

Editorial

SEBASTIAN VEG

The year 2007 marked two important historical commemorations in China: the 70th anniversary of the “Nanking Massacre” and the 50th anniversary of the Anti-Rightist Campaign. As one might have expected, these two dates were handled in opposing ways. The first gave rise to a surplus of commemorative activity, from political ceremonies to mass market films and unbridled discussions on internet forums. The second was almost entirely overlooked by the mainland media, and was marked only in a negative manner by the prohibition, in January 2007, of the latest book authored by Zhang Yihe, the daughter of the well-known “rightist” Zhang Bojun, during the “eight books” affair.⁽¹⁾

If these two examples illustrate clearly opposing treatments of history in today’s China, we must also note that public discourse about the many layers of Chinese history has diversified over the last two decades. Distancing themselves from Maoist orthodoxy, the authorities have tolerated, even elicited, new approaches to certain historical realities, whether these concern “traditional culture,” which has been the object of growing popular enthusiasm since the 1980s, or the Qing empire, whose place in the national record was formally restored through official research programs such as the “North-East Project” (*Dongbei gongcheng*) led by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences from 2002 to 2006. On the other hand, the history of the People’s Republic, along with certain episodes that have been integrated into the government’s ideological canon (the Boxer Rebellion, for example, as was illustrated by the prohibition of the *Bing-dian* supplement following the publication of an article proposing to revise the judgment of the Boxers in history manuals) remains off limits. However, while debate over these events continues to be strictly controlled in the public sphere, even in this realm we can observe individual attempts to express other points of view, nourished by the explosion of available sources documenting the Maoist period.⁽²⁾ So far, attempts to initiate a wide-ranging debate on this subject remain limited to forms of artistic expression (literature, cinema), or to the “oral history” projects currently in vogue, in which the sheer “number of words” – as Raul Hilberg reminds us concerning Holocaust testimonies – is unable to make up for limitations and intrinsic biases.⁽³⁾

This special issue of *China Perspectives* seeks to analyze the divergent historical points of view that are beginning to

emerge, and even consolidate themselves, in China, and takes into account the varied layers of Chinese history without limiting itself to the Maoist era. The aim is not, of course, to create a simplistic opposition between government and society. In each case, what has captured the attention of our contributors is rather the interaction between the two, whether this concerns the way in which social movements are able to exploit faults in the system of power, or the authorities’ attempts to manipulate or reclaim certain popular (*minjian*) movements.

The special feature begins with an article by Sébastien Bilioud and Joël Thoraval describing the revival of an authentically popular Confucianism. This movement is characterized by the re-appropriation of traditional culture by institutions, in this case educational, which are on the margins of the official sphere, and nonetheless remain relatively free of interference. Marianne Bujard also takes an interest in traditional heritage, delving into the memory of Beijing as it is transmitted orally as well as through steles.

Christopher Howe’s discussion of the work of Japanese historian Shin’ichi Yamamuro underlines the historical complexity of the Japanese colonization of Manchukuo, described as a chimera, an “illusion tinted with horror” in which a number of contradictory plans and ambitions were embroiled. This colonial episode and others of the same nature call for a historical treatment, also in China, that is more rigorous than the government’s purely political approach.

The history of the People’s Republic is marked by several blind spots, of which the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957 is perhaps the most unjustly forgotten. In a piece devoted to the “right-wing intellectuals” of the movement, Chen Ziming, the former Tiananmen dissident, strives to emphasize the importance of the “loyal” reflections this group undertook concerning greater institutional democratization during

1. In January 2007, eight books touching on sensitive – in particular historical – subjects were targeted by a Chinese government order aimed at impeding or limiting their circulation.
2. Cf. Julia Strauss, “Editor’s Introduction: in Search of PRC History,” special edition, *The History of the PRC (1949-1976)*, *China Quarterly*, n° 188 (December 2006), p. 855-869. Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik develops, in the same volume, the idea that the Party is no longer in the position to impose a “dominant narrative” of modern history, opening up the field to more fragmented memories (“In Search of a Master Narrative for 20th-Century Chinese History,” *ibid.*, p. 1070-1091).
3. Cf. Raul Hilberg, *Sources of Holocaust Research. An Analysis*, Chicago, Ivan Dee, 2001, p. 48-49.

the 1950s. Three texts deal with fragmented memories of the Cultural Revolution. Michel Bonnin, working from the official “forgetting” of this episode by those in power, establishes an inventory of forms of remembering. Wang Youqin, founder of the virtual memorial to the victims of the Cultural Revolution, concerns herself with the place of these victims in historiography. Sebastian Veg, through his study of Wang Xiaobo’s bestselling novella *The Golden Age*, touches on the more active role literature and intellectuals can play in public reflection on the Cultural Revolution.

The selection is rounded out by two articles that inscribe their treatment of history within a more general perspective. Jean-Philippe Béja emphasizes that the official amnesia concerning certain historical episodes poses problems for the development of a democratic movement in China. Finally,

Eva Pils, focusing on the requests for legal redress and rehabilitation (*pingfan*) for damages suffered during the political campaigns of the Maoist state, concludes that an authoritarian relationship persists between the governing and the governed.

The selection of articles presented here complements a number of recent publications and seeks to give as varied a survey as possible of the multiplicity of historical layers present in contemporary Chinese discourse, as well as the vitality of strategies now employed by the different players, two developments that mark a definitive exit from the era of monologic history. •

• **Translated by Jonathan Hull**