China Perspectives

2020-3 | 2020

Re-Envisioning Gender in China: (De)Legitimizing
Gazes

VEG, Sebastian (ed.). 2019. *Popular Memories of the Mao Era: From Critical Debate to Reassessing History*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/10508>

DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.10508

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2020

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Els van Dongen, "VEG, Sebastian (ed.). 2019. *Popular Memories of the Mao Era: From Critical Debate to Reassessing History*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.", *China Perspectives* [Online], 2020-3 | 2020, Online since 21 September 2020, connection on 10 December 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/10508> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.10508>

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- 1 In the shadow of the cultural and anthropological turns, recent historical scholarship on the Mao era (1949-1976) has manifested an interest in “everyday life,” rituals and performance, and the lived experience of those at the “grassroots” levels of society (see among other examples Leese 2011; Brown and Johnson 2015; Yang 2016). This detour from elite politics and factionalism has been enabled by the availability of a greater variety of sources, including oral histories, memoirs, diaries, previously unavailable archival documents, semi-official and unofficial books, material objects, and visual sources. This trend also involves greater attention being paid to the representation of the Mao era in media such as literature and film, museums, and performance and visual

arts, and to the relation between history and memory (recent titles include Li and Zhang 2016; Ho 2018; Chen 2020). But how do we reconcile these developments with the seemingly static official narrative as famously outlined in the 1981 “Resolution on Party History”? Are history and memory on divergent paths?

- 2 *Popular Memories of the Mao Era*, edited by Sebastian Veg, makes two relevant contributions in addressing this intricate question. Firstly, it posits that the intellectual narrative of trauma and victimhood as expressed in the 1980s’ scar literature (*shanghen wenxue* 傷痕文學) and the 1990s’ nostalgia narrative of the “educated youth” (*zhiqing* 知青) have made room for a more critical and public debate since the 2000s. In other words, the “popular” or *minjian* 民間 (literally among the people) and “alternative memories” of the Mao era are “increasingly discussed publicly in a critical, historiographical manner” (p. 9). Secondly, attentive to the dynamics of history-making, the volume argues that popular memory in this sense is more than merely “an alternative to official history”; it is also “a mechanism for the social construction of knowledge” (p. 10). Whereas the “broad set of narratives” advanced by individuals and communities that make up memory are “often contentious rather than consensual,” the “body of socially and politically sanctioned knowledge” that is history is supported by a certain degree of “professional or social consensus” (p. 10). The book aims to delve into the “processes,” “social and institutional negotiations” and “mechanisms” through which private memory becomes publicly endorsed history (p. 10).
- 3 The volume’s organisation seeks to reflect the tensions between the private and public spheres and between elite and popular memory that have arisen in this process, but each section also covers a different set of sources. Part One, “Unofficial Memories in the Public Sphere,” focuses on journals, the internet, and museums, respectively. Jean-Philippe Béja sketches the arrival of unofficial journals such as *Jiyi* 記憶 (Remembrance) and *Zuotian* 昨天 (Yesterday) and Chinese *samizdat* (self-published) works. Wu Si, former chief editor and acting publisher of *Yanhuang Chunqiu* 炎黃春秋 (Annals of the Yellow Emperor), documents the journal’s engagement with public memory issues. Drawing on the work of Maurice Halbwachs, Jun Liu investigates social memory and the spread of counter-historical narratives on social media, whereas Kirk Denton explores the possibility of alternative history through the lens of the so-called “Red Era” series of museums at the Jianchuan Museum Cluster in Anren 安仁, Sichuan.
- 4 Part Two, “Critical Memory and Cultural Practices,” probes the changing relation between elite and popular discourse and memory through literature, documentary films, and art. Sebastian Veg analyses three works of reportage, historical investigation, and fiction on the Great Famine (1959–1961), including Yang Jisheng’s *Tombstone* (2008), as new forms of critical assessment of the Mao period. Next, Judith Pernin outlines how independent documentaries have contributed to historical discussions on the Mao period and which methods have been employed to this end. Finally, Aihe Wang considers private and visual memory and its relation to public history through both her research and her personal experience as a member of the underground art group *Wuming* 無名 (No Name).
- 5 Part Three, “Unofficial Sources and Popular Historiography,” looks into the interaction between elite and popular discourses by means of archival records and memoirs. Frank Dikötter challenges the image of total compliance under Mao through sources such as Party archives, self-published memoirs, and interviews. Reading against the grain, Daniel Leese taps on rarely used political-legal documents as a source of alternative

memories. In the last of the book's ten chapters, Michael Bonnin argues for the importance of unofficial and semi-official sources on the rustication (*xiaxiang* 下鄉) movement, including testimonies and publications by former officials and the rusticated youth themselves.

- 6 On the whole, the volume introduces readers to major developments regarding how the Mao era has been remembered and interpreted among various communities across the past decade, and the ways in which state and market have interacted in this process. Beyond historiographical and methodological considerations, the volume acquaints those interested in the history of the Mao and reform eras with a vast collection of primary sources. Furthermore, the interdisciplinary nature of the volume renders it a highly valuable teaching resource. One aspect of ambiguity in the volume concerns the use of the term “popular memories,” which conventionally evokes the counterpart of “official history” in socialist societies (p. 3), an opposition the volume in fact aims to problematise. The “classic” binary “official/unofficial” also features throughout the volume, with some authors leaning more towards “alternative memories” than towards mechanisms of knowledge production. This ambiguity reflects the muddled realities of contemporary China, where processes of memory-becoming-history are volatile and rather unpredictable. What happens to publicly endorsed narratives following renewed repression? And how does this affect existing negotiation mechanisms? These and other questions on how, why, and when the pendulum of history-making swings back are perhaps for a follow-up volume.

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