Lu Xun, he posits the harsh reality of self-humiliation as China’s primary problem, depicting the Party as an “other” that bastardizes the essence of Chinese culture today. Accusing the government of intentionally exporting false cultural products to strengthen itself while suppressing domestic creativity, he delegitimizes the CCP’s claim to being a virtuous leader.

Despite Han Han’s scathing criticism of the Party, it is important to note that he is not a democracy activist. When some Chinese began laying flowers outside the

\[86\] Ibid.
Czech embassy after the death of Vaclav Havel, Han Han bitterly wrote, “Even if the social conflicts intensify ten times over, even if you have ten Havels speechifying in ten cities and even if the authorities don’t act, those speeches will eventually end up being sponsored by a lozenge manufacturer.” By cynically rejecting the possibility of a successful Chinese democratic revolution, Han Han here separates himself from intellectuals like the Charter 08 activists, who explicitly demanded democratic reforms and were consequently either imprisoned or exiled. Nonetheless, Han Han still believes in the value of pressuring the Party to limit its censorship of Internet discourse:

> If we oppose all cultural censorship so that the only words left in the database of banned words are anti-human ones, we can create a grand cultural nation. It does not matter if my name or yours gets added to the database in the interim. I believe the database has a maximum capacity and every additional word will accelerate its destruction...if a nation truly rises up culturally, it will be a strong nation and it will never have any fear of collapsing.

Imploring Chinese to actively break the government’s system of censorship, Han Han puts faith in China’s potential to nourish a new sort of cultural environment. In this respect, Han Han is not unlike cultural nationalist intellectuals of the early 20th century such as Liang Qichao and Lu Xun. Though he refrains from attacking traditional values, Han Han encourages Chinese to fight hegemonic efforts to stifle culture. He seeks the ultimate revival of China as a “grand cultural nation.”

By assigning China the potential to be a grand cultural nation, Han Han, too, transmits the idea of cultural “chosenness.” He paints the CCP as an oppressive force

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88 Han Han, “The So-called Grand Cultural Nation.”
that seeks to make culture “useful,” but cannot access its essence. In this negative characterization of the Party, Han Han questions the state’s cultural authority and pressures it to recognize the transformative potential of a free cultural environment.

**Descendants of the dragon**

Although Han Han has covered the Internet with his critiques of the Party, he is merely one figure among a diverse mass of intellectuals who engage in cultural discourse. While many choose to frame the Party as an impostor that appropriates Chinese culture for its own use, there are also intellectuals who do not oppose the Party. Instead, these public figures speak out against external forces—such as capitalism and Westernization—that they believe challenge the descent of authentic Chinese culture.

One intellectual who bemoans China’s continual subjugation to foreign influence is Yu Qiuyu, who perceives the tragedy of cultural loss in an increasingly Westernized world. While Han Han believes that a true “grand cultural nation” requires free interactions with the rest of the world, and focuses his criticism against government censorship, Yu laments a grand cultural past that has gradually disappeared due to foreign encroachment. In one passage of *A Bitter Journey Through Culture*, Yu describes a Western man of Chinese ethnicity who, when interviewed by a Chinese newspaper reporter, reveals that he has no Chinese name.\(^8^9\) Describing the tragedy of this man’s distance from his ancestral roots, Yu writes:

> How much mental transformation and time does it take to go from not speaking the mother tongue to forgetting one’s family surname? Of course, the more pressing question is whether this all is inevitable: to

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what degree we can avoid this. Regardless, I have already seen an enormous, indisputable fact: linguistic transformation has rapidly contributed to a group of “abstract people” with broken blood-roots.\textsuperscript{90} Yu Qiuyu describes the dying language of a withering culture and questions whether Chinese are actually capable of shifting their dismal trajectory. By emphasizing the helplessness of an empty people who increasingly lack a sense of their own personal history and identity, Yu directs the reader’s attention to seemingly unstoppable global trends (such as Westernization) that threaten China’s unique cultural continuity. In this sense, he blames China’s cultural decline squarely on foreigners’ disruptive influence on Chinese society.

Much like Zou Rong and Liang Qichao, Yu also draws upon a racially defined Han identity in his conceptualization of “Chineseness.” In doing so, he subtly strengthens the same “insider versus outsider” mentality encouraged by the CCP’s patriotic education campaign. Describing an overseas Chinese hairdresser who combats the disappearance of Chinese language by speaking only Mandarin to his ethnic Han customers, Yu claims:

Chinese hair has been continuously black for tens of thousands of years; it has been black in glory, black in humiliation, and will still be continuously black in the future, but language isn’t this obstinate. Or perhaps it is still obstinate, but now cannot easily form a stable aesthetic model similar to Chinese physiological traits. For this, the hair stylist is pained, young women are pained, mothers are pained; this is a pain that no one is willing to renege on, and moreover, no one is willing to condemn. It is a perfectly willing sort of pain, and this sort of pain is precisely the deepest pain.\textsuperscript{91}

Contrasting the continuous genealogical transmission of black hair with the painful yet irreversible disappearance of Chinese language, Yu communicates what he

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 335.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 337.
believes makes China unique: a brilliant, unbroken history shared by members of a racially homogeneous civilization. This unified portrayal of Chinese history and language reflects how Yu transmits *tianxia*—how he wishes Chinese to understand their own “chosen” culture.

In portraying Chinese and foreign languages as opposing forces, Yu further reinforces the distinction between China and the “West.” In fact, his account mirrors the use-essence distinction developed by Li Hongzhang and Zhang Zhidong in the 19th century. While the benefits of globalization have certainly proved “useful,” Yu upholds Chinese language as the irreplaceable essence of Chinese culture, and laments the increasing distance between overseas Chinese and their true identity.

To finish describing the decline of Chinese language (*huayu* 华语), Yu borrows a metaphor from Tang dynasty poet Meng Jiao’s “Song of a Traveling Son,” depicting the mother tongue as a loving weaver of identity. He declares, “If we consider all Chinese language to be a ‘loving mother,’ then the thread she carries in her hand is truly long and far, finely wrapping up countless overseas travelers’ bodies and minds. In fact, this thread has already become a thick rope of racial reproduction: history’s crawling fiber.”

Yu believes that this linguistic rope of racial identity runs through all Chinese, and ultimately functions as a grand transmitter of Chinese culture. Considering this passage along with Yu’s sorrowful tale of foreign academics stealing ancient relics from the Mogao Caves, we see two sides to Yu Qiuyu’s construction of cultural transmission. On the one hand, he actively remembers China’s glorious past, and on

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93 Ibid., 340.
Regardless of Chinese intellectuals’ respective political positions, each believes that Chinese culture faces an existential crisis that must be urgently addressed. Ever since the First Opium War in 1840, this crisis has occupied the minds of Chinese intellectuals, inspiring passionate debate about how to save both the Chinese nation and race from extinction. One song that perfectly encapsulates this feeling of existential insecurity is “Descendants of the Dragon,” written and performed by Hou Dejian in 1978, the year that Reform and Opening began. The lyrics are as follows:

The ancient East has a dragon
Its name is called China.
The ancient East has a people
They are all the dragon’s descendants.
Under the great dragon’s foot, I grew up.
After growing up, I was a descendant of the dragon.
Black eyes, black hair, and yellow skin,
Forever and ever, I’m a descendant of the dragon.

One hundred years ago on a peaceful night,
On the eve before the tremendous change, late at night,
The sound of cannon fire struck the peaceful night to pieces.
Besieged on all sides by appeasing swords,
How many years has the cannon fire continued to rumble?
How many years followed by how many years?
Great dragon, great dragon, rub clear your eyes!
Forever and ever, rub clear your eyes!94

Speaking of an age of cultural strength that many Chinese have never known, the first verse evokes pride in the unique racial qualities of the Chinese people—the black eyed, black haired, and yellow skinned descendants of the dragon. By emphasizing the filial nature of this relationship—that *all* Chinese grew up under the dragon’s foot and will forever continue to revere their distinct ancestry—Hou embraces cultural unity and transmits a feeling of belonging. The last verse draws attention to the role that foreign powers played in bringing destruction and humiliation to China during the Opium Wars. Though none today were alive to physically witness the eruptive cannon fire of that night, the self-doubt aroused by the cannons continues to rumble.

Today, intellectuals such as Han Han and Yu Qiuyu are painfully aware of their culture’s existential crisis, and all partake in shaping the contours of present-day Chinese worry. While their messages are different, their ultimate goal is the same. They call upon the great ancestral dragon to forever rub clear its eyes: to provide China’s chosen culture its nourishing protection once again.
Chapter 3

The Heavenly Kingdom, a “Useable” Past

The bleeding wound does not shed tears
The flag-raising pole does not kneel down
The tightly clenched fist does not loosen
The river-crossing soldier does not retreat

—Zhang Junyi, “Vast Heaven and Earth”

When I visited the southern megalopolis of Guangzhou in August 2013 to interview a former history professor, he took the time to show me several of Guangzhou’s patriotic education bases. Since Guangzhou was one of the most prominent centers of international trade in 19th-century China, it became a city in which Chinese and foreign interests frequently antagonized each other. After the First Opium War in particular, Chinese lived under a weakening Qing government and experienced a string of serious natural disasters, repeated military defeats, and increasingly dire economic circumstances. During this tumultuous mid-19th-century period, several rebellions broke out across southern China. Today, Guangzhou’s patriotic education bases shed light upon how the CCP has consistently aligned its portrayals of such rebellions with shifting political currents.

The most thought-provoking patriotic education site I visited in Guangzhou was the Hong Xiuquan Former Residence Museum on the outskirts of the city. One of modern Chinese history’s most charismatic figures, Hong Xiuquan led the bloody Taiping Rebellion, proclaimed a “Heavely Kingdom” in Nanjing that lasted from 1853 to 1864, and nearly succeeded in bringing down the Qing Empire. Although the

museum mythologized Hong Xiuquan as an egalitarian hero of the masses, his creation of a dangerous cult of personality is well documented. In addition, Hong Xiuquan frequently embraced violent measures, at one point even ordering the massacre of the Manchu population in Nanjing. As historian Frederic Wakeman notes in his introduction to *Strangers at the Gate*:

> The Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) was the world’s most disastrous civil war. Travelers passing through the once populous Yangtze provinces could go for days without seeing more than rotting corpses, smoking villages, pariah dogs…Fifteen years of butchery and famine were to cost China somewhere between ten and twenty million souls.\(^96\)

Though Hong Xiuquan launched a hellish wave of destruction across southern China, his museum nevertheless presents him as a proto-socialist precursor to the CCP. Upon arriving at the museum gate, one is immediately confronted by an imposing stone statue of Hong Xiuquan that stands atop a red pedestal enclosed by a flowerbed. As the lone guard of the white-tiled square outside the museum, he assumes a masculine stance—chest puffed out and hands placed firmly on his hips, his resolute gaze fixed on the future.

As the former Guangzhou history professor and I walked through the Hong Xiuquan Former Residence Museum, he explained that Hong Xiuquan’s original residence had been burned down by Qing officials in 1864. The CCP had ordered the reconstruction of the current museum in 1961.\(^97\) This was a year of particular relevance: just as Hong Xiuquan led his bloody peasant rebellion from 1850 to 1864,

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in 1961 Mao was encouraging peasants to overcome the West by throwing themselves into the heavy industrial development of the Great Leap Forward.

The CCP constructed the Hong Xiuquan Former Residence Museum as a tribute to Mao and his radical Great Leap Forward policies (such as collectivization and the abolishment of private property). After Mao’s death in 1976, however, the discourse surrounding both Hong and Mao began to change. Whereas the Party had once needed to promote images of larger-than-life forerunners of Mao, in 1978 the worship of socialist revolution was abandoned in favor of a slow expansion of state-led capitalism. Following this political ideological shift, Chinese historians began to openly discuss the parallels between Mao and Hong as leaders who began their
revolutions with egalitarian ideals but eventually reverted to “feudal despotism.”\textsuperscript{98} Upon realizing that the portrayal of Hong Xiuquan as a revolutionary vanguard was no longer feasible, the CCP began to construct a new image: namely, that of Hong Xiuquan, the courageous patriot.

Despite Chinese intellectual sensitivity to the uncomfortable similarities between Mao and Hong, patriotic education still glorifies the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom as an object of national pride. In a television series about Hong Xiuquan entitled \textit{Taiping Tianguo} (2000), the opening song dramatically declares, “The bleeding wound does not shed tears, the flag-raising pole does not kneel down. The tightly clenched fist does not loosen, the river-crossing soldier does not retreat.” As bombs explode and Taiping soldiers scale the walls of Nanjing, Hong Xiuquan’s face appears superimposed over raucous crowds of peasants cheering in support.\textsuperscript{99} Though these lyrics paint the image of a defiant soldier surging into battle for the sake of his country, historical memory of this event is not nearly as straightforward as this television series theme song suggests.

**Hong Xiuquan: Hero of the masses**

At the Hong Xiuquan Former Residence Museum, the Taiping leader is portrayed as a valiant pioneer of class struggle that challenged a feudal social order. Describing the beginning of Hong’s revolutionary activity, the museum notes:

Hong Xiuquan was born to a peasant family, and had an intimate connection to farmers…After the First Opium War, the invasion of foreign capitalism, the Qing government’s corruption and incompetence, and the extensive distress of the people deepened his


dissatisfaction with the status quo. Under the education and encouragement of the formidable anti-feudal, anti-invasive struggle of the masses, Hong Xiuquan started down the revolutionary path.\textsuperscript{100}

By attributing Hong Xiuquan’s rebellious motivations to a desire to oppose foreign capitalism and to spread proto-socialist ideals (there was even a red-framed picture of Marx next to the main exhibit), the museum frames Hong as not only a hero of the masses but also a national hero. Particular emphasis is placed on Hong Xiuquan’s devotion to egalitarian ideals that foreshadowed the rise of CCP policies:

In late 1853, Hong Xiuquan announced his kingdom’s guiding principles in a document entitled “The Heavenly Kingdom Land System.” This document put forward revolutionary propositions such as “divide the fields evenly according to the population, not differentiating between man and woman”…The Heavenly Kingdom state pushed forward a series of revolutionary measures and policies in politics, economics, and culture, and advanced this revolutionary movement’s flourishing development.\textsuperscript{101}

Here, Hong Xiuquan is depicted as a “revolutionary” thinker who allied with peasants to challenge feudal ideals and found a fairer, more equal society. By portraying Hong in this manner, the museum creates a mythology that both elevates the Heavenly Kingdom as a harbinger of Chinese socialist development and praises Mao’s Great Leap Forward policies. The exhibit finishes with open glorification of Hong’s death and legacy:

Chinese and foreign “reactionaries,” because of their common counterrevolutionary goals, united to strangle the Taiping Rebellion. Opposing the powerful enemy, Hong Xiuquan led the Taiping army in life-and-death struggle. Eventually because of the disparity in strength between the Taiping army and the enemy [\textit{diwo liliang xuanshu} 敵我力量悬殊]…Tianjing became surrounded.\textsuperscript{102} On June 1, 1864, Hong

\textsuperscript{100} “The Emergence of Revolutionary Thinking,” Hong Xiuquan Former Residence Museum, Guangzhou, accessed August 5, 2013.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{102} The word used to describe the two opposing sides is 敵我 \textit{diwo}, which essentially translates to “enemy-self.” Chinese language often assigns the “self” (我 \textit{wo}) to words that denote broader group
Xiuquan passed away. In July, Tianjing fell and numerous fighters heroically gave their lives for their country. The heroes of the Taiping Rebellion who looked to Hong Xiuquan as their leader, using their own blood, composed a brilliant chapter in the Chinese people’s history of anti-imperialist, anti-feudal struggle.\footnote{“Defending Revolutionary Power,” Hong Xiuquan Former Residence Museum.}

Assigning the language of socialism to 19th-century China, this passage puts the finishing touches on the CCP reconstruction of the Taiping Rebellion as a proletarian revolution. However, due to the fact that CCP officials designed the museum in 1961 in order to buttress Mao’s Great Leap Forward policies, it also needed to omit several well-known details about Hong Xiuquan that would severely contradict Mao’s conception of Chinese socialism.

One of the most important omissions in the museum is that Hong built his charismatic authority by appropriating Western Christianity for his own use. Following the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842, which opened Guangzhou to British residence and trade, Hong began to intermittently study Christianity with Westerners. Studying with American Issacher Jacox Roberts’ Southern Baptist Mission in Guangzhou in 1847 proved to be a particularly formative experience.\footnote{Frederic Wakeman, \textit{Strangers at the Gate: Social Disorder in South China, 1839-1861}, 129.} Preaching publicly, baptizing converts, and brazenly destroying Confucian relics, Hong used his audacity and spiritual conviction to gain a devoted following. By combining his personal charisma with the alien yet alluring religion that seemed to lie behind the West’s military power, Hong convinced peasants that he was the Son of God and the brother of Jesus Christ. Although this mystical ideology was key in attracting faithful supporters, the museum barely mentions the religious nature of identification, such as 我国 woguo (my country, i.e. China) or 我党 wodang (my Party). Interestingly, in this case the “self” is equated with Hong Xiuquan, despite the fact that he himself was a Hakka minority, and killed millions of Chinese throughout the Taiping Rebellion.
Hong Xiuquan’s rise, as this element of the Taiping story would significantly contradict the atheism favored by Mao.

In addition to omitting the appropriation of Western religion and mysticism inherent in Hong Xiuquan’s rise to power, the museum also neglected the racist nature of Hong Xiuquan’s rebellious call to action. While Hong Xiuquan was a member of the Hakka minority and did not consider himself Han Chinese, he nevertheless fiercely opposed the Manchu minority that controlled the Qing government. Proclaiming war against the Manchu race, Hong demanded:

Can the Chinese still consider themselves men? Ever since the Manchus poisoned China, the flame of oppression has risen up to heaven, the poison of corruption has defiled the emperor’s throne, the offensive odor has spread over the four seas, and the influence of demons has distressed the empire while the Chinese with bowed heads and dejected spirits willingly became subjects and servants.\(^{105}\)

This clear delineation between Chinese and Manchus is another element of Hong Xiuquan’s ideology that is impossible to fit into CCP patriotic narratives today. If Hong Xiuquan were indeed a national hero of the masses, then his Manchu enemies would necessarily be excluded from Chinese identity. The CCP, however, wishes to unite all minorities under one nationality, and has explicitly classified all national ethnic groups as “Chinese” since 1949.\(^{106}\) For this reason, Hong Xiuquan’s hatred of China’s Manchu minority was ignored in the museum’s historical account.

Hong Xiuquan’s anti-Manchu language dispels the myth that he was an authentic national hero. Furthermore, Hong not only propagated racist messages, but also ordered horrific massacres of Manchus wherever he found them. When the

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\(^{106}\) Ibid., 498-9.
Taiping army invaded Nanjing in March 1853, Nanjing’s Manchu population of 40,000—about 5,000 of whom were combat troops—crowded into the city’s inner citadel. After the Taiping army crushed the armed opposition, Manchus who had survived the battle, including women and children, were rounded up and systematically executed by stabbing, drowning, and burning. This massacre of Nanjing’s Manchus was also omitted from the museum, which portrayed a leader who—like Mao—needed to stand for universal justice and equality.

In addition to neglecting Hong’s role in murdering Manchus, the museum depicted him as an anti-corruption crusader defeated by a sinister combination of foreign imperialist forces and Qing counterrevolutionaries. The reality of the Heavenly King’s governing practices, however, is more disputed than the museum’s historical account indicates. After the deaths of two talented military leaders in 1852, the preemptive assassination of the brilliant but power-hungry adviser Yang Xiuqing, and the departure of trusted adviser Shi Dakai, Hong Xiuquan began to lose direction. Instead of moving forward to attack Beijing, the Heavenly King remained in Nanjing, where he indulged himself with concubines and searched the Bible for any references that might allude to himself and his mission.

Finally, not only did Hong Xiuquan stray from egalitarian ideals, but he also was not as universally popular among Han Chinese as the museum indicated. Most Han Chinese in Nanjing resented the Hakkas, whose “uncultured” women bizarrely refused to bind their feet and who attempted to implement economic regulations and other strict rules (such as segregation of the population by sex and occupation).

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108 Ibid., 137-9.
According to Spence, “passive resistance to the Taiping was endemic, and flight, spying, and defections to the Qing common.” These details reveal a far more complex picture of Hong Xiuquan. While the Heavenly King preached a message of equality, he was not afraid to violently oppress the people he ruled over and was far from the universally lauded hero the museum made him out to be.

**Never forget national humiliation**

While the Hong Xiuquan Former Residence Museum created a historical narrative that fit the political necessities of the time, over fifty years have elapsed since the museum’s founding in 1961. Today, high school textbooks discuss the Taiping Rebellion in a language located outside the museum’s proto-socialist historical framework. Rejecting the historiography of the Maoist era, patriotic education materials such as the 2002 Renmin Jiaoyu Press textbook (RJP) and the 2004 Renmin Press textbook (RMP) contextualize the Taiping Rebellion as a movement shaped in response to Chinese interactions with the West. In different ways, both RJP and RMP reflect the political motivations of the present-day CCP, and illuminate how historical narratives can dramatically shift in China’s rapidly developing modern society.

RJP maintains its own distinct emphasis on “national humiliation” at the hands of both an incompetent Qing government and, more prominently, Western invaders. This new focus was chosen as a direct response to the August 1991 “General Outline on Strengthening Education on Chinese Modern and Contemporary History and National Conditions,” which called for historical content stressing

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109 Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 172-3.
China’s past subjugation to Western powers. According to RJP, the causes of the Taiping Rebellion were:

1. A corrupt feudal system and heavy exploitation sharpened class contradictions. After the Opium War, the Qing government extorted funds from the people in order to pay war reparations, and corruption worsened. Corrupt officials and local bosses seized opportunities to blackmail the common people. The unbearably suffering masses rebelled in profusion.

2. The foreign capitalist invasion brought the Chinese people new catastrophe.

3. Natural disasters were serious. From 1846 to 1850, Guangdong and Guangxi provinces experienced endless flooding, drought, and locust plagues, and the great laboring people fell into dire straits of starvation and death.\(^\text{110}\)

This description of the causes of the Taiping Rebellion retains the historical materialist notion that the Chinese people were a cohesive mass compelled to rebel by their socioeconomic circumstances. Additionally, the passage blames the poor condition of the Chinese people on both corrupt Qing authorities and Western powers, turning both groups into malicious “others.”

When discussing Qing government corruption, a distinction is made between cruel officials and the “unbearably suffering masses,” as if all Chinese fit neatly into one common category. Similarly, the second point concerning China’s interactions with foreigners does not only mention capitalism—it specifically defines capitalism as Western. Furthermore, Western capitalism did not merely influence Chinese society—it invaded. By endowing Western capitalism with the agency to invade, this

passage labels “the West” as a dangerous enemy that sought to violate Chinese sovereignty.

Aside from implicating the Qing government and foreign powers in causing the Taiping Rebellion, the passage also mentions that natural disasters that led to widespread starvation and death. It is important to note that although RJP acknowledges starvation during this period, the text refrains from even mentioning the Great Famine that resulted from Mao’s Great Leap Forward policies and killed tens of millions. While the corrupt Qing government is realistically portrayed as incapable of responding to the natural disasters between 1846 and 1850, RJP neglects to even recognize the existence of the Great Famine between 1958 and 1961, let alone incriminate the CCP for its leading role in the disaster. In this way, two distinct yet parallel periods of starvation are selectively displayed according to how the Party wishes to construct both its own image and that of its Qing predecessor.

After painting the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom as a victim of both the invasive West and the corrupt Qing, RJP characterizes the Taiping Rebellion as a glorious precursor to future Chinese revolutions. The text states, “The Taiping Rebellion, in modern Chinese history, was a grand scale, forward-surging, anti-feudal and anti-invasive peasant’s revolutionary war.” Not only does RJP here label the Taiping Rebellion as “forward-surging,” which ignores the racist character of the movement, but it also uses the term “anti-invasive” (fan qinlüe 反侵略) to depict the Heavenly Kingdom as anti-Western. However, until the Taiping rebels were assaulted by Western forces allied with the Qing, they never once attacked Western powers. In

111 Ibid., 27.
addition, as previously stated, Hong Xiuquan himself espoused an ideology derived from Western Christianity. Following its characterization of the Heavenly Kingdom as “anti-invasive,” the textbook explicitly sums up the accomplishments of the Taiping Rebellion as:

1. It sped up the Qing Empire and the entire feudal system’s decline and collapse.

2. At the same time that it opposed feudalism, it also undertook 27 anti-foreign tasks. It opened large-scale military struggle against foreign invaders, and destroyed the Western invaders’ plots to rapidly colonize China.

3. In comparison to China’s past peasant wars, in terms of thought and organization, it stood alone, and was the height of thousands of years of Chinese peasant wars. It had significant influence on future Chinese anti-imperialist, anti-feudal struggle.

4. The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom’s leaders also encouraged trade relations with every nation, and later put forth the first plan to develop capitalism within China.

5. In the mid-19th century, the first tide of national liberation movements appeared in Asia. The Taiping Rebellion, along with people from such countries as Persia, Indonesia, and India pushed and influenced each other in anti-colonial struggle. Together, they attacked Western colonialists.112

These five listed accomplishments of the Taiping Rebellion hyperbolically claim that the movement powerfully influenced both Chinese and international struggles against feudalism and Western colonialism (an argument it partially validates by noting “27 anti-Western tasks” that do not appear in the rest of the chapter). Nevertheless, at the same time that it attacks Western “colonizers,” RJP also lauds the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom for putting forward plans to develop Chinese capitalism—the very same

112 Ibid., 27.
force that the textbook previously described as invasive, catastrophe-inducing, and Western.

While similar contradictory claims appear in other parts of RJP, few are accidental. Like any Chinese history textbook, RJP’s portrayal of history is designed to prepare students for the history portion of the gaokao, China’s college entrance examination. However, since the gaokao is centrally written and administered, textbooks must teach students to memorize and negotiate official narrative contradictions that appear in test questions. For instance, when discussing the feasibility of Hong Xiuquan’s “Heavenly Kingdom Land System,” the textbook states:

> Objectively, there was no stable environment to ensure the implementation of the field division plan; subjectively, evenly dividing land and production, as well as having all life materials stored in a holy warehouse was all an empty fantasy [kong xiang] without the slightest means of implementation.\(^{113}\)

The self-conscious contrast between “objective” and “subjective” presented in this passage is striking. While China was highly unstable during the Taiping Rebellion, RJP’s claim that it was too unstable to ensure the implementation of the field division plan is an unsupported, subjective statement. Nevertheless, these official “objective” facts must be memorized for the sake of the all-important gaokao.

China’s education system has often been criticized for doing little to encourage critical thinking.\(^{114}\) Passages that predetermine objective and subjective facts instead of allowing students to analyze history for themselves support this stereotype. Building on this trend, the multiple choice questions at the end of the RJP

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\(^{113}\) Ibid., 21-2.
chapter provide little opportunity for students to do more than memorize objectively “correct” answers. For instance, one question asks:

The correct statements about the Tianjing Incident are:

1. It was a random event, and didn’t follow any regular pattern
2. It was a limited expression of the peasant class
3. It contained distinctive features of the time period
4. It caused the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom to lose vitality

A. 1, 2  
B. 2, 3  
C. 3, 4  
D. 2, 4

While the “correct” answer appears to be C, whether events such as the Tianjing Incident (Yang Xiuqing’s attempt to assassinate Hong Xiuquan) follow regular patterns is a debate that remains unresolved.

This question exemplifies a central goal of the RJP book: to teach children to memorize “correct” answers so that they perform well on officially managed tests. It is precisely the contradictory nature of such questions that leads disillusioned students to distinguish between “correct” and accurate and consequently to adopt a perfunctory approach to learning official history.

Heavenly modernization

Unlike RJP, RMP (2004) does not couch the Taiping Rebellion’s significance in terms of overcoming national humiliation caused by Qing feudalism and Western bullying. Instead, it characterizes the Rebellion as a significant precursor to China’s Reform and Opening movement. RMP’s portrayal of the Heavenly Kingdom as a

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forerunner of Chinese globalization and modernization fit China’s political circumstances at the time of its publishing. Beijing had won the bid to host the 2008 Olympics, the Chinese economy was experiencing enormous growth and integration with global markets, and newly anointed President Hu Jintao had made “China’s peaceful rise” a key CCP slogan.\textsuperscript{116}

Adopting a more conciliatory tone to accommodate the new political motivation to strengthen China’s soft power, RMP’s language differs significantly from that of RJP. For instance, the opening line of the chapter on the Taiping Rebellion states, “After the Opium War, foreign products poured into China, and caused coastal farmers and workers to lose their livelihoods.”\textsuperscript{117} Instead of framing the rise of capitalism in China as a “foreign capitalist invasion” as RJP does, this sentence merely indicates that foreign goods “poured into China.” The emphasis on products as opposed to the foreign capitalists themselves changes the tone of the narrative; it frames the rise of Chinese capitalism as something that happened due to macroeconomic forces rather than due to foreign plots to colonize China.

This relatively conciliatory language paves the way for a narrative that describes a forward-thinking Taiping Heavenly Kingdom that attempted to learn from and emulate the West. For example, one paragraph describes the role that Hong Ren’gan, Hong Xiuquan’s cousin, played in advocating for modernization:

\textit{In 1859, in order to invigorate the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, Hong Ren’gan put forth “A New Treatise on Aids to Administration,”}\textsuperscript{116}


which…suggested following the example of some Western capitalist systems, including developing industry and mining, transportation, postal service, finance, and irrigation. It also allowed private opening of industry, and encouraged technological innovation…This was advanced Chinese people’s earliest suggested reform plan that contained elements of capitalism, and it centrally reflected the pressing desire of advanced Chinese at that time to seek truth [xunqiu zhenli 寻求真理] and explore paths to save the nation and the people [tansuo jiuguo jiumin daolu 探索救国救民道路].

While RJP neglects to explicitly address Hong Ren’gan’s attempts at reform and primarily stresses the Taiping Rebellion’s anti-feudal, anti-Western nature, this RMP passage reverses that narrative by focusing on the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom’s plans to pursue modernization based on Western models.

RMP labels the capitalist reforms proposed in “A New Treatise on Aids to Administration” as the positive ideas of modern Chinese pioneers. In doing so, the text implies that certain elements of capitalism are indeed useful, and even necessary, in order to establish a Chinese path to national salvation. In labeling Hong Ren’gan as a patriotic reformer who sought truth and explored “paths to save the nation and the people,” this passage presents the Taiping Rebellion as an early example of China’s willingness to engage in mutually beneficial global exchange.

By associating these elements of capitalist development with “truth-seeking,” RMP places the Taiping rebellion within a framework that encourages students to support recent CCP policies of globalized economic development. In fact, the first lesson question at the end of the chapter asks students to explain the ideological shift from Hong Xiuquan’s egalitarian “Heavenly Kingdom Land System” to Hong Ren’Gan’s capitalist “A New Treatise on Aids to Administration.” This question

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118 Ibid., 48.
somewhat mirrors the shift from Mao’s revolutionary ideology to Deng Xiaoping’s pragmatic Reform and Opening policies. These types of questions demand more advanced thinking than merely circling politically correct answers. Nevertheless, they still contain a hidden curriculum of justifying the government’s policy shifts. In this sense, RMP promotes a narrative of “heavenly modernization” that imposes present-day ideological needs on the past and supports the CCP’s push for global economic integration.

**Taiping history’s shifting currents**

The RMP textbook does not represent a shift towards a more accurate narrative. After all, this historical account ignores the violence, corruption, and racism that fueled the Heavenly Kingdom’s rise. Furthermore, RMP portrays “advanced” Chinese reformers as a unified group instead of presenting the spectrum of reform ideologies that existed at the time. In spite of its lack of accuracy, however, RMP does qualify as more “correct” according to recent political objectives. Further alluding to the necessity of CCP leadership, the end of RMP’s Taiping Rebellion chapter states:

> The Taiping Rebellion’s failure demonstrates that when the peasant class acts as the representative of small producers, yet lacks the guiding weapon of scientific principles, it cannot undertake the heavy burden of leading China’s democratic revolution.\(^{119}\)

By claiming that Taiping leaders lacked the scientific tools necessary to lead China’s democratic revolution, the textbook indicates China’s need for the Party—an organization that ostensibly employs scientific knowledge to methodically lead

\(^{119}\) Ibid., 49
economic development. With the “guiding weapon” of seemingly vague scientific principles, RMP suggests that the CCP will enable China to catch up with the West and achieve national salvation.

Outside of high school history textbooks, professional historians have also shifted Taiping history away from a socialist revolutionary framework. As historian Li Huaiyin notes in an article about historians Fan Wenlan and Jiang Tingfu, Chinese intellectuals have a long history of reconciling their own perceptions of historical truth with the political demands of their time. This tension between political ideology and historiography is particularly visible in the fluctuating narratives of the Taiping Rebellion.

Jiang Tingfu, a nationalist historian who wrote in Republican China during the 1930s, dismissed the Taiping Rebellion as no different from any other peasant uprising. Framing Hong Xiuquan as a tyrant from the outset, Jiang argued that he never had any intention to evenly divide land or establish equality between the sexes (as evidenced by Hong’s obsession with concubines and his failure to put the land system into effect). Instead of praising the Taiping Rebellion as a progressive proto-socialist revolution, Jiang dismissed it as another example of the “cyclical trap” (xunhuan tao 循环套) that encouraged the leaders of successful peasant rebellions to establish new autocratic empires.

In framing the Taiping Rebellion as a bloody but typical revolution, Jiang identified Republican China as the authentic starting point of modern Chinese history and the end of China’s dynastic cycle. After the CCP officially founded the PRC in

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120 Li Huaiyin, “Between Tradition and Revolution: Fan Wenlan and the Origins of the Marxist Historiography of Modern China,” Modern China 36, no. 3 (May 2010), 275.
1949, however, Jiang’s narrative of Republican modernization was buried by the political demand for a socialist revolutionary narrative that supported the Party’s rise to power.

In an attempt to graft a historical materialist framework onto Chinese history, the Party adopted the historiography of Fan Wenlan, a well-known Marxist historian who wrote during the 1950s. It is precisely Fan Wenlan’s ideological framework that is exhibited by Guangzhou’s Hong Xiuquan Former Residence Museum today.

Describing Fan’s approach to Taiping historiography, Li Huaiyin writes:

Unlike Jiang, who disapproved of Hong Xiuquan, Fan Wenlan highly commended his creative ideas on inequality in social relations, wealth distribution, ethnic relations, and gender, as expressed through his treatises for religious and ideological indoctrination…Fan thus praised the Taiping Rebellion as a movement proposing ‘four basic equalities for the first time in Chinese history’ and ‘the very beginning of the Chinese bourgeois democratic revolution,’ which was completely different from the myriad ‘old-style peasant rebellions’ of the past.  

Highlighting Hong Xiuquan’s innovative thoughts on social inequality, Fan framed the Taiping Rebellion as a turning point in Chinese historical development. His work provided a historical materialist counter-narrative to Jiang’s argument of Republican modernization. Fan’s work also appealed to China’s sense of “choseness” by noting that the Heavenly Kingdom was the first time in Chinese history—not Marxist universal proletarian history—in which such ideas were proposed.

Fan’s particular historical framework rose to the forefront of Chinese mainland historiography because it closely reflected Mao’s own reinterpretation of Marxism. In his 1940 essay “On New Democracy,” Mao emphasized the need to situate Marxist theories of historical development within the context of Chinese

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121 Ibid., 275-6.
national history. Warning against the blind application of foreign dogma to Chinese conditions, he wrote:

China has suffered a great deal from the mechanical absorption of foreign material. Similarly, in applying Marxism to China, Chinese communists must fully and properly integrate the universal truth of Marxism with the concrete practice of the Chinese revolution, or in other words, the universal truth of Marxism must be combined with specific national characteristics…Chinese culture should have its own form, its own national form.\textsuperscript{122}

In this passage, Mao called for the integration of universal Marxist narratives into Chinese national history, and thereby voiced opposition to orthodox Marxist hardliners within the CCP. In addition, he also displayed his disapproval of the historical accounts of Li Dingsheng and Zhang Wentian, who had been formally trained in Marxist historiography.\textsuperscript{123} This criticism of universal Marxist history allowed Fan’s nationally integrated historiography to emerge.

Fan, who was originally trained as a philologist, emphasized the unique role that individual figures played in determining Chinese history. For instance, although Fan characterized the Taiping Rebellion as a precursor to CCP-led peasant revolution, he did not attribute its failure to insufficient class-consciousness or to the material conditions of China at the time. Instead, Fan blamed the outcome on the individual actions of Qing General Zeng Guofan, whose Xiang Army significantly weakened Taiping forces in Hunan. In a 1943 pamphlet entitled \textit{The Life of the Traitor-Butcher Zeng Guofan} (\textit{Hanjian Guizishou Zeng Guofan de Yisheng}), Fan fiercely condemned Zeng Guofan for his role in suppressing what may

\textsuperscript{123} Li Huaiyin, “Between Tradition and Revolution,” 271.
otherwise have been a successful proto-socialist revolution.\textsuperscript{124} In this sense, Fan’s historiography simultaneously contained both a China-specific focus on individual historical figures and a socialist emphasis on class struggle. His work suitably aligned with Mao’s desire to articulate a distinctly national history of Chinese socialist development.

Although Fan’s Taiping historical narratives were popular during the Maoist era, most historians today consider them neither “correct” nor accurate. After Mao’s death in 1976, the CCP stopped framing itself as a revolutionary party, and began stressing its role as a facilitator of economic development. Since this ideological shift required historical legitimation, the CCP returned to the modernization narrative that Jiang Tingfu had constructed in the late 1930s.\textsuperscript{125} While today’s textbooks differ from Jiang Tingfu in that they attribute pioneering significance to the Taiping Rebellion, their narratives of national progress ultimately borrow his historiographical framework of modernization.

Changing course with political winds, Taiping history’s shifting currents epitomize the CCP’s search for a “useable past.” However, unlike Zhang Junyi’s intrepid Taiping soldier, who crosses history’s river with singular purpose and tightly clenched fists, Chinese intellectuals carefully observe the river as they move across it; they compare their own knowledge of historical undercurrents to deceptively simple surface narratives. This underlying sense of historical memory has its own inertia, and enables intellectuals to critically assess official efforts to align history with present-day ideological needs.

\textsuperscript{125} Li Huaiyin, “Between Tradition and Revolution,” 296.
Chapter 4

Paving the Road to Rejuvenation

Sleep deeply and sweetly, my China,
Who would have imagined that loving the country is loving home?
The citizens’ realized consciousness must awaken today,
So no one carves up the land like a melon.126

Amid the muggy heat of Shanghai in late July, I decided to take a northbound train to Beijing, where I visited the National Museum of China. Housed on the east side of Tian’anmen Square, just south of the Forbidden City’s Heavenly Gate, the National Museum is an imposing structure. After a 3-year, 2.5 billion-yuan expansion completed in 2011, it covers nearly 200,000 square meters of floor space, and houses approximately 1.05 million cultural relics.127

As I waited in an hour-long line outside the museum, I met and observed tourists from all parts of China: a family from Wuhan, a patriotic education summer camp tour group from Shanghai, an elderly couple visiting from Xi’an. Free of charge, the National Museum attracts throngs of visitors every day, and includes both patriotic and cultural exhibitions. Despite the tourists’ varied backgrounds, all shared an enthusiasm for interacting with museum content: I saw practically no “stair-sitters” all day. This was not “perfunctory patriotism,” but a rare visit imbued with personal significance. If China’s national consciousness had once been asleep, it seemed to have fully awakened under the National Museum’s enormous grey columns.

Since the National Museum’s reopening, the most prominent exhibit on

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display has been “The Road to Rejuvenation” (复兴之路 fuxing zhi lu)—a portrayal of the progression of Chinese history from the First Opium War to the present. Drawing from Sun Yat-sen’s slogan of “Reinvigorate China” (zhenxing zhonghua 振兴中华), the term “rejuvenation” not only implies China’s return to international political prominence, but also connotes the idea of cultural renaissance (wenyi fuxing 文艺复兴). By associating itself with the theme of cultural rejuvenation, the Party not only asserts its position as the leader of China’s economic rise, but also presents itself as an enlightened force determined to return China to an age of cultural supremacy.

Sacralized progress

One of the first things one notices at the beginning of “The Road to Rejuvenation” is the textbook-like linearity with which China’s modern history is portrayed. This linearity is enhanced by grey walls that guide viewers through narrow, dimly lit hallways of 19th-century national humiliation. Progress throughout the entire exhibit is demarcated by large stone slabs that proclaim, “Unit 2: The Imperialist Powers’ Invasion of China,” or, “Part 3: The Communist Party Takes on the Historic Burden of Making the Country Independent and Liberating its People.”

These milestones delineate both the literal and imagined borders of the “Road to Rejuvenation,” framing the materials presented within the CCP’s narratives. For example, the stone slab covering the second half of China’s 19th century is entitled, “The Chinese People’s Resistance and Awakening.” It reads:

In order to safeguard the country’s sovereignty and defend the nation’s dignity, the Chinese people unflinchingly attacked the foreign

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invaders, foiling the imperialist powers’ plot to subjugate China. The national crisis and the people’s misery constantly deepened.¹²⁹

In this section, the fact that the Second Opium War was primarily financed and fought by the Manchu Qing government—not the Chinese people as a national collective—is scarcely mentioned. Additionally, this portion of the museum also omits most of China’s massive 19th-century domestic uprisings in their entirety.

An 1898 poster entitled “The Current Political Situation” depicts foreign animals dividing China amongst themselves.

Constructing a dichotomy of foreign imperialists versus a united China, this poster displayed in “Road to Rejuvenation” projects national consciousness onto a 19th-century China that had yet to develop a strong sense of nationhood. A poem beneath the poster eerily reads, “Sleep deeply and sweetly, my China,” as if the nation were a helpless infant being hushed to sleep, blissfully unaware of its looming annihilation. Continuing, the poem encourages citizens to awaken their national consciousness and save their homeland from the invasive foreign animals wishing to “carve the land up

¹²⁹ Ibid.
“like a melon.” This stark picture of a sleeping China in imminent danger creates space for a CCP redemption figure to emerge and heroically awaken the nation to its existential peril.

As the exhibit marches unswervingly forward through national humiliation and ideological awakening, it eventually arrives at the War against Japan (WWII), which is portrayed as a historical turning point. Commemorating the CCP’s “leading role” in China’s victorious resistance against the Japanese, one stone tablet reads:

In the 1930s, the Japanese imperialists launched a war of invasion to subjugate China…The CCP became a tower of strength in the war of resistance. After 14 years of bloody war, the Chinese people won their first complete victory in resisting and repelling the invasion of a foreign enemy in its modern history.130

By mythologizing the CCP’s anti-Japanese guerilla force as a “tower of strength,” this description aligns with the central theme of the “Road to Rejuvenation”—the steady return of a CCP-led China to global prominence. To support this image of unyielding fortitude, the CCP commissioned a sculpture for the exhibit entitled, “The Great Wall of Blood and Flesh” (xuerou changcheng 血肉长城).

A sculpture entitled “The Great Wall of Blood and Flesh” commemorates Chinese victory in the War against Japan.

130 Ibid.
Juxtaposed with a stone model of the Great Wall of China itself, the red-tinted, larger-than-life “Great Wall of Blood and Flesh” features a Zeus-like salvation figure emerging from the masses to urge the nation into battle. As muscular soldiers doggedly surge forward, a worried mother clutches her child, and an elderly man proudly observes the bravery of his countrymen. United under the almighty guidance of the God-figure, China resists, suffers, and moves forward as one.

**Chosen victims: War with Japan**

Outside of the “Road to Rejuvenation” exhibit, the War against Japan plays a central role in the patriotic education campaign. Patriotic textbooks, museums, and official war commemorations portray the CCP as a national savior, and hardly mention America’s role in winning WWII. Moreover, most patriotic sources cite the statistic of 35 million Chinese war casualties—a conspicuous number slightly larger than most estimates of deaths during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution.\(^{131}\) In asserting that Chinese war casualties outweigh the victims of flawed CCP policies, the Party shifts the weight of China’s 20th-century suffering to Japan.

RJP (2002) describes the War against Japan as a period of massive hardship for the Chinese people, who were eventually saved by CCP victories against both the Japanese and Chiang Kai-shek’s KMT. Beginning its account, RJP blames the Japanese for plotting war as a means of achieving global domination:

> Japanese imperialism’s all-out mobilization to invade China was absolutely not accidental. This was the inevitable result of its established plans to realize the long premeditated plot to swallow China, monopolize Asia, and rule the world…China’s War of

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Resistance victory made a great contribution to the anti-fascist wars of people around the world.\(^{132}\)

This passage describes the tremendous sacrifice put forward by Chinese in order to rescue the world from the clutches of fascism. It aims to elevate the reader’s sense of national pride, asserting that were it not for the strength and determination of the Chinese people, humanity may have fallen to Japan’s plot to monopolize the world.

However, in spite of the RJP’s assertion that the Chinese people put forth a united effort to fend off Japanese imperialism, not all Chinese vigorously resisted Japanese power. In March 1940, Wang Jingwei, who was once second-in-command to Chiang Kai-shek, accepted a post as leader of a Chinese puppet regime. Although Dai Li, chief of the KMT secret service, had secret agents assassinate many Chinese collaborators, Wang’s regime survived, and was accepted as legitimate by millions of Chinese in the Shanghai-Nanjing region.\(^{133}\) Additionally, hundreds of thousands of Chinese soldiers joined puppet governments and plundered the villages they came across. One Chinese reporter sent to western Hubei to report on a KMT victory in 1943 wrote in his eyewitness account:

I had talks with the people…one man slowly put four fingers on the table and then turned the hand over. I understood his meaning. He meant to say that the [Chinese] 44\(^{\text{th}}\) Army looted the city completely. He told me in a low voice that the army raped, plundered, set incendiary fires, and murdered…The 87\(^{\text{th}}\) Army acted likewise…At the time they all said that the enemy was better than the Chinese troops.\(^{134}\)


Although many Chinese forces—particularly the better disciplined Communist divisions—refrained from abusing the peasants they came across, this horrific description of one Chinese army’s violent treatment of civilians raises important questions about the validity of the CCP’s patriotic unity narratives.

Although RJP claims that China was a unified national subject, it does not characterize CCP and KMT actions against the Japanese military as cohesive joint efforts. For instance, when introducing the Nanjing Massacre to readers, RJP states that when the Japanese attacked, the KMT government fled to Chongqing. Following this statement, the textbook cites a Japanese reporter’s gruesome description of the horrors that engulfed the city:

On the deck there were charred corpses everywhere, piled one on top of the other, creating a corpse mountain…The sound of moaning, the dark red blood, the convulsing hands and feet, and the muted silence left a deep impression on us.\textsuperscript{135}

Though the KMT did not actively bring about the grisly Nanjing Massacre, by framing it against the KMT government’s flight to Chongqing, RJP implicitly blames the KMT for betraying Chinese in their time of need. This juxtaposition distinguishes the KMT from the CCP, which the text notes was the first party to declare war on Japan after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 1937.\textsuperscript{136} RJP also directly shames the KMT for betraying China by attacking its CCP rival instead of Japan:

In early 1939, the fifth session of the fifth KMT plenum decided on a reactionary “dissolve the CCP, block the CCP, limit the CCP, oppose the CCP” policy…The KMT began to carry out a line of passive resistance to Japan and active opposition to the CCP.\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 35.
This statement clearly distinguishes a righteous CCP from an incompetent, treacherous KMT. Nevertheless, just as separate textbooks include differing interpretations of Hong Xiuquan and the Taiping Rebellion, the portrayal of the CCP-KMT rivalry has also shifted over time.

Due to increasingly conciliatory political relations between China and Taiwan, the anti-KMT language of previous textbooks has been toned down considerably since 2002. In particular, the 2004 RMP text focuses on collaborative efforts between the two parties to resist Japanese aggression. For instance, one passage recounts:

On December 12, 1936, the patriotic KMT generals Zhang Xueliang and Yang Hucheng approached Chiang Kai-shek—who supported a “suppress the CCP” policy—to remonstrate and ask him to stop the civil war by uniting with the CCP to resist Japan…Under the mediation of the CCP, Chiang Kai-shek was forced to accept Zhang and Yang’s suggestion. The peaceful resolution…allowed the two parties to move from civil war to peace, from divided confrontation to a prologue for cooperating to resist Japan.138

This description of peaceful albeit forced cooperation between the two parties highlights the united resolve of Nationalists and Communists to collaborate against Japan in order to save China. Though this narrative emphasizes the primacy of the CCP’s farsighted leadership, and recognizes its role in initiating cooperation, it also avoids drawing attention to the mistakes of the KMT. In this sense, RMP contains a hidden curriculum that encourages bilateral collaboration—a core political objective of today’s CCP, which seeks the return of Taiwan to the mainland.

As the War against Japan chapter of RMP continues, the theme of interparty unity is further emphasized. One passage in particular collapses the distinction

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between the CCP and KMT, portraying both parties as equally devoted to resisting Japanese aggression:

In September, the KMT Central Communication Agency announced the CCP Central Committee’s KMT-CCP Declaration of Cooperation, and the people’s united battlefront to resist Japan was formally established. From this point on, the War against Japan’s development became a war that had the industry, agriculture, military, blood, and commerce of people from all from all circles, of all nationalities, and of every democratic party unite to resist Japan.\(^{139}\)

By substituting a past of patriotic cooperation for narratives of mutual hatred, RMP paints a much cleaner picture of interparty relations than actually existed. Throughout the war, both parties remained distrustful, and even openly attacked each other in the Wannan Incident of January 1941. This incident, sparked by the Communist New Fourth Army’s unauthorized expansion north of the Yangtze River, led to a serious crisis in the CCP and KMT’s Second United Front.\(^{140}\) Nevertheless, RMP ignores this event in favor of a myth of unity designed to strengthen present-day ties with Taiwan.

In contrast to RJP and RMP, which were nationally distributed texts, the 2010 Huadong Shifan Daxue Press (HSFD) textbook was compiled specifically for Shanghai students, and was distributed after textbook publication was decentralized to urban and provincial printing presses in the early 2000s. As a result, this textbook adopts a local flavor by including distinct stories about the Japanese invasion of Shanghai. While its treatment of the KMT is similar to RMP’s, HSFD is unique in its endeavor to activate students’ imaginations with local stories and graphics. For instance, the textbook includes a Shanghai-specific story about a soldier that recounts:

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\(^{139}\) Ibid., 39.

On October 26, 1937, the Chinese army guarding Zhabei [district] received orders to retreat, and left behind the 800 soldiers of the First Battalion of Regiment 524 of the 88th division to undertake the task of shielding [the city]…Assistant regimental commander Xie Jinyuan declared: “Before completing the task, don’t make light of sacrifice; after the task is completed, make heroic sacrifice to protect the country.”…The people of Shanghai willingly gave the brave soldiers food. “The Eight Hundred Brave Men,” bathed in blood, bravely fought against the Japanese Army day and night, repelled more than ten Japanese attacks, eliminated over 200 Japanese soldiers, and left behind moving, heroic achievements.141

By writing narratives for Shanghai students, HFSD aims to relate to local students in a way that generic national textbooks cannot. By dramatically recounting the story of Xie Jinyuan and contextualizing it within a national narrative, HSFD tries to engage Shanghainese readers’ imaginations, as well as synthesize local and national identities.

In addition to including local Shanghainese stories, the HSFD text also discusses the theme of ensuring postwar justice for the Chinese people in emotional, righteous language. One passage that describes the fate of Japanese war criminals following the Chinese victory states:

After the victory in the War against Japan, the ruling issued on [Japanese] war criminals by the Far East International Military Court…resulted in the chief culprits of the invasive war receiving their proper punishment. This ruling extended international justice, upheld human dignity, and represented the common wishes of all lovers of peace and justice in the world. *This was history’s trial [lishi de shenpan 历史的审判]!* This trial’s righteous nature is unshakeable, and cannot be challenged.

By claiming that the sentencing of Japanese war criminals was “history’s trial”—an irrevocable victory for human dignity—HSFD pushes against Japanese textbooks that ignore atrocities committed in China. The syntax of the phrase “history’s trial” is particularly noteworthy: “History” is given the agency to judge, and unequivocally rules in humanity’s favor, righteously declaring Japan guilty of its wartime atrocities.

With “history’s” backing, HSFD strikes back against Japan’s denial of its crimes, and places China and Japan on diametrically opposed axes of good and evil. Much like the narrative presented by the “Road to Rejuvenation” exhibit, HSFD’s language embodies the victimization that many historians argue lies at the heart of Chinese historical memory. It promotes a hidden curriculum of reminding Chinese to forever bear in mind the heavy burden of history’s judgment.

**A complicated development**

After exhaustively commemorating the War against Japan, the “Road to Rejuvenation” presses forward to the CCP victory in the Chinese Civil War. As it guides visitors down this path of unrelenting progress, the exhibit gradually changes its color scheme, growing brighter and redder until reaching a climax at the universally recognized painting of Mao announcing the founding of the PRC from the

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142 Emphasis mine.
143 Ibid., 14.
Forbidden City’s Heavenly Gate. After having been led through a century of fear, suffering, and national anguish, this gigantic painting emerges as a light of salvation at the end of a dark history of steady progress.

In front of the famous painting, the exhibit displays historical artifacts such as the original microphone Mao used for the Founding Ceremony, the first plaque over the CCP headquarters in Beijing, and the original cannon fired to mark the birth of the PRC. These symbolic objects endow the exhibit with a sense of momentous import and allow visitors to feel as if they too were present when the PRC was founded. Furthermore, these objects prime visitors to be overwhelmed with patriotic pride when they encounter a stunning view of Tian’anmen Square and the Forbidden City, visible through a broad rectangular window to the right of the Founding Ceremony painting.
Peering through the window that looks out on the magnificent Heavenly Gate—the same one displayed in the recreation of the PRC’s Founding Ceremony—one cannot help but feel carried away by the “Road to Rejuvenation’s” overwhelming narrative of progress. Contrasting China’s century of humiliation with the colossal Tian’anmen Square, the throngs of bustling tourists, and the endless columns of cars streaming down Chang’an Road, visitors recognize the tremendous changes that China has experienced since beginning its long, bitter journey of modernization.

After passing the brilliant window that overlooks Tian’anmen Square, the layout of the museum changes. Instead of continuing along a linear path, the exhibit opens up into wide spaces in which visitors read about China’s economic advances since 1949. Here, the Party claims credit for postwar economic recovery, the making of China’s first nuclear bomb, the construction of the Sino-Tibetan Railway, and even the progress of Chinese cell phone technology. The exhibit attributes this wave of economic progress to the CCP’s innovative style of economic management.
Encircled by descriptions of economic progress, the visitor loses the sense of direction that characterized the first half of the exhibit. Upon reaching the presumable chronological location of the Great Leap Forward, the reason behind the exhibit’s change in spatial linearity becomes clear: CCP-inflicted suffering has no place on the “Road to Rejuvenation.”

Traumatic events like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution indisputably contradict the “Road to Rejuvenation’s” primary theme of unyielding progress under CCP leadership. As a result, all information concerning these events (which spanned nearly twenty years in total) is carefully hidden in a small corner of the exhibit entitled “Complicated Development.” There, these events are described as necessary struggles that the Party and Chinese people successfully overcame together:

After the establishment of the socialist system, New China entered a period of comprehensive socialist construction. The CCP led the whole country’s people of all nationalities through painstaking exploration of the laws of socialist development, and clearly set forth the grand goal of realizing “the four modernizations.” Through self-regeneration and
hard struggle, [the CCP] founded an independent and relatively complete industrial and national economic system, which laid an important material-technological foundation for modernized socialist development.\textsuperscript{144}

Neglecting the gruesome details of the greatest man-made famine humanity has ever witnessed, this description frames the CCP as an organization that assisted the people in overcoming the unavoidable structural difficulties of socialist development. On the “Road to Rejuvenation,” the Party is a benevolent leader that uses scientific knowledge to overcome such difficulties and determine the nation’s future development.

In spite of the Party’s insistence on its scientific management of socialist development, the “Complicated Development” section of the museum contains no statistics. While one tablet in the War against Japan section of the museum cites more than 35 million Chinese lives lost in the war, and estimates direct and indirect economic harm done to China to amount to 60 million dollars (calculated in 1937 currency), the approximately 30 million lives and enormous economic output lost in the Great Leap Forward receive no mention. In fact, the entire five-year period itself is only obliquely referred to as “a time of economic difficulties.”\textsuperscript{145}

Similarly, the exhibit carefully portrays the Cultural Revolution as a time of internal chaos within the Party. It passes over horrific stories of students beating teachers, children arresting parents, and violent self-criticism meetings. In the exhibit, the Cultural Revolution is merely bookended by three pictures—one which shows a crowd gathering in Tian’anmen Square to support Mao in 1966, and two which show

\textsuperscript{144} “The Road to Rejuvenation,” National Museum of China, Beijing.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.
party leaders and the masses gathering in Tian’anmen Square in 1976 to celebrate the downfall of the Gang of Four together.

Compared to the bloody, statistic-heavy commemoration of the War against Japan, these descriptions of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution were well concealed and exceedingly vague. Stripped of their traumatic weight, these events seemed to function as insignificant bumps along a constant road of progress.

“A hundred-footed insect dies hard”

While traveling in Guangzhou, I had the experience of meeting several high school and university level teachers willing to discuss their views on the Party’s role in determining history curricula. One professor of political science candidly told me:

China has developed its technology since Reform and Opening, but it hasn’t reformed its politics. Today, a more open media is a new type of power that is gradually exerting its influence on the Party. However,
any political reform will come very slowly: a hundred-footed insect
dies hard [baizu zhi chong, si er bu jiang 百足之虫，死而不僵].

Employing a classical Chinese idiom, this professor compared the CCP to a slowly
dying centipede. While the centipede’s power is waning, it nevertheless retains the
ability to censor discussion around sensitive topics. Upon examining recent
developments in official Great Leap Forward historiography, one recognizes the
relevance of this metaphor. Although the proverbial centipede of censorship is still
kicking—and, in fact, still retains many well functioning legs—an increasingly
diverse spectrum of historical interpretation of the years 1957 to 1962 has emerged on
the Chinese mainland.

In RJP, the Great Leap Forward is formally acknowledged as a mistake that is
largely Mao’s fault. The textbook repudiates Mao’s strategy of heavy industrial
development, and asserts that economic policies were not based on careful planning:

Blindly seeking fast [development] overwhelmed everything. In 1957,
the Soviet Union put forward a plan to surpass America in 15 years,
and Mao Zedong also suggested a plan of about 15 years to catch up to
England in primary industrial products and yields…Mao repeatedly
quickened the pace, and first changed to a plan of catching up to
England in 7 years, then finally changed to catching up to England in 3
years, increasingly breaking away from reality.146

Citing external pressure to match the Soviet Union’s pace of development, as well as
Mao’s urgent desire to catch up with the West, this passage describes a plan that was
doomed to fail from the outset. RJP here criticizes Mao for embracing unrealistic
plans, attributing his faulty judgment to an excessive commitment to ideology. Many
historians, however, believe that Mao’s decision process was ultimately steered not

146 Renmin Jiaoyu Chubanshe Lishi Shi, Quanri Zhi Putong Gaoji Zhongxue Jiaoke Shu (Bixiu):
Zhongguo Jindai Xiandai Shi (Full-time Common High School Education Textbook (Required):
by ideology, but by a vindictive personal character. RJP refrains from presenting this cynical interpretation of Mao. For instance, when describing Mao’s furious reaction to Peng Dehuai’s criticism of Great Leap Forward policies at the infamous Lushan Conference of July 1959, the textbook declares:

At the meeting, Peng Dehuai submitted a written statement to Mao Zedong praising the success of the “Great Leap Forward,” and also highlighting prominent problems. The statement, due to an imbalance in proportion [of praise to criticism], created anxiety among all parties…Mao believed that Peng Dehuai’s suggestions were signs of right-leaning thought…After the meeting, he began a national “anti-rightist” struggle, and many party members who supported seeking truth from facts received false criticism.147

Though this passage acknowledges that Mao’s criticism of Peng Dehuai was incorrect, and exonerates wrongly accused party members, it fails to detail the vengeful nature of Mao’s reaction. It is well documented that Mao carried a personal vendetta against Peng Dehuai, once declaring, “Many people hate me, especially Comrade Peng Dehuai—he absolutely loathes me, or at least certainly hates me to a substantial degree…if you [Peng] mess with me, I’ll certainly mess with you.”148 Ignoring the vindictive character of Mao’s attack on Peng, RJP ultimately absolves the Great Helmsman entirely:

In the beginning of 1962, the CCP…began to sum up the experience and lessons of the “Great Leap Forward.” Mao and fellow central leaders led the way in conducting self-criticisms. After the meeting, most people who had been falsely criticized by the “anti-rightist” movement were rehabilitated. The Party Central Committee’s measures encouraged the whole party and all people of the country, and starting in 1962, the economy gradually recovered.149

147 Ibid., 101.
In contrast to the passages about the War against Japan, which are filled with gory details of charred bodies and scattered limbs, this exoneration of Mao’s actions includes neither the specifics of his highly personal attack on Peng Dehuai, nor descriptions of the terrible Great Famine that resulted from the expansion of flawed economic policies. By ignoring the gruesome reality of starving children, tree bark dinners, and cannibalism that resulted from Mao’s Lushan “anti-rightist” lurch, RJP avoids discussing a subject that continues to be a political liability for the CCP today.

Though RJP highlights Mao’s leading role in conducting self-criticisms, the text does not detail what exactly he apologizes for, other than unfair accusations directed at his critics. This decision contrasts with how RJP portrays the War against Japan. While the War against Japan is an event in which the CCP plays the hero, there is only blame to be distributed for the tens of millions of lives lost in the Great
Famine—approximately five percent of the Chinese population at the time. For this reason, the Great Famine does not even receive mention in the text, and the massive number of people who died during the period is disregarded.

Rather than discuss those who lost their lives in the Great Famine, RJP obliquely hints at national troubles by talking about a related phenomenon: the abysmal economic consequences of Great Leap policies. Instead of accounting for victims, as it does with the War against Japan, RJP lists a string of economic statistics:

The “Great Leap Forward” caused the national people’s economy to become even more dramatically imbalanced. Agriculture and industry became disproportionate, and heavy industrial abnormalities developed. From 1957 to 1960, heavy industry multiplied by a factor of 2.3, but agriculture fell 22.8%...Steel industry production seized most resources, raw and processed materials, and transportation, causing other sections to have no means of normal production...Agricultural byproduct yields dropped precipitously. By 1960, grain and cotton production had dropped to 1951 levels...The market’s supply of materials was very tight.

Statistics showing losses in grain production from 1958 to 1961.

By presenting impersonal economic statistics in lieu of human starvation, RJP circumvents discussion of a sensitive topic. Because it only references what is politically safe—namely, economic difficulty, poor policies based on ideology, and the eventual top-down correction of all problems—RJP’s Great Leap Forward narrative lacks the emotional power that pervades its description of the War against Japan. It is a narrative sapped of real faces and stories. When taken at face value, it encourages readers to label this monstrous stage of Chinese history as something that was an unfortunate, but perhaps necessary stage of China’s economic development.

“No need for money to eat”

Although none of China’s recent textbooks discuss the Great Famine in depth, significant changes in how textbooks approach the Great Leap Forward are visible in HSFD (2010). While the shifts in HSFD are subtle, its new content nevertheless signals a readiness to draw nearer to the realities of the Great Famine.

The first noticeable difference in HSFD is its use of language that avoids labeling Mao’s actions as historically necessary. In RJP, for instance, one sentence reads, “In order to clearly divide great truths from great falsities and uphold the socialist path, a mass struggle attacking the rightist party erupted. This was necessary at that time.” This sentence legitimates the CCP’s anti-rightist purge as a necessary stage of sacrifice along the socialist path. In contrast to RJP, the language of HSFD is far less rigid:

Starting from the second half of 1956, the wave that emerged at the Comintern caused Mao Zedong to make an overly serious estimate [guoyu yanzhong de guji 过于严重 的估计] about that socialist stage.

152 Ibid., 99-100.
of international class struggle. Mao Zedong and the CCP Central Committee decided to open a whole party-scale correction movement, and from this triggered anti-rightist struggle.\(^{153}\)

In this presentation of the Anti-rightist Movement, HSFD describes Mao’s actions as having been influenced by Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech” of 1956, which denounced Stalin’s reign of terror. Indeed, historian Roderick MacFarquhar points out that the sudden anti-Stalinist shift of the Soviet Twentieth Congress came as a shock to Mao. Having received no warning that Khrushchev would attack Stalin’s legacy, Mao drafted a speech for China’s principal representatives that praised Stalin at the same congress.\(^{154}\) Instead of claiming that Mao’s Anti-rightist Campaign was somehow historically “necessary,” HSFD asserts that Mao’s decision making was influenced by the rude surprise he encountered at the Comintern, which pushed him to redouble his commitment to a policy of heavy industrial development and mass collectivization. Though HSFD disregards the Hundred Flowers Campaign’s role in setting the stage for Mao’s Anti-rightist crackdown, its nevertheless attributes Mao’s actions to his own errors, and not to the need to “clearly divide great truths from great falsities.”\(^{155}\)

Aside from abandoning the language of historical necessity, HSFD also details the sheer madness of the Great Leap Forward more than other textbooks. One excerpt taken from a *People’s Daily* article from September 1958 reads:

> Guangxi has a record-setting middle-season rice that produces 130,434 jin per mu [approximately 97 kg/m\(^2\)]; Henan has corn production of


\(^{155}\) The Hundred Flowers Campaign was a movement in which Mao encouraged intellectuals to openly criticize the Party and its policies. After a surprisingly significant wave of criticism emerged, Mao forced those who had spoken out to undergo self-criticisms, and condemned them to “reeducation” in labor camps.
35,393 jin per mu; Henan has sorghum production of 22,720 jin per mu; Shandong has soybean production of 4517.12 jin per mu; Fujian has tea leaf production of 1635.15 jin per mu.\textsuperscript{156}

This newspaper report presents the impossibly high production numbers that were reported to Chinese during the Great Leap Forward. By including this nonsensical false report of agricultural yields, HSFD acknowledges the terrible craze that gripped the country at the time, and draws nearer to the realities of the Great Leap Forward than older textbooks dared to approach.

Though HSFD does not explicitly address the Great Famine, it does include descriptions of food shortages that hint at the famine’s existence. Discussing the communal cafeterias used at the time, one passage states:

By the end of 1958, the whole country’s communal cafeterias reached 3.45 million, the population of communal eaters occupied over 90% of the whole nation’s countryside, and 500 million peasants ate out of big cauldrons worthy of their name. Communal cafeterias implemented “no need for money to eat” supply systems, and encouraged “eating as if releasing your stomach skin.” Starting from the spring of 1959, not few communal cafeterias had become disturbed by insufficient grain, and some cafeterias even arrived at a stage in which they had no rice for the cauldrons, and in which it was difficult to continue. They simply had to dissolve, and the peasants returned to their houses again to eat small-pan meals.\textsuperscript{157}

While this paragraph refrains from delving into the cruelest details of the Great Famine, it does mention the flaws in the “no need for money to eat” supply system. In hinting at the difficulties communes faced in feeding the entire populace, this passage exemplifies the gradually increasing openness with which the grey area around taboo subjects such as the Great Famine is being discussed.

\textsuperscript{156} Huadong Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, \textit{Gaozhong Lishi: Di Liu Fence, Shiyan Ben (High School History: Book Six, Experimental Edition)}, 91.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 92
Unfortunately, personal experiences are still sorely missing from HSFD’s account of the Great Leap Forward. Peasants did not simply retire from their naïve utopian experiment and return home to full dinner tables: due to their massive efforts to produce pig iron, there was no food left for themselves. By broaching the topic of food scarcity, however, HSFD informs students about the severe flaws in Great Leap Forward policies. In the following paragraph, this lesson is effectively summed up:

Departing from realistic goals resulted in the grave, unchecked spread of “leftist” errors such as the use of high targets, blind direction, habits of exaggeration, and the use of “communist style” [gongchan feng 共产风] as a primary symbol [of success]. On top of natural disasters and the USSR’s withdrawal of all experts, from 1959 to 1961 the Chinese national people’s economy experienced serious difficulties.158

Despite withholding explicit mention of the famine, HSFD does not frame the disastrous Great Leap Forward as a necessary stage of socialist development. Instead, it recognizes the CCP’s departure from realistic goals as a burdensome mistake that harmed both the Chinese people and the economy. Though HSFD’s account by no means does justice to the traumatic reality of the famine, it does convey previously omitted details about the events of 1957-1962.

Although it is difficult to pinpoint a clear-cut political reason for HSFD’s Great Leap Forward narrative shift, the change in language and content nevertheless represents a deliberate choice that deserves attention. Perhaps this new information about the Party’s past mistakes is included to stimulate the critical thinking crucial to successful employment in Shanghai. On the other hand, perhaps textbook compilers wished to distinguish the present CCP from its past by emphasizing what China was like when it lacked the scientific decision-making that has delivered China’s post-

158 Ibid., 92.
1978 economic growth. While the answers are unclear, the centipede of censorship seems to gradually rigidify as time and technological change provide the space necessary to discuss politically sensitive topics.

“Never wholly innocent”

While changes in official patriotic narratives often proceed slowly, Chinese intellectuals continue to press for different ways of talking and thinking about both the War against Japan and the Great Leap Forward. These individuals push for a careful reconsideration of history, and act as influential agents of change within the broader national discourse on China’s past.

In an article posted on Fenghuang Wang, a popular website for social commentary, activist Wang Xuan challenges the CCP’s methods of pressuring Japanese textbook compilers to more accurately present wartime atrocities committed in China. Instead relying on government officials or academic elites to convince Japanese to change their textbook narratives, Wang Xuan recommends that Chinese should strive to make the individual voices of victims heard. She collects individual stories and then takes them to Japanese courts, relying on the Japanese legal process to address war crimes. Explaining her position, Wang Xuan states:

After so many years, China’s villages and Chinese peasants’ individual histories have almost no records…the numbers aren’t clear. Thus, we need to gather individual histories, make oral histories, and collect circumstantial evidence and substantial evidence that become court-recognized facts. You can’t say something is fact and have it simply be fact: you need to collect evidence, prove crimes definitely occurred. This is very difficult.\footnote{Fenghuang Wang, “Neng Rang Riben Chenmo de Zhongguo Nüren Wang Xuan: Women Bixu Yao You Shouhaizhe Jiaodu de Lishi Xushu,” \textit{Fenghuang Wang}, September 2013, http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/ribenguan/wangxuan.shtml (accessed November 7, 2013).}
By encouraging Chinese to record oral histories that commemorate individual victims, Wang Xuan rejects official narratives that are often of questionable veracity. Instead of relying on authorities or elites to write history, Wang Xuan desires narratives that do justice to victims’ experiences. According to Wang Xuan, restoring the personal dignity of each victim is China’s only means of restoring national self-respect:

Many young people aren’t concerned with villages and don’t understand this affair. This is not saying we should remember hate; this is an individual’s consciousness of dignity. The nation is made up of individuals, and the nation is not a hollow concept. If every Chinese person doesn’t have dignity [zunyan 尊嚴], does this nation have dignity? National problems are in no way merely territorial.\(^\text{160}\)

By linking individual dignity to national dignity, Wang Xuan implicitly criticizes the CCP for prioritizing territorial disputes with Japan over China’s collective self-respect. She believes in a grassroots level rectification of national self-respect. Just as King Goujian of Yue needed to “lie on brushwood and taste gall” in order to reclaim his kingly dignity, Wang Xuan crusades for a painstaking national effort to collect the stories of victims. By doing so, she hopes to restore China’s national dignity and decisively silence Japanese deniers of wartime atrocities.

Wang Xuan appeals to Chinese individuals to take responsibility for recording their own history, declaring, “If you wait for elites to make it—for instance, the government, social elites, or academic elites—nothing will happen.”\(^\text{161}\) This attitude echoes that of the intellectuals of the New Culture Movement: it seeks to use a critical spirit and mass activism to work towards national changes without the assistance of government officials. At the end of her piece, Wang Xuan expresses optimism about the potential of her approach for creating genuine Sino-Japanese reconciliation:

\(^\text{160}\) Ibid.  
\(^\text{161}\) Ibid.
Because Japanese emphasize the importance of authentic research, I believe we only need to record history well and establish victim memorials, or publish books, and let the facts speak. I believe many Japanese will slowly understand and acknowledge [the facts]. Thus, I believe that rather than blaming others, we should do what we ought to do, and do it well.\textsuperscript{162}

Wang Xuan’s optimistic approach to the reconciliation process (as well as her faith in Japanese people’s capacity to reason and empathize) runs counter to patriotic narratives that paint Japan as a perpetually unapologetic enemy. Her rejection of the typical Japan-baiting that occurs in patriotic films, television series, and print media represents a new way of remembering victims without relying on the politically influenced historical accounts of the government.

Although Wang Xuan has received popular recognition from netizens for her grassroots historiography, her work contradicts a CCP that seeks to control how Japanese war crimes are portrayed in mainland China. In 2006, the China-Japan Joint History Research Project (JHR) was initiated to spur official efforts of historical reconciliation between China and Japan. However, according to reconciliation historian Edward Wang, despite significant areas of agreement reached by both Chinese and Japanese members of the JHR, the CCP blocked the committee’s essays from being published on the mainland.\textsuperscript{163} For the Party, these mutually agreed upon narratives threaten its framework of legitimacy, which establishes the CCP as a national guardian against a persistent Japanese enemy.

In spite of the friction that Wang Xuan’s approach to historical remembrance generates with the Party, her work is ultimately protected due to the relative political

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid.
\end{footnotesize}
safety of her subject matter. Because Wang Xuan discusses crimes perpetrated against
the Chinese nation by the Japanese army, her call for truthful recording of victim
narratives is insulated from official censorship. Scholars who research politically
sensitive events such as the Great Leap Forward, however, must approach public
criticism of official history more cautiously.

When remembering any historical event, let alone one as politically charged
as the Great Leap Forward, it is important to note that writers and textbook
compilers—regardless of how “objective” they attempt to be—all imbue their work
with their own hidden curricula. As Kimberley Ens Manning writes in her
introduction to a collection of essays on the Great Leap Forward:

> Recent scholarship on the ‘politics of memory’ in China suggests that
> collective memory is complex, uneven terrain and that it is never
> wholly innocent. The task of explaining what happened and why it
> happened is rendered even more difficult given the trauma that so
> many endured as a consequence of the Great Leap Forward
> mobilizations and famine. Indeed, the famine itself presents a dilemma
> with which Holocaust historians have struggled for years: how to name
> the unnameable.¹⁶⁴

The idea of collective memory as being “never wholly innocent”—that there is some
sort of motive behind every narrative—is central to interpreting any piece of history.
It is particularly important to remember the historian’s innate culpability when
considering the ways in which complex traumatic events like the Great Leap Forward
are portrayed over time.

Although intellectual historical reinterpretations lack the hegemonic force of
the Party, they too are inescapably political by nature. In an article written for

*Foreign Policy,* dissident blogger Murong Xuecun derides official accounts of the

¹⁶⁴ Kimberley Ens Manning and Felix Wemheuer, *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China’s
Great Leap Forward for repeatedly expressing a desire to be “responsible to history and truth,” yet employing vague terms like “the three years of difficulties” that discourage critical reflection on historical reality. Nevertheless, Murong Xuecun, too, interprets the Party’s historical portrayals through an inherently skewed lens:

Most people in China suffer from an inability-to-accept-facts syndrome. They only believe what they want to believe and can’t see facts that are painful or contradict their own views. A school curriculum that ignores all policy failures since 1949 exacerbates this syndrome.

Though Murong Xuecun may understand his own efforts to expose the Party’s manipulation of historical truth as “innocent,” he nevertheless constructs his counter-narrative in reaction to an official interpretation that he considers faulty. This inescapably biased approach prevents him from recognizing that textbooks such as HSFD do in fact acknowledge the errors of the Great Leap Forward, as well as trace the contours of the Great Famine.

Desiring to forcefully separate “loving the nation” from “loving the Party,” dissenting bloggers such as Murong Xuecun utilize the traumatic past to support their ideological opposition to the CCP. Seeking to combat zhengtong (the state’s political control) with daotong (a transcendent thread of historical truth), these cultural nationalist intellectuals weave narratives designed to tarnish the Party’s image. Although their opposition to the Party’s manipulation of history lends their message credibility in the eyes of CCP critics, it does not mean that they authoritatively grasp ultimate truth. All participants in the act of portraying history have reasons for


expanding or limiting discussion, or for writing new interpretations of certain events. All are implicated in the innate subjectivity of narrative construction.

Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik argues that the persistent silence surrounding China’s Great Famine may be attributed to tension between two countervailing forces: the myth of the Great Leap Forward as a necessary stage of Chinese socialist development, and the taboo of acknowledging the Great Famine’s deadly human toll. However, she also observes that ever since the CCP abandoned its revolutionary ideology during Reform and Opening, discourse has become increasingly open:

Myth and taboo are closely connected: as long as the myth about the Great Leap dominated the historiography of the post-1949 era, the taboo about the famine had to be upheld. However, as soon as the myth about Mao’s ability to successfully sinicize Marxism was open to deconstruction, the taboo about the famine was no longer enforced. And, vice versa, the more the Chinese public learned about the Great Famine, the less it was prepared to believe in the myth that the Chinese Communist Party had found a successful path to socialism.\(^\text{167}\)

As Weigelin-Schwiedrzik notes, when myth falls into disrepair, taboo becomes permeable, and bolder interpretations of the past begin to emerge in the public sphere. Once public, these new interpretations are near impossible to recant. They retain their staying power as time moves forward.

Though intellectuals such as Murong Xuecun tire of the trite, politically correct historical portrayals put forward by officially commissioned scholars, the development of new holes in the Great Leap Forward taboo—the severing of legs from the centipede of censorship—is undeniable. In 2002, government-sanctioned scholar Li Rui publicly addressed the Great Famine for the first time. Specifically, he

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described the famine in Xinyang, a town in which CCP investigative teams learned of starvation in the countryside.\textsuperscript{168} Although the famine largely remains a political taboo, it is significant that these official acknowledgments of the Great Famine are now coming forward.

In addition to quiet official reinterpretations of the Great Famine, there are also intellectuals who, like Wang Xuan, have meticulously recorded individual memories of the traumatic past. The most prominent of these intellectuals is Yang Jisheng—a former reporter for the state-run Xinhua News Agency—who publicly argues that the Great Famine claimed 36 million lives. In 2008, Yang published a massive history the Great Famine entitled \textit{Tombstone}, and today accepts interviews from his home in Beijing.\textsuperscript{169} While his book is banned on the mainland, it was published in Hong Kong, which is at least nominally under the CCP’s jurisdiction.

As increasingly more people on the mainland either hear about books such as \textit{Tombstone} or read pirated copies online, the longstanding taboo on Great Famine discourse will continue to break down, and the “Road to Rejuvenation” will lose its unwavering linearity. Though no single account will encapsulate the entirety of historical truth, the presence of a diversity of historical narratives may better approximate the past. Perhaps this plurality of critical approaches to history will draw China nearer to Wang Xuan’s ideal of dignity for Chinese individuals—the real travelers along China’s bumpy, winding path of modernization.

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 37.
\textsuperscript{169} Stephan Feuchtwang, \textit{After the Event: The Transmission of Grievous Loss in Germany, China and Taiwan}, 65.
Chapter 5

Only by Upholding Confidence in History…

The many rivers run each a separate course, but all must meet in the sea; only thus may the land be spared the evil of inundation.\footnote{William Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, \textit{Sources of Chinese Tradition: Volume 1: From Earliest Times to 1600}, Vol. 1, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 663.}

—Zheng Qiao, \textit{Tongzhi}

When Yang Jisheng published \textit{Tombstone}—a weighty 1,200-page testament to his father and 36 million other victims of the Great Famine—he joined an ancient tradition. Like Sima Qian, who endured castration to finish his massive \textit{Records of the Grand Historian}, or Xuanzang, who devoted his life to translating Indian Buddhist texts, Yang spent twenty years pouring layer after layer of personal stories, local statistics, and meticulous historical research into two massive volumes. Unlike China’s past champions of history, however, Yang Jisheng remains unrecognized by most of China today.

observed, though rivers may flow in different directions, all must eventually coalesce in the sea lest the land endure terrible flooding. By guiding history’s many tributaries to their proper destination, the CCP seeks to avoid such inundation, and moreover hopes to maintain the stability and confidence afforded by a vast, singular ocean.

A “national” question

In January 2006, when Yuan Weishi equated Chinese history education with feeding students “wolf’s milk,” he attempted to start a discussion about how history is written, taught, and conceived in China. By voicing the need to prevent Chinese youth from becoming angry wolves with a taste for foreign blood, Professor Yuan created his own conception of jiuguo: in order to save the nation, he called for reforms in the Chinese high school history curriculum.

Despite receiving much support from netizens, Professor Yuan was harshly criticized by scholars and officials who support patriotic education. Legal scholar Zhang Zhicheng, a member of the state-run Chinese Science and Technology Association, accused Yuan Weishi of valuing the academic historian’s perspective over the views of the masses. According to Zhang, only the government should have the power to give voice to mass opinion. In an online piece entitled “Discussing Professor Yuan Weishi’s Commentary on History Textbooks,” he wrote:

So, what exactly is “not joining political ideological construction?” This is not to say that history textbooks should not be written by history experts, but is instead to say that the ideological questions of history textbooks are national questions [guojia wenti 国家问题], and not academic questions [xueshu wenti 学术问题]. Just like Japanese history textbooks, what any country’s history textbooks reflect is the ideology “of the time,” “of the state,” “of the masses,” and then finally

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172 Emphasis mine.
of historians. Ideology must reflect this sort of blended essence, and is not some sort of “fact,” “truth,” or “correctness.”

By designating the ideological content of history textbooks as a “national” question outside the purview of academics, Zhang Zhicheng elevates the national collective’s need for unity above the individual historian’s commitment to truth. In particular, he asserts the need for national history curricula to be managed by the CCP—the official representative of the masses.

Although some would argue that Zhang espouses a blind patriotism that equates the nation with the Party, his argument is subtler than first glance might indicate. While Zhang argues for the primacy of national ideology over the intellectual’s conception of historical truth, he also voices the need for consideration of both academic and national narratives. Together, these narratives create a “blended essence” that is neither entirely “accurate” nor “correct” from any one viewpoint.

Delineating the borders of academic and political spheres, Zhang claims:

So-called political reconstruction means that an abstract state apparatus, according political ideology, conducts another construction of the nation and its people’s history atop the foundation of academic reconstruction…At the same time, what we must be clear on is that political ideology is the sole source of “correct” and “incorrect” when it comes to values [jiazi shang de zhengque, ’cuowu’ de weiyi laiyuan 价值上的 ‘正确’、‘错误’ 的唯一来源]. The reason I say that political ideology is the sole source of correctness and incorrectness is this: the state apparatus holds coercive power over citizens’ ideological constructions, and historians do not.

This passage affirms Zhang’s belief that the state’s historical narratives must ultimately be constructed upon a foundation of academic historiography. However, Zhang also recognizes that political ideology alone determines the coordinates of

174 Ibid.
“correct” and “incorrect.” Well aware of the problematic between zhengtong and daotong, he recognizes that professional historians have little power when confronted with the state’s political control, and thus recommends that historians stay out of the politics of history textbooks—a national matter managed by the government. Though Zhang believes that conscientious efforts to grasp historical truth have their place in professional academic research, he ultimately insists that the state will always determine how the national past is represented in official education materials.

At the end of his essay, Zhang Zhicheng paints Yuan Weishi as a prisoner of his own ivory tower—an outsider to the public understanding of how Chinese history should be portrayed. Rejecting a professionalized national history based on cold, rational facts that disregard the feelings of the masses, Zhang writes:

Looking at Yuan Weishi’s value judgment itself, we cannot deny that Professor Yuan’s historical knowledge might be more comprehensive and his thought might be more macroscopic. But if we look at political ideological considerations, Professor Yuan’s point of view seems rather childish. The reason is that political ideology not only reflects the official will: it also reflects mass consciousness…Official ideology must reflect these common values, which are perhaps neither “modern,” “scientific,” nor “rational.” It must satisfy the people’s mass emotional demand to share a common history; otherwise, this Chinese community cannot not survive for even one day.\(^\text{175}\)

Though Zhang acknowledges Yuan’s essay as a sincere attempt to encourage more truthful historical accounts in textbooks, he portrays Yuan as a naïve academic who wishes to promote his own values above those of the state and the people, which Zhang believes are inextricably linked. In rejecting Yuan’s “modern,” “rational” values, Zhang calls for a history written with the emotional demands of the national

\(^{175}\) Ibid.
collective in mind. Directly addressing Professor Yuan’s criticism of how the Boxer Rebellion is portrayed in Chinese textbooks, he argues:

Consider the fact that the Japanese army occupied Beijing: Chinese textbooks use the word “invade [ruqin 入侵],” and in contrast, Japanese people could use “enter [jinru 进入].” Don’t these two words express the same factual content? Yes. But these two words at the same time express entirely opposite values. Thus, that the Boxers killed people is a fact, but what about whether or not they should have been killed—whether killing is “correct [sha de ‘zhengque’ yufou 杀的 ‘正确’ 与否]?” Historians may put forth their own judgments, but they cannot attempt to replace the national ideology reflected in history textbooks with their own values.\(^\text{176}\)

In comparing Chinese and Japanese textbooks, Zhang argues that each nation can and must reconstruct its own history so that the biased accounts of “others” do not overrun its national identity. Although Yuan Weishi seeks to create more tolerant, factually accurate narratives to enhance the critical thinking abilities of Chinese youth—thereby restoring national strength and integrity—Zhang Zhicheng believes that the nation requires narratives constructed by a benevolent government that has the interests of the masses at heart. Though Zhang voices support for historians pursuing the truth in their own research, he ultimately believes that history must serve the nation, not instruct it. Fighting over how best to pursue the course of national salvation, Zhang and Yuan represent opposite ends of the struggle between politics and the search for historical truth among Chinese intellectuals today.

**Opposing historical nihilism**

Although China’s sustained burst of economic development began with Reform and Opening in 1978, the existential worries that have caused Chinese

\(^{176}\) Ibid.
intellectuals to fixate on national salvation have been firmly lodged in China’s collective psyche since the end of the First Opium War in 1842. According to the CCP, China has not yet completed the task of rescuing the nation; the “Road to Rejuvenation” stretches forth, and the Party designates itself as the only force capable of leading the nation down its destined path. As one of the last nominally Communist parties that remains in power in the post-Soviet era, today’s CCP feels particular pressure to legitimate itself before the Chinese people and the world. When historians such as Yuan Weishi challenge official accounts, they challenge the Party’s self-conception, and therefore its role in Chinese society.

Though the present-day CCP is in many ways stronger than ever, its leaders are acutely aware of the continual need to legitimate the Party, and have remained increasingly sensitive to how modern Chinese history is portrayed. In October 2013, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) published an article entitled “Resolutely Oppose Historical Nihilism” in Qiushi (Seek Truth)—a Party-published magazine. Warning against the dangers of forgetting history’s painful lessons, the CASS proclaims:

In recent years, historical nihilism [lishi xuwu zhuyi 历史虚无主义]—wrapping itself in the banner of “academic reflection”—has denied Party history and distorted national history in the name of “restoring history” and “rewriting history.” This sort of historical perspective disregards the internal relations and cause-effect relationships of historical phenomena, ignores the laws of history, and not only does damage to China’s [woguo 我国] historical research, but moreover, through mass media creates disruptions in broad cadre-mass thought. It results in confusion on important questions such as

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177 The term woguo 我国 generally denotes “China,” but its literal meaning translates to “my country.” Although we hardly ever refer to America as “my country” (with the exception of singing “My Country ‘Tis of Thee”), the compound 我国 is commonly used in the Chinese vernacular. By linking the self-referential 我 to the nation-kingdom 国, this word semantically lends the Chinese “self”
“Raise which banner? Walk which path? Move forward towards what goals?” Facing this, we must voice resolute opposition.¹⁷⁸

The Chinese rendering of “nihilism” is *xuwuzhuyi* 虚无主义, the first two characters of which may be respectively translated as “empty” and “nothing.” By raising the ominous specter of historical “empty-nothingness,” the CASS depicts China as a nation on the brink of sinking into a directionless, meaningless black hole. Accusing academics of seeking to deprive history of its relevance, the passage argues that cause-effect relationships and logical rules govern history, and ultimately form the backbone of China’s national destiny. In foreboding language, a united opposition is summoned to confront historical nihilism’s grave threat to both nation and Party.

In response to rising historical nihilism, the article confirms the irrevocable progress made under the CCP, which includes vaguely defined accomplishments such as “completing a democratic revolution,” “achieving socialist transformation,” and “pushing forward Chinese-style modernization.” After making these claims, the essay provides a string of economic statistics that reinforce the CCP’s claims of progress. For instance, it mentions that after 60 years of CCP rule, Chinese steel production increased from 160,000 tons per year to over 500 million tons per year, and the Chinese economy jumped to second largest in the world.¹⁷⁹ Concealing the enormous economic damage of the Great Leap Forward, not to mention the horrific human losses of the Great Famine and Cultural Revolution, these statistics brush over grave historical difficulties to support a linear narrative of success under CCP leadership.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.
Continuing this line of argument, the essay accuses historical nihilists of attempting to destroy China’s progress:

> Although historical nihilism is a peripheral trend, its negative capacity to harm is extremely large. Enduring its spread will slacken and weaken mainstream ideology, and cause people to subconsciously tolerate and accept plots hidden within this thought-wave that secretly erase history, annihilate the nation, and change the country’s flag.\(^{180}\)

This passage labels intellectuals who criticize official historical narratives as inimically opposed to the interests of the national community, and even accuses them of heading down the path of treason. However, the essay is not only written to admonish intellectuals for encouraging a reconsideration of national history, but also to warn Chinese of the destabilization that results from challenging official narratives.

Seeking to bolster the CCP’s political legitimacy on two fronts, the CASS both condemns its detractors and scares Chinese citizens by alluding to the possibility of national disintegration. To support this point, the essay compares present-day China to the Soviet Union prior to its fall:

> In 1987, the USSR had people openly write articles opposing the Soviet Union’s primary and secondary education history textbooks. In 1988, the department responsible for education in the USSR demanded the full destruction of primary and secondary history education materials.\(^{181}\)

Citing the ideological dismantling of official history that preceded the USSR’s downfall, this passage attempts to legitimate the CCP’s control of history textbook narratives as a necessary cornerstone of national survival. Conspicuously absent from this chronology of Soviet disintegration, however, is the year 1989, which would remind readers of the CCP’s bloody suppression of the Tian’anmen Square Incident.

\(^{180}\) Ibid.
\(^{181}\) Ibid.
Regardless, by mentioning the events of 1987 and 1988, the essay still evokes memories of the ideological dissonance that preceded 1989, which significantly contributed to the chaos that ensued. Brushing past 1989 itself, the essay recounts:

After 1988, historical nihilism spread even further: [historical nihilists] merged onto one path with all forms of anti-Party and anti-socialist elements both inside and outside their borders. They wantonly attacked revolutionary leaders, and discredited the Soviet Communist Party...This resulted in the collapse of the entire people’s spiritual pillars, and allowed self-rejection to become mainstream. The 80-year-old Party that governed the USSR for 70 years ultimately withdrew from history’s stage, and the second-strongest country in the world fell to pieces.182

According to the CASS, if China wishes to avoid the fate of the Soviet Union—which disintegrated under the mass crisis of doubt caused by historical nihilism—it is necessary to censor voices that dissent from the historical narratives that undergird the Chinese nation. In other words, confidence in a single, hierarchically implemented national history is crucial for achieving and preserving tianxia—the sense of “chosenness” attached to Chinese identity, and the foundation of national greatness.

The CASS article finishes with a call for consensus on Chinese history, stating, “Only by upholding confidence in history [lishi zixin 历史自信] can we uphold confidence in the Path [daolu zixin 道路自信], and finally be able to walk towards the future amid the historic progress of deep thought.”183 The Chinese word zixin, commonly translated as “confidence,” is here applied to “history” and “the Path.” The word for “path” (daolu) contains the root character of dao, which also connotes “the Way”—the righteous conduct once practiced by the ancients.

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182 Ibid.
183 Ibid.
Understanding the relationship between these characters is crucial to comprehending how the Party attempts to unite Chinese under a single, state-constructed national identity. While most paths have forks in the road that lead to different destinations, this article argues that there is only one sacred path of Chinese destiny. By succinctly linking “confidence in history” with “confidence in the Path” the essay defines development under the CCP’s leadership as the only path, and therefore legitimates officially constructed history as the only truth worth preserving. By encouraging confidence in its own historical narratives, the CCP uses its political control to silence intellectuals who express the belief that China has been led astray. The question of whether to align with this officially mandated path, however, is up to intellectuals themselves to decide.

The price of tianxia

The present predicament of mainland Chinese intellectuals is by no means unique to China today; political authority and the personal pursuit of truth maintained a contentious relationship in each of China’s imperial dynasties. One of the final scenes in Zhang Yimou’s Hero, an enormously successful Chinese film released in 2002, depicts the soon-to-be Qin emperor’s confrontation with a would-be assassin. This confrontation vividly reveals the tension between hegemonic authority and those who seek to critique it.

Set in ancient China during the Warring States period, just before the king of Qin conquered China and became its first emperor, Hero is the tale of Wuming (无名, literally “no-name”)—a fearless warrior who plots to assassinate the king of Qin, thereby ending his ruthless invasions of other kingdoms. However, after traveling
across China and speaking with Broken Sword (who was once a fellow assassin),
Wuming is convinced that in order to achieve universal peace and bring about social
harmony, China must be united under one ruler. Nevertheless, Wuming still wishes to
deliver a message to the future emperor of China.

In the king of Qin’s court, Wuming presents himself as a loyal warrior who
killed two dangerous would-be assassins in service to the Qin kingdom. After
Wuming recounts his tale, however, the king manages to see through his guise. After
disclosing his true identity, Wuming reveals his surprising exchange with Broken
Sword. Amazed at Broken Sword’s decision to support his mission to unite China, the
king of Qin turns his back to Wuming and stares at the traditional character for
“sword” (jian), which hangs behind his throne. Upon reexamining this character,
the king of Qin realizes, “The highest plane of swordsmanship is that of no sword in
hand, and no sword in heart…it is precisely to not kill, to have peace.” Wuming
responds, “Great King, my sword I must give. Having given this sword, many people
will die, but the Great King will live. Those who die request that the Great King
remember that highest plane.”

Following this exchange, Wuming drops his sword at the altar and walks
through a crowd of black-robed palace guards. They part for him, fearful of his
audacious spirit and selfless sacrifice. The king watches in awe as Wuming proceeds
down the palace steps towards the inner gates. Finally, the king reluctantly orders the
Wuming’s execution at the collective urging of the mass of guards. Upon reaching the
closed palace gate, Wuming calmly stares back towards the king, and disappears amid

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184 Emphasis mine.
a torrent of arrows that blots out the sky. The film ends with palace guards chanting, “Hail! Hail! Hail!” in unison. A shot of the Great Wall follows, and text rolls across the screen, stating that Qin Shihuang ultimately united China.

The powerful imagery in the last few scenes of Hero illustrates just how much the ideal of *tianxia*—uniting all under one harmonious culture—is tied up with Chinese conceptions of national identity. Wuming could have killed the king of Qin, and this measure might have saved many lives at the time. However, he firmly believed that killing the king would cost more lives over the long run, perpetuating a constant state of war that would plague Chinese for centuries to come. In the eyes of Wuming, *tianxia* requires tremendous sacrifice—both self-sacrifice and the unilateral sacrifice of others. In the hope of achieving peace and long-term stability, Wuming silenced his own criticism of the king of Qin, and ultimately died for the cause of the “highest plane.”

Although *Hero* is set in China’s ancient past, Wuming is made “nameless” to match the timeless nature of his story. In particular, the shadow of Mao looms large over Wuming’s struggle with *tianxia*. Like Qin Shihuang, Mao united China after a period of violent instability, and his reign cost China countless lives. However, few intellectuals during this time were able to challenge Mao in the same way that the fictional Wuming threatened the king of Qin. Instead of sacrificing their lives, most intellectuals during the Maoist era silenced their beliefs for the sake of self-preservation.

Though the hesitancy of many present-day Chinese intellectuals to directly criticize the CCP seems to originate from a concern for personal security rather than a
desire to bring about universal peace, some intellectuals do support the Party out of a desire for national stability. The overtones of *tianxia* are audible when such intellectuals defend the Party from its many critics. When Zhang Zhicheng reminds Yuan Weishi of the importance of leaving national matters to the government, and the members of the CASS advise readers to uphold confidence in China’s true path, they construct a dichotomy between unity and disintegration, salvation and extinction, cultural superiority and national shame.

Despite the inclination to view Wuming’s death as a worthy sacrifice for national unity, his decision to spare the king of Qin ultimately proved to be in vain. The Qin Dynasty lasted merely 15 years from 221 to 206 B.C.E., and Qin Shihuang became renowned for the cruel punishments that he and his legalist advisors exacted upon the population. Similarly, though the CCP established full control of the Chinese mainland in 1949, unity did not lead to harmonious social conditions. As the record keeping of intellectuals such as Yang Jisheng indicates, the Great Leap Forward alone caused more deaths than either the War against Japan or the Chinese Civil War.

If Wuming’s framework applied to modern China, then all of the silent “sacrifices” made by intellectuals during the Anti-Rightist Campaign could be understood as stepping-stones to periods of peace and prosperity. Rather than justifying progress, however, these silent sacrifices enabled Great Leap Forward policies to kill tens of millions. In turn, the Great Leap Forward has also been portrayed as a period of essential sacrifice—a crucial experience that allowed the CCP to learn the limits of Maoist ideology. Tragically, it too was followed by the
capricious violence of the Cultural Revolution. Having been told of “sacrifice” after “sacrifice,” it is understandable why many Chinese sit on museum stairs and issue apathetic yawns in response to official narratives. Contrary to patriotic historiography, China’s “century” of national humiliation seems to have extended well beyond 1949.

**Fictional space for speaking truth**

While Chinese historians are often asked to silence their criticism for the sake of national unity, Chinese fiction writers have often found more space to maneuver. As discussed in Chapter Two, cultural iconoclast Lu Xun endowed his writing with sarcastic critiques of a Chinese national character that he nevertheless desperately sought to improve. Following Lu Xun’s lead, some present-day Chinese writers employ fiction to communicate what historians cannot due to political constraints.

Although official textbook accounts of the Great Famine are still nonexistent in the PRC, the Famine was explicitly addressed through the medium of literature as early as 1994 in Wang Zhiliang’s *The Starving Village*. In this novel, Wang Zhiliang shares stories from his time in the Chinese countryside, where he served time for alleged “rightist” activities. Not only does Wang vividly describe the devastating hunger that struck rural China, but he also includes descriptions of how people lost all sense of civilized behavior. Writing of cannibalism, prostitution in exchange for food, and even Party cadres raping starving women, Wang spares no effort in shattering the taboo on discussing the monstrosities of that time.\(^{186}\)

Unlike Yang Jisheng’s *Tombstone*, Wang’s novel does not explicitly attribute the cause of the Great Famine to CCP policies. Nevertheless, his writing opens the worst horrors of the Great Famine to public consideration in a way that mainland historians have been unable to match. Susanne Weigelín-Schwiedrzik writes, “For Wang Zhiliang, the disaster of the Great Leap is not only that it led to the Great Famine…but also that it robbed people of their innate humanism. People who survived the Great Famine would never be the same.”¹⁸⁷ By sharing stories about the loss of human dignity during the Great Famine without discussing the politics of the Great Leap Forward, Wang Zhiliang was able to describe peasant experiences without having his book banned in mainland China.

Like Wang Zhiliang, popular novelist Yu Hua was also able to write about sensitive periods of Chinese history and avoid being blacklisted. Though starvation is not the central focus of Yu’s story, and he does not explicitly name the Great Famine, his novel *To Live* (1993) nevertheless presents a fictional account of a family living during the Great Leap Forward. *To Live*, which was later adapted to film by Zhang Yimou, is the story of Fu Gui—a commoner who suffers through the turbulent events of China’s 20th century. During the Great Leap Forward, Fu Gui’s son, Youqing, is summoned to the hospital along with his classmates to give blood to the school principal—the county head’s wife. In a fit of panic, the doctor at the hospital takes too much blood and kills Youqing.¹⁸⁸ At the end of the novel, Fu Gui emerges as his

family’s sole survivor, losing his son, daughter, wife, grandson, and son-in-law. His story serves as his sole contribution to China’s future generations.

Through the character of Fu Gui, Yu Hua describes the hideous violence that pervaded the lives of Chinese commoners throughout the course of the 20th century. Like Wang Zhiliang, Yu Hua’s position as a fiction writer gives him more leeway to discuss the horrors of the Great Leap Forward than historians, who must explain causation and distribute blame. Since Yu Hua’s fictional account does not stake a claim on historical truth, however, his novel remains available for popular consumption.

Despite the relative freedom that fiction writers such as Wang Zhiliang and Yu Hua possess when portraying politically sensitive events, commercial filmmakers are allowed less liberty in displaying the violence of events such as the Great Leap Forward. For instance, Zhang Yimou’s adaptation of To Live differs dramatically from Yu Hua’s novel. While Yu Hua’s Youqing is killed by political pressure to save the county-head’s wife, Zhang Yimou’s Youqing dies when a car runs into a brick wall that collapses on him while he sleeps. In addition to removing the blame for Youqing’s death on political favoritism, Zhang’s film also includes an optimistic ending in which Fu Gui, his wife, his grandson, and his son-in-law all survive the Cultural Revolution and anticipate a brighter future.\(^\text{189}\)

In the Chinese film industry, all films must pass stringent film requirements upheld by the Chinese State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television. By exercising political control over all Chinese films, this government bureau ensures that no historical narratives contained in popular films deviate too far from the

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\(^{189}\) Zhang Yimou, To Live, directed by Zhang Yimou, Shanghai Film Studio, 1994.
official line. One possible explanation for Zhang Yimou’s alternative ending is that CCP officials pressured him to shift blame away from the Party’s past mistakes. Lacking the novelist’s space to create stories that contradict official narratives, Zhang may have accepted the need to censor Yu Hua’s original novel for the sake of his livelihood. At the same time, it is also possible that Zhang decided to turn away from Yu Hua’s account in favor of upholding legitimate confidence in the path of national unity designated by the CCP today.

**Groping for stones while crossing the river**

Although there are some mainland Chinese historians who choose clear-cut sides of the dichotomy between paying the price of *tianxia* and refusing the dictates of political authority, most historians instead take a pragmatic view of their circumstances. As one Guangzhou political science professor confided:

> When I speak in class, what I’m able to say is of course limited. I need to explain the “correct” material, and in class we can never directly criticize the government—otherwise I’d risk my job. However, I can present facts to the class, and let them analyze things themselves.

Carefully feeling around the contours of politically sensitive subjects, intellectuals such as this professor do not flagrantly break taboos. Instead, they relay their conceptions of truth to their students as circumstances allow them to.

One of the most prominent representatives of this group is Ge Jianxiong, the director of the Institute of Chinese Historical Geography at Fudan University. A pragmatist at heart, Ge Jianxiong has played a significant role in compiling several Chinese history textbooks. In his book entitled *What is History?*, Ge expresses his

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belief that the historian’s task is not to create accounts that serve the present, but instead merely to present facts and give readers space to judge for themselves.

Opening his book with a quote from the classic Han Dynasty character dictionary *Shuowen Jiezi* (Explaining and Analyzing Characters), Ge recites, “Historians and record keepers use their right hand to uphold the middle *[cong you chi zhong 从又持中]*. They are neutral, and just *[zhong, zheng ye 中, 正也]*.” By invoking this classical passage, Ge critiques today’s mainland historians who assert that history must serve present purposes such as strengthening the nation, criticizing the government, or combating historical nihilism. Instead of attempting to weave narratives that snugly fit present purposes, Ge believes historians must return to their primary task—pursuing the most unbiased recording of history possible. Ge elaborates on this critique of “making the past serve the present” (*gu wei jin yong 古为今用*) later in his book, warning:

> Once historians limit the goal of historical research to this, and only conduct research purely for *gu wei jin yong*, it is very dangerous…If we blindly, one-sidedly emphasize “*gu wei jin yong*,” and treat whether or not history fits present needs as the only standard for judging the value of historical research, historical research will become a tool that serves certain interest groups or views.  

According to Ge, *gu wei jin yong* is a power mechanism that harnesses the past to serve a hierarchy of politically influential groups or ideas. As Ge continues, he presents a strong argument for precisely why distributing such power to the top of the hierarchy is dangerous:

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192 Ibid., 147-9.
If history were to concretely serve the present, then it wouldn’t be of much use; it would only result in the distortion of history and government policies. In the USSR’s Stalinist era, Stalin was regarded as the greatest genius, teacher, theorist, philosopher, and historian…the answers to all problems could be found in his writings, and all humanities and social science research was merely to explain his sayings. This type of historical lesson is profound.193

Here, Ge Jianxiong’s allusion to the USSR’s manipulation of history to serve Stalin is a thinly veiled criticism of Chinese history during the Maoist era. This reference indirectly yet undeniably conjures memories of how Chinese praised CCP policies during the Great Famine, and worshipped Mao during the Cultural Revolution. Ge asks readers to critically consider how and why the past is used to serve the present, and to actively remember recent history’s painful lessons.

Although Ge calls for separating present needs from portrayals of the past, he neither explicitly attacks the present-day CCP nor calls for an active reconsideration of the most difficult parts of Chinese history. Rejecting the strategy of open confrontation that both Yang Jisheng and Yuan Weishi espouse in their writing, Ge acknowledges the twin constraints that China’s traumatic past and current political environment place on accurate historiography:

Quite frankly, in China there are some areas—very sensitive subjects—where it is impossible to tell people the truth…Going very deeply into the history of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and some features of the Liberation—as the Communist victory is called—is forbidden. In China, history is still used as a political tool, and at the high school level, we still must follow the doctrine.194

Instead of actively pushing for change in the structural constraints that govern Chinese high school history curricula, Ge works within a politically acceptable

193 Ibid., 177-8.
framework: he communicates all he can about the subjects he is able to teach, and ignores what he is not allowed to discuss. This pragmatic approach allows history teachers to retain their jobs and adjust their teaching methods as certain topics open gradually over time. Nevertheless, it also hides a more complete picture of history from present-day students.

Ironically, because every choice that Ge makes as a teacher presumably has a reason behind it, Ge himself engages in “making the past serve the present.” To some degree, every teacher must make choices like this, regardless of the age of the students, the political constraints of the school system, or the teacher’s personal degree of professionalism. As educational philosopher Paulo Freire writes in his seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

> To deny the importance of subjectivity in the process of transforming the world and history is naïve and simplistic. It is to admit the impossible: a world without people. This objectivistic position is as ingenuous as that of subjectivism, which postulates people without a world…If humankind produce social reality (which in the “inversion of the praxis” turns back upon them and conditions them), then transforming that reality is an historical task, a task for humanity.195

Freire reminds us that no matter what, every historian, history teacher, and textbook compiler uses their subjectivity to interpret, and thus, to change the objective reality they perceive. Given the cyclical inseparability of objectivity and subjectivity, any historian must re-interpret and reshape history—the question is not whether, but how and toward what purpose?

Conclusion

Undercurrents of Consciousness

A tombstone is memory made concrete. Human memory is the ladder on which a country and a people advance. We must remember not only the good things, but also the bad; the bright spots, but also the darkness...I erect this tombstone so that people will remember and henceforth renounce man-made calamity, darkness, and evil.  

—Yang Jisheng, Tombstone

Although the river of history may periodically disappear, it never ceases to flow. Despite hegemonic authority’s efforts to redirect the course of the past, or even destroy its contents entirely, history remains embedded within a cultural consciousness passed between generations of community members. It is intellectuals such as Yang Jisheng, the self-designated monumental mason of memory, who probe this collective consciousness for historical truth, and construct tombstones for the obscured past. As the words of writer Feng Jicai suggest, these intellectuals seek to bring deep undercurrents to the surface: to open the floodgates that will restore history to its true form.

Leveling their own conceptions of historical reality against official narratives, many present-day Chinese historians join a long line of scholars who understood their primary responsibility as critiquing political authority to promote benevolent governance. One of the most prominent figures to recognize the necessity of this tension between rulers and their advisers was Confucian philosopher Mencius. When asked by his disciples how to handle this complex social arrangement, he argued that it would be perfectly appropriate to inform one’s employer, “In terms of official

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position, you are my ruler and I am your minister. How dare I be friends with my ruler? In terms of Virtue, then it is you who should serve me. How could you befriend me?”

In delineating areas of expertise—the ruler possessing power, and the minister understanding the “Virtue” of the ancients—Mencius outlines the contours of zhengtong and daotong. Since the minister will never control political power, he will never be his ruler’s equal. Simultaneously, since the ruler does understand the divine Virtue transmitted across generations of worthy sages, he cannot hope to match the minister’s moral character. Occupying their own spheres of authority, both minister and ruler must remain within the constraints of their dual Confucian roles—subject to sovereign and student to teacher, respectively. Nevertheless, the seemingly antagonistic dynamic between these two roles rests atop a common commitment to harmonious governance. A closer look at the semantic roots of daotong highlights this underlying unity between sovereign and sage.

Although the character dao 道 may be translated as “path,” it also refers to the “Way”—a formless yet omnipresent moral guide that the truly virtuous must conscientiously seek and listen to. It is precisely this latter dao that lies at the heart of daotong 道统, frequently described as an “interconnecting thread” of the Way. Nevertheless, this concept eludes such linear characterization. While the Way is indeed a singular entity, it is not merely a thread that weaves itself through the minds of few, but it is also an all-encompassing fabric. The nature of this Way is perhaps

A monkey trainer was distributing chestnuts. He said, “I’ll give you three in the morning and four in the evening.” The monkeys were furious. “Well then,” he said, “I’ll give you four in the morning and three in the evening.” The monkeys were delighted. This change of description and arrangement caused no loss, but in one case it brought anger and in another delight. He just went by the rightness of their present “this.” Thus, the Sage uses various rights and wrongs to harmonize with others and yet remains at rest in the middle of Heaven the Potter’s Wheel. This is called “Walking Two Roads.”

In this deceptively simple parable, the monkeys only consider immediate gratification when evaluating their trainer’s proposals. By impulsively praising one offer as superior to the other, they fail to realize that regardless of when they receive their chestnuts, by nightfall they will only have eaten seven. Conversely, the trainer plays the role of the sage, who comprehends the underlying fabric of the Way. He uses his knowledge of the larger truth of seven chestnuts to find the “rightness” of the monkeys’ “present ‘this.’” By sitting in the middle of “Heaven the Potter’s Wheel” and embracing the “oneness” of all perspectives while walking two paths, the trainer ultimately produces a harmonious outcome for all. The monkey trainer’s singular, formless truth is the dao that constitutes the core of daotong.

As effortless as Zhuangzi’s monkey trainer makes tolerating multiple “paths” appear, life is not a box of chestnuts. When ministers criticized their rulers, they risked their jobs, their social status, and sometimes even their lives. Nevertheless, Chinese history is filled with examples of intellectuals who dared to confront their rulers. In particular, Song Dynasty historian Sima Guang used the past as a mirror,

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providing Emperors Yingzong and Shenzong instructive reflections of their actions through historical parallels. For example, in reference to the constructive relationship between Tang Dynasty Emperor Taizong and his advisor Chu Suiliang, Sima Guang recounted:

The emperor said, “If I do something that is not good, do you then also record it?” Suiliang replied, “My office is to wield the brush. How could I dare not record it?” The Gentleman of the Yellow Gate Liu Ji added, “Even if Suiliang failed to record it, everyone else in the empire would”—to which the emperor replied, “True.”

By alluding to the positive dynamic between Emperor Taizong and Suiliang, Sima Guang encouraged his rulers to embrace the exercise of political authority while accepting harsh but helpful criticism. In this sense, zhengtong and daotong have the possibility of mutually reinforcing one another for the sake of establishing benevolent governance and social harmony.

Despite the ideal of tolerant coexistence described by Sima Guang, hegemonic power does not always lend a patient ear to admonition. When political authority refuses to accept criticism, it becomes the task of historians like Yang Jisheng to stubbornly uphold their contrary understanding of both past and present. As Yu Yingshi notes, while the virtuous truth of daotong is transcendent, it does not possess the structurally supported authority enjoyed by Western religion:

China’s daotong included religious components, but it was by no means a religion in the commonly accepted sense; it didn’t possess a physical form…Since daotong was not organized, the dignity of “dao” depended entirely on those who assumed its burden—the scholars—to manifest itself.

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Though *daotong* was passed between ancient Chinese scholars—and continues to run through intellectuals today—the concept itself has never been safeguarded by China’s temples, which were traditionally built and administered by the government. Without a physical space in which truth may be assigned to an authority separate from the state, it becomes a contested entity—controlled by none, yet claimed by all. For this reason, political power and historical truth exist in a precarious balance in which officials and intellectuals must carefully situate themselves.

**Opening mines**

For Chinese intellectuals, deciding how to approach this frustrating political and moral dilemma is a difficult choice. Seeking historical truth is a personal mission: one that requires the sacrifice of individual security for the sake of fulfilling a cultural commitment to accurate historical representation. Though this cultural consciousness flows between intellectuals across time and space, its leaves its carriers feeling lonely and bitter. Like Wuming, the protagonist in Zhang Yimou’s *Hero*, intellectuals must choose whether or not to relinquish their allegiance to historical truth in order to support the unity of *tianxia*—the ideal of a harmonious community held together by a shared destiny.

Attributing a stony quality to the Chinese intellectual determination to uphold the sanctity of the past, one historian, Meng Xianshi, characterizes historians as people who must “open up mines.” Citing the responsibility of historians to submit accurate historical accounts to the public, Meng writes:

> History belongs in the entire people’s possession: it is a treasure, a mineral resource. The historian’s task is to open up mines, but after opening, history is not for oneself to enjoy, because all rights [to
Meng Xianshi characterizes the relationship between historians and the rest of society in Confucian fashion. If society provides historians its trust and readership, then historians must perform their filial duty, repaying society by mining and transmitting truthful narratives.

Precisely because of the risk of hitting explosive material during the mining process, Meng emphasizes the need for self-confidence in historical research. He calls for the maintenance of socially responsible media for teaching history, and most importantly stresses that “no matter how the product turns out, or how much history is taught, one cannot change one’s professional conviction.” The weight placed upon devotion to professional values serves to counter the CASS’s exhortation to “resolutely oppose historical nihilism” by upholding “confidence in the path.” Meng’s plea for professional conviction is indicative of an insecurity among Chinese intellectuals that history could become derailed (chugui 出轨), and that even deep cultural memory could begin to dry up.

The individual search for historical truth and the political imperative of national unity delineate Chinese historical narratives. It is the task of Chinese intellectuals to choose which “path” to lend their confidence to. In seeking to transmit the horrific reality of the Great Famine to future generations, Yang Jisheng adheres to a path of uncompromising remembrance. In this way, he challenges the narrative of

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203 Ibid.
the “Chinese Path” upheld by the CCP and exerts pressure on the delicate balance between truthful reporting and political ideological necessity. Those who question the official narratives of history textbooks, such as Yuan Weishi, also fall into this category; they resist the unifying momentum pressed forward by political hierarchy, and stoically bear the cultural responsibility to mine truths for the rest of society.

Despite the audacity of these defiant devotees of the past, most intellectuals do not choose this lonely, seemingly thankless path. The “Road to Rejuvenation” exhibit was compiled by legions of hired historians who created an ideal manifestation of the “Chinese Path”—the ideologically coherent narrative of the CCP. Both Zhang Zhicheng and the CASS support the “Chinese Path” by censoring critics such as Yuan Weishi in the name of the national interest. While this confidence in official history is perhaps maintained either to gain power or avoid risking public condemnation, it is also pursued in order to establish a strong, unified China. Regardless of personal motivations, however, political authority in this case succeeds in hushing criticism in order to preserve its ideal of unity between nation and Party.

Although some Chinese intellectuals fully support the official narratives put forth by those who control zhengtong, more often than not, Chinese intellectuals strike a balance between truth and the political constraints of modern China. The best example of this is Professor Zhu Zhenghui of East China Normal University (ECNU), who believes that history must gradually rehabilitate itself over time. While Professor Zhu understands that history may be temporarily silenced, he recognizes the endurance of history’s subthemes. In particular, he notes that many survivors of the
Great Famine still live today, and that many accounts of the politically sensitive subject are published both abroad and online.

When I asked Professor Zhu whether he believes that the Great Famine will eventually become open for discussion on the mainland, he responded:

Mountains and rivers don’t change, and neither does history. What changes are politics, power, and the benefits that derive from shaping history. Xi Jinping is the Chairman of the CCP, and he lived through the Cultural Revolution. People in power know about that time, but they cannot talk about it openly at the moment because it works to their benefit to keep silent. Once a new generation that doesn’t remember that time is in power, then this topic will open itself to further discussion.

Despite the current CCP’s inability to openly confront its past errors, Professor Zhu believes in history’s resilience, and maintains that China will gradually move toward full historical reconsideration when it is structurally able to do so. Though the Cultural Revolution is not adequately discussed in textbooks, and merely receives three uninformative pictures in the National Museum’s “Road to Rejuvenation” exhibit, the stubborn inertia of memory endures.

**Drawing biscuits to fill one’s stomach**

In spite of Professor Zhu’s confident faith in history’s unmovable nature, many Chinese today feel that mountains and rivers *have* changed. Carefully negotiating the space between “correct” and accurate, Chinese intellectuals must shift their feet as the ground moves beneath them. Underlying this changing landscape, however, an essential “oneness” remains: the understanding that all of these intellectuals are technically “patriotic,” but according to their own definitions. Yuan

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204 Personal interview with Professor Zhu Zhenghui, Shanghai, July 19, 2013.
Weishi challenges the “Chinese Path,” and Zhang Zhicheng hews to it. Lu Xun criticizes Chinese culture, and Yu Qiuyu pities it. Despite the differences between their paths, these intellectuals search their cultural consciousness to negotiate between an obscured past and a nation in need. All paths lead to China’s “chosen” destiny: it is the varying approaches to national salvation and the imperative of personal preservation that ultimately determine their divergence.

Over the last year, the CCP has adapted the slogan of the “Chinese Dream” to signify the goals of revitalizing Chinese culture and expanding global influence. According to President Xi Jinping, this slogan calls for “national rejuvenation, improvement of people’s livelihoods, prosperity, construction of a better society, and military strengthening as the common dream of the Chinese people that can best be achieved under one party, Socialist rule.” In this sense, the Chinese Dream is essentially synonymous with the “Chinese Path”—both signify united support behind the CCP’s leadership of China’s modernization.

When I asked one professor what the Chinese Dream meant to him, he scoffed and replied, “All slogans are merely equivalent to ‘drawing biscuits to fill the stomach’ [hua bing chong ji 画饼充饥]. This is an empty promise. The Chinese Dream has no concrete standards, and has no definition.” Continuing, the professor pointed out the ultimate problem with the Chinese Dream: that it is merely one dream—one slice of an all-encompassing spectrum of possibility. Despite the CCP’s desire to rally the nation around one Chinese Dream that establishes unity under a benevolent government, China is a country of growing multiplicity. The idea that

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each Chinese individual has his or her own dream is gaining increasing currency with younger generations. These individually imagined Chinese dreams push against the centripetal force of political control. As recently as 1989, they even threatened to break the CCP’s grip on hegemonic power.

In a China where high school students differentiate “correct” from accurate, and where the present gradually inches away from the abject terrors of the past, space for consideration of sensitive topics is expanding. This expansion is neither smooth nor constant, but since 1978 has advanced to a point in which Yang Jisheng can publish work damning the CCP for its Great Famine policies and remain in Beijing unharmed. Despite all of the controversial issues that still receive harsh censorship, the change in openness on issues such as the Great Famine is palpable. Furthermore, once this material is mined and exposed to the public, it is near impossible to retract. Outside of the patriotic education curriculum, in this space of increasingly candid, nuanced discussion, Chinese are beginning to publicly grapple with these issues and decide what “loving the nation” means to them as individuals.

In a world full of many paths, neither the CCP nor intellectuals are able to define what Chinese history should be, or how Chinese intellectuals should negotiate the tension between zhengtong and daotong. The choice of which path to follow is determined through consultation of a cultural consciousness that every member of the Chinese nation possesses—a phenomenon we may only attempt to describe in vain.

In spite of Yuan Weishi’s alarm over the “wolf’s milk” being fed to students today, the patriotic education campaign is merely the most recent manifestation of political authority’s mission to herd all citizens onto a unified “Chinese Path” of
national salvation. The CCP today breeds no more “wolves” than it did before patriotic education began. Nonetheless, as lyricist Hou Dejian makes clear, Chinese will forever continue to roam the banks of cultural memory:

The distant East has a river  
Its name is called Changjiang.  
The distant East has a river  
Its name is called Huanghe.

Although I’ve never seen the Changjiang’s beauty,  
In dreams I wander through the Chanjiang’s water.  
Although I’ve never heard the Huanghe’s strength,  
It surges turbulently in my dreams.\textsuperscript{206}

History’s vanished river and the Party’s hegemonic power struggle deep beneath the dust of patriotic education, amid the shadowy recesses of China’s past. These forces will endure in precarious balance, and the messy, manifold paths of China will continue to weave together and rip apart. Future generations of Chinese will inherit this shifting tapestry of identity. Embracing this cultural consciousness as both common heirloom and personal burden, they will persist, powering history’s undercurrents through bend after bend.

Research Bibliography


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